



**Parenting services under pressure:
Unequal access to early years support in England**

Executive summary

Early years parenting support services are vital to levelling up

- Services like baby and toddler groups and parenting programmes can support children's development, help with parent and child wellbeing, and enable the early identification of serious issues facing families.
- In this way, **they should be seen as an important lever for achieving government's levelling up goal of improving learning outcomes at age 5.**¹
- We surveyed 2,000 parents of 0 to 5s across England to ask about their experience of accessing parenting support in the early years. 66% of parents in our survey wished there was more high-quality parenting support available to help with their parenting.

But – lower income families are less likely to access services

- We know that there's an attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.²
- Worryingly, our survey found that **families who could benefit the most from key parenting support services were least likely to have accessed them.** Parents of lower household income were less likely to have accessed parenting support than high income parents.
- There were also big variations in access between different regions of England.

And there was inequality in ease of access to services

- 42% of parents had either struggled, or been unable, to access at least one parenting support service over the past five years – equivalent to 2.7 million parents. Nearly a quarter (23%) had been completely unable to access at least one service – equivalent to 1.5 million parents.*
- Parents in the lowest household income group are 40% more likely to have faced difficulty in accessing support than those in the highest income group (35% compared to 25%).
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents, younger parents, and fathers, were also more likely to have faced difficulty accessing services.

* Calculations of equivalent numbers of parents are based on the fact that in Opinium's nationally representative survey of 2,000 UK adults from 12-15 July 2022, 244 lived in England and were parents of children aged 5 and under. The ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates from June 2020 (the latest release) list 52,890,044 adults in the UK. $244 / 2,000 \times 52,890,044 = 6,452,585$ parents of 0 to 5s in England. In our survey, 832 parents were unable / had difficulty accessing support. $832 / 2000 \times 6,452,585 = 2,684,275$ (2.7 million). 468 were unable to access support. $468 / 2000 \times 6,452,585 = 1,509,905$ (1.5 million).



Executive summary

Services were unavailable, and there were financial barriers to access

- Concerningly, the main barrier to accessing support was that services were not available. We know that funding pressures have impacted the provision of parenting support services over recent years.³
- We also found a financial barrier to accessing support. Services not being available for free was the third most common barrier. Parents who weren't in walking distance of services cited the cost of petrol or public transport as the biggest challenge. This is particularly concerning in the context of the growing cost of living crisis.

Parents were worried about missing out on support

79% of parents who'd been unable to access support were worried about the potential impact, with the most common worries being:

- 'Feeling isolated / lonely' (41% of parents unable to access support had this worry).
- 'My mental health and emotional wellbeing' (41%).
- 'My ability to handle difficult behaviour from my child such as temper tantrums' (37%).
- 'Feeling scared, daunted or anxious about issues relating to parenting' (35%).
- 'My housing, finance and employment situation' (35%).

Parenting support helps with prevention

- Nearly a third (32%) of the parents who had accessed parenting support had gone on to access further support as a result of this.
- Troublingly, the groups who were most likely to need further support (Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents, younger parents, and fathers) were also those who had found it difficult to access parenting services in the first place.
- As 23% of parents were unable to access parenting services, and 32% of those who accessed parenting services went on to access further support for other issues, we can estimate the number of issues that went unidentified due to parents missing out on parenting support. We calculate that there were 415,979 parents with missed needs.



Executive summary

What should government do?

Levelling up must be about giving every child an opportunity for a safe and happy childhood, and the foundations to thrive. There's no better place to start than in the earliest years.

Government must ensure that every family can access the parenting support they need.

We welcomed the inclusion of parenting support services within the recently published family hub service expectations, and the requirement to collect data on service usage and reach, including demographic breakdowns.

Next, government must:

Address inequality in access

We found variation in access to parenting support, between regions and between demographic groups. Currently, family hub plans apply to just over half of local authorities in England. Government must clarify how it plans to improve access to parenting support in areas which are not eligible. No area, or family, should be left behind.

Invest to improve access

The most common barrier to accessing parenting support in our survey was that services were not available. The lack of access to services is a function of the sharp reduction in spending on early intervention services; spending fell by £1.9 billion between 2010/11 and 2020/21.⁴ Little progress can be made on parenting support without further and sustained investment. We'd welcome a long-term plan for investment into early years services.



Introduction

What does Action for Children deliver?

In 2021/22, Action for Children supported 671,275 children, young people and parents/carers across the UK, including over 100,000 through our children’s centres and family hubs. We have years of frontline expertise in supporting the youngest children and their families. Our centres and hubs offer a range of services including one-to-one family support, support for disabled children, coordinating multi-agency support, play therapy, practical help with issues like housing, managing money, school placements and more. Parenting programmes account for a large part of the support we provide through these services. We also deliver Parent Talk, an innovative online parenting support platform, which features a one-to-one live chat feature with our experienced Parenting Coaches. In 2021/22, Parent Talk supported over 400,000 parents through advice pages and live chats.

Why focus on parenting support services?

Over recent years, policy conversations around early years support in England have often focused on health services and childcare. These services are absolutely vital. But there is another essential type of support for families of 0 to 5s which is too often left out of the conversation: parenting support. We’re focusing on baby and toddler groups, and parenting courses and programmes, which were in high demand among parents of 0 to 5s in our 2021 survey.⁵

Baby and toddler groups

Examples of these groups include Stay and Play, Chat and Play, music and movement groups, story and rhyme groups, and messy play. These groups are often open-access, and often run on a drop-in basis. This means they’re welcoming, relaxed environments for new parents to meet other people in similar situations, learn more about how to play with their children, and get any advice and support they might need. In some areas these groups are delivered by early years practitioners; in others, often due to funding limitations, they might be delivered by volunteers. Sometimes they’re delivered or attended by a midwife or health visitor.

Parenting courses and programmes

There are many types of parenting courses and programmes. In our survey we’ve used two broad categories. Firstly, we asked parents about courses or sessions to help with a new baby or with preparing to have a baby, such as antenatal groups. Secondly, we asked about programmes or sessions to help with parenting skills, such as managing children’s behaviour or supporting children’s development. This second group of services are often offered on a targeted basis, to parents who professionals think might benefit from this extra support.



Why are these services important?

We welcomed the inclusion of a metric focused on early learning goals for five-year-olds within Mission 5 of government's levelling up white paper.⁶ More recently, the family hub programme guide stated that family hubs will 'support the government's levelling up ambitions'.⁷ Parenting support services should play a key part in achieving these ambitions.

It's widely acknowledged that the early years are a vital period for children's development. Within the first year of life, babies' brains double in size, and by age 3, a child's brain is estimated to be twice as active as an adult's.⁸ Relationships are hugely important to development during this time. The development of fetuses' brains can be influenced by mothers' health; once children are born, interactions with caregivers play a key role in development.⁹ This is why parenting support services are so essential, for both parents and children.

The earliest years are also a period where inequality begins to emerge. Research has shown that 40% of the attainment gap at age 16 is already present at age 5.¹⁰ The First 1001 Days Movement is clear that 'it is much easier to influence a child's development and wellbeing if we intervene earlier in life.'¹¹ Clearly, ambitions to level up must prioritise the early years.

Our research in 2019 found an early association between increased usage of children's centres (in which parenting support is a major element, as we detail below) and a decreasing gap in outcomes between disadvantaged children and their peers.¹² Looking at specific types of parenting support services reveals the vital and multifaceted role they play in supporting children's development:

- The Evaluation of Children's Centres in England found 'significant positive effects' of Stay and Play groups on the early years home learning environment (as well as improving mothers' health and reducing parental distress).¹³

- In our survey of frontline staff in spring this year, 91% of staff felt that baby and toddler groups have a positive effect on child development.¹⁴
- The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) guidebook details the various ways in which parenting programmes and courses can support child development and parent-child attachment. The Incredible Years programme, for instance, has been shown to improve children's reading ability and ability to play independently (as well as reducing behavioural problems).¹⁵ ParentChild+ has been shown to improve children's language and cognitive ability, as well as social-emotional competence.¹⁶ Family Foundations, which begins during pregnancy, improves children's sleep and prosocial behaviour.¹⁷ Parents as First Teachers improves child language and vocabulary, self-help skills, and developmental milestones.¹⁸

Support with development, and the levelling up goal for five-year-olds, is more important now than ever. Ofsted's July 2022 briefing on early years education recovery following the pandemic states that 'Fewer children are ready for the move up to Reception than would have been expected before the pandemic.' It highlights continued concerns around all areas of children's development: from communication and language, to personal, social, and emotional, to physical. 'Many children were still lacking confidence in social settings'; 'Some children are lacking in independent self-care skills, such as toileting and dressing, to a greater extent than would usually be the case for their stage of development.'¹⁹

The place of parenting support within the wider system

It's widely understood that recent years have seen a significant fall in funding for, numbers of, and usage of, children's centres across the country.²⁰ As well as a reduction in funding, there has been a lack of policy focus from government on early years community services like children's centres. Ofsted inspections of children's centres were 'temporarily' suspended in 2015, and have not been reinstated.

This fall in investment and prioritisation has been accompanied by a waning focus from central government on parenting support as a vital element of the support that children's centres provided. According to the Evaluation of Children's Centres in England research, Stay and Play was the second most used individual service in children's centres: used by 85% of the sample, just after midwife/health visitor services at 88%. Parenting programmes such as Incredible Years and Triple P were also widely delivered by centres.²¹

Health services, childcare, and parenting support, should be viewed as essential components of one system of support for 0 to 5s. Government's plans for family hubs highlight the importance of whole-family support, and of close coordination between agencies. We welcome the inclusion of parenting support services in the recently published service expectations for family hubs.²² However, as the next section illustrates, there is still much more to be done to ensure that access to these services improves across the country.

What's happening to these services?

Despite the high demand for early years services, too many parents are struggling to access them. Our survey last year found that 82% of parents of 0 to 5s across England struggled, or were unable, to access at least one essential non-childcare early years service.²³

The impact of the pandemic

The pandemic has certainly increased pressures on children and families. We know how hard services and professionals worked to continue their provision during periods of restrictions.* However, in general, physical sites still had to close. Many face-to-face services from various agencies were only available online, on the phone, or may have been scaled down. The Babies in Lockdown report found that only 11% of parents of under-2s saw a health visitor face-to-face during the first lockdown.²⁴ Our 2021 survey found that the proportion of parents unable to access a service increased since the onset of the pandemic. Since the onset of the pandemic, more parents said that services had been unavailable, or only available online, compared to before the pandemic.²⁵

The pandemic had a significant impact on access to parenting support services in particular. In a June 2021 survey from the Petitions Committee, 93% of respondents said they had been unable to access baby and toddler groups over the previous 12 months.²⁶ Research in autumn 2021 found that only 12% of professionals surveyed said that baby and toddler groups in their areas were 'back to normal', and 12% said that the groups were no longer operating in their areas.²⁷

* Our report from January 2021, *Adapting to a new world*, outlines how Action for Children services pivoted rapidly to ensure that we kept supporting families during the first lockdown.

Pre-pandemic

However, it's important to note that even before the pandemic, access to early years support was already a significant problem. Funding for, and availability of, local early years services had been dramatically affected during the years preceding 2020.

- Our research with other children's charities shows that local authority spending on early intervention services (like children's centres, youth work, and family support) has halved since 2010/11. Spending on children's centres specifically fell by 71% between 2010/11 and 2020/21. In contrast, spending on late intervention services (such as support for looked-after children, youth justice provision, and safeguarding) has risen. In 2020/21, 80% of all local authority spending on children and young people went on late intervention services, up from 58% in 2010/11.²⁸
- Our report in 2019 found that between 2014/15 and 2017/18, the number of children using children's centres across England fell by almost a fifth. Worryingly, the biggest fall in use was in the most deprived local authorities – 22%, compared to 12% in the least deprived.²⁹
- The Sutton Trust's research with local authorities, published in 2018, outlined a shift in provision of children's centre services. 55% of local authorities surveyed reported a reduction in the level of services provided by children's centres in recent years. The research also found that in general, children's centres were focusing more on targeted provision rather than open-access services. Local authorities reported that financial pressures were the biggest driver of the change in provision over recent years.³⁰

- Our survey of Action for Children's frontline staff asked about the availability of baby and toddler groups in their local areas in the years before the pandemic. A third of staff (33%) told us that the availability of groups had fallen; 25% weren't sure and 24% felt that availability had stayed the same. Only 18% said that availability had grown.³¹



Our findings

What we did

Our 2021 survey found that too many parents struggle to access many different types of non-childcare early years services.³² This year, we wanted to look in more detail at access to parenting support services in particular: baby and toddler groups, and parenting courses and programmes. So, in July 2022 we surveyed 2,000 parents of 0 to 5s in England.

We also wanted to hear about parents' journeys to accessing support in more depth. Over the winter (December 2021-January 2022) following our last survey, we interviewed nine parents of 0 to 5s across England.

Confidence in parenting, and need for more support

We started by asking parents whether they felt they have the skills to be a confident parent.

84% felt that they did have these skills, with 31% strongly agreeing that they did.

There were a few notable demographic differences in responses:

- Parents in the highest income group were more likely than any other income group to feel confident in parenting.
- Parents in urban areas were more likely to feel confident in parenting (88%) than those in suburban (82%) or rural areas (81%). Despite most parents feeling confident in their parenting skills, however, **two-thirds of parents (66%) wished there was more high-quality parenting support available to help with their parenting.**
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents (76%) were more likely than white parents (64%) to want more support.
- And parents in the youngest age group (18-24) were more likely than any other age group to want more support. Overall, the likelihood of wanting more support decreased as parent age increased.

Clearly, parenting support is highly valued by parents.

From our interviews

A key theme of the interviews we conducted was simply that parenting is difficult, and parents need support. Almost all of the parents we spoke to had sought support from a service, at some point, for an issue relating to parenting their child aged 0 to 5.

'As a first-time mum, you're dealing with quite a lot. You're not functioning as you normally would.'

- Mum, South East, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, married, annual household income £100,000 or more.

'The first month or so when we were breastfeeding, it was quite difficult because we had no experience with kids.'

- Dad, London, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, separated, annual household income less than £9,999.

'I'm not a parenting expert ... I've not been through this before, [I said] I just need some advice from someone, please!'

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

Access to parenting support

We asked parents about their access to three types of parenting support:

- Courses to help with a new baby or preparing to have a baby.
- Programmes to help with parenting skills such as managing children's behaviour.
- Baby and toddler groups.

Overall, 85% of parents we surveyed had access at least one of the service types in the past 5 years.

- 62% had accessed courses to help with a new baby or preparing to have a baby.
- 45% had accessed programmes to help with parenting skills.
- 77% had accessed baby and toddler groups.

Clearly, this type of support is in high demand among parents.

From our interviews: the benefits of accessing services

Parents were very positive about the potential benefits of services. In particular, they had valued the support of health visitors, and parenting support services.

One mother said that before the pandemic, she had been to 'loads' of baby and toddler groups:

'The first session I went to, I went in a nervous wreck, thinking "I don't know if I'm doing the right thing here, what if the other mums don't like me", I was a complete nervous wreck. But then I came out feeling on top of the world because I'd been able to ask questions, the mums had all been friendly, the midwives had been friendly. That gave me the confidence to try some of the other baby groups in the area. It got to the point where I was going to a baby group every day in the winter.'

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

She went along if she wanted a chat with other parents, or with the health professionals who led some of the groups.

'The help that I got at the very beginning from some of these groups was just amazing. It's just the confidence boost that new mums need.'

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

One father had attended Stay and Play groups at his local children's centre. He identified that a benefit for his daughters was 'having free rein of lots of toys and activities', and sensory experiences like playing, singing and 'making a lot of noise'. Other sessions he had attended at the children's centre, such as baby massage, were also beneficial.

‘Thinking about the developmental phase of the children – there were those massage or baby mobility, things that help with motor skills, things that help with sensory skills.’

- Dad, West Midlands, White, heterosexual, divorced, annual household income £50,000-£59,999

A mother cited the benefits of the free, local play groups she attended for her son’s social and emotional development.

‘I think my son definitely benefited from it, because he’s an only child ... he just needed a bit of time to meet other kids and to learn how to socialise because the social skills were quite difficult with him. But he has gotten a lot better now, thanks to those groups.’

- Mum, London, White and Asian, heterosexual, married, annual household income £30,000-£39,000

Parents also found that the social element of these groups could be a lifeline.

‘It wasn’t just getting the advice you needed, it was making friends who were in the same boat as you, they’d just had a baby, they were looking for company, they were at home all day, they needed other mums to speak to that were on the same wavelength.’

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999

‘For me, it was to have a group to be part of. A chance for the child to play, a chance for parents to talk.’

- Dad, West Midlands, White, heterosexual, divorced, annual household income £50,000-£59,999

‘Because I didn’t have that family support [from my own family] locally, to have those courses where I could go to and speak to other mums – I actually met a surprising amount of mums who didn’t have family support locally either.’

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999

‘Helpful to get out, meet new mums, share experiences.’

- Mum, Midlands, White, heterosexual, married, annual household income £50,000 - £59,999.

‘I think group support, and seeing that there’s other people that are as unsure as you, whether it’s remotely or face to face, is one of the beneficial things a new mum can have, because you just know that you’re not alone, and that there’s other people that feel the same as you.’

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

‘I’ve stayed in contact with a couple of the mums, we meet up whenever we can. It was a big help.’

- Mum, London, White and Asian, heterosexual, married, annual household income £30,000-£39,000

The high demand for parenting support services among parents in our survey, and the value parents place on these services, demonstrates the importance of this type of support being taken seriously by policymakers, and prioritised within broader conversations about early years services.

Unfortunately, until recently, too often this has not been the case. The government's response to a report on new parents by the Petitions Committee acknowledged 'the importance' of baby and toddler groups.³³ And we welcomed the £50 million commitment to parenting programmes in the 2021 Spending Review. However, a more joined-up vision for parenting support was still lacking. Government's response to the Petitions Committee report was telling in its admission on the subject of baby and toddler groups that 'there is no single responsible body with complete oversight of these groups. Parent and child groups are a cross-government policy with different departments having an interest.'³⁴

The inclusion of parenting support services in the recent family hub programme guide, therefore, was a positive step forward. It's vital that government understands how parenting support services work, how many parents are receiving them, and is aware of the outcomes these services achieve for families. So we welcome the programme guide's requirement for data collection, including service reach and demographic profiles of service users.³⁵ Local authorities must now be sufficiently supported by central government, in terms of investment as well as guidance, to make these requirements a reality.

Access by demographic groups

Social grade and income group

We've highlighted above how parenting support services could play a key role in levelling up. Parenting support services help with children's development, and the levelling up metric aims to improve learning outcomes for five-year-olds. We know there's a significant attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.³⁶ It's worrying, therefore, that **parents of lower income groups, and of C2DE social grades, were less likely to have accessed parenting support** than ABC1 and higher income parents.

Parents of higher social grades were more likely than those of lower social grades to have accessed all types of support. And across all the service types, parents in households of the highest income group were significantly more likely to have had access than those in households in lowest income group. Access to courses to help with a new baby, and to baby and toddler groups, both have a pattern of increasing as household income increases. The pattern for parenting skills programmes is a bit different, which is interesting as this service type is the most likely of the three to be targeted to families who need it.*

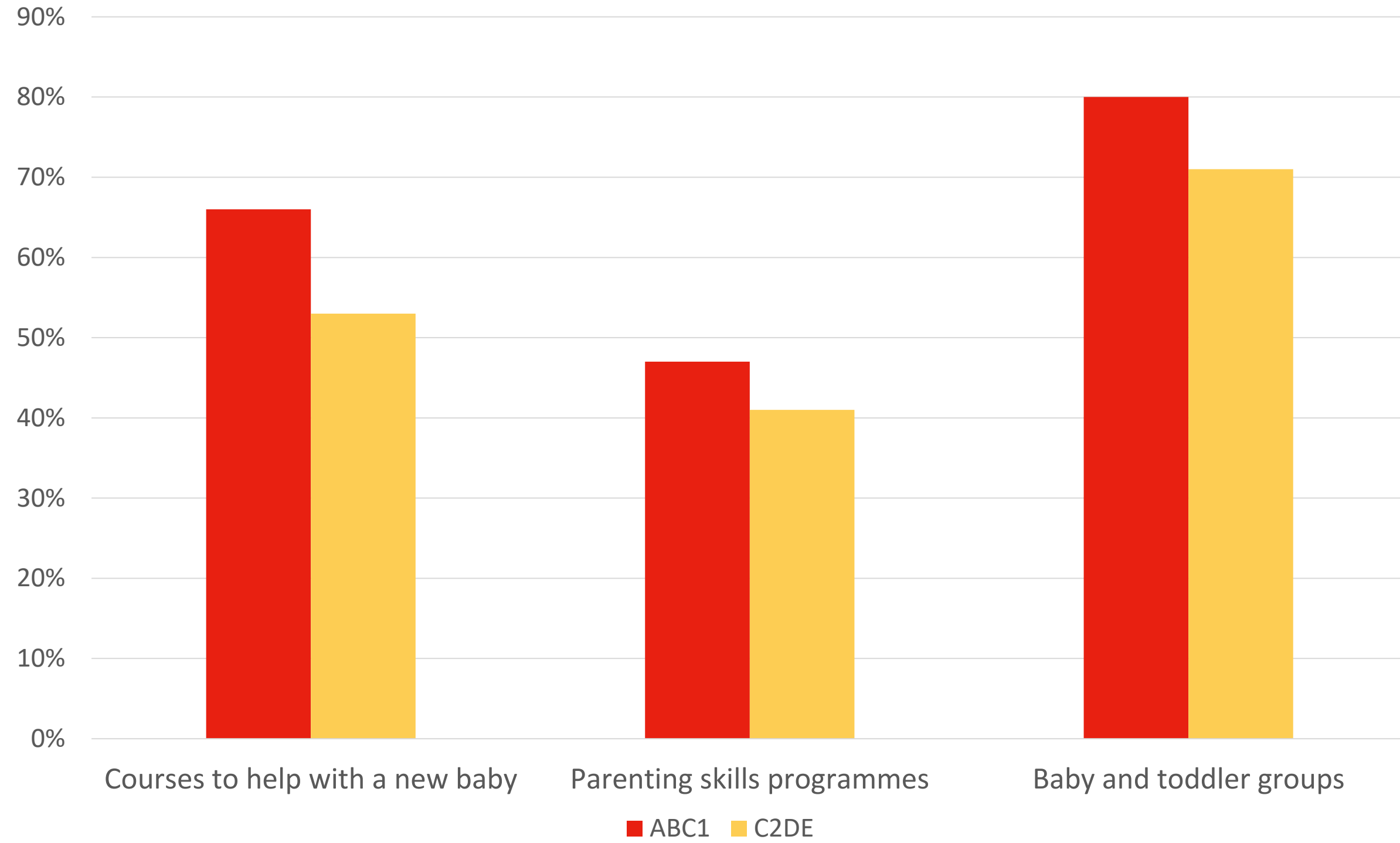
The below charts present a concerning imbalance – especially when we're reminded that apart from the highest income group, the percentage of parents who wanted more parenting support was fairly similar across the income groups.** Clearly, the need for parenting support isn't reserved for those of higher social grade or incomes, yet access remains unequal.

* Based on the finding that the highest proportion of parents said they were referred to this service type, rather than it being open to all parents.

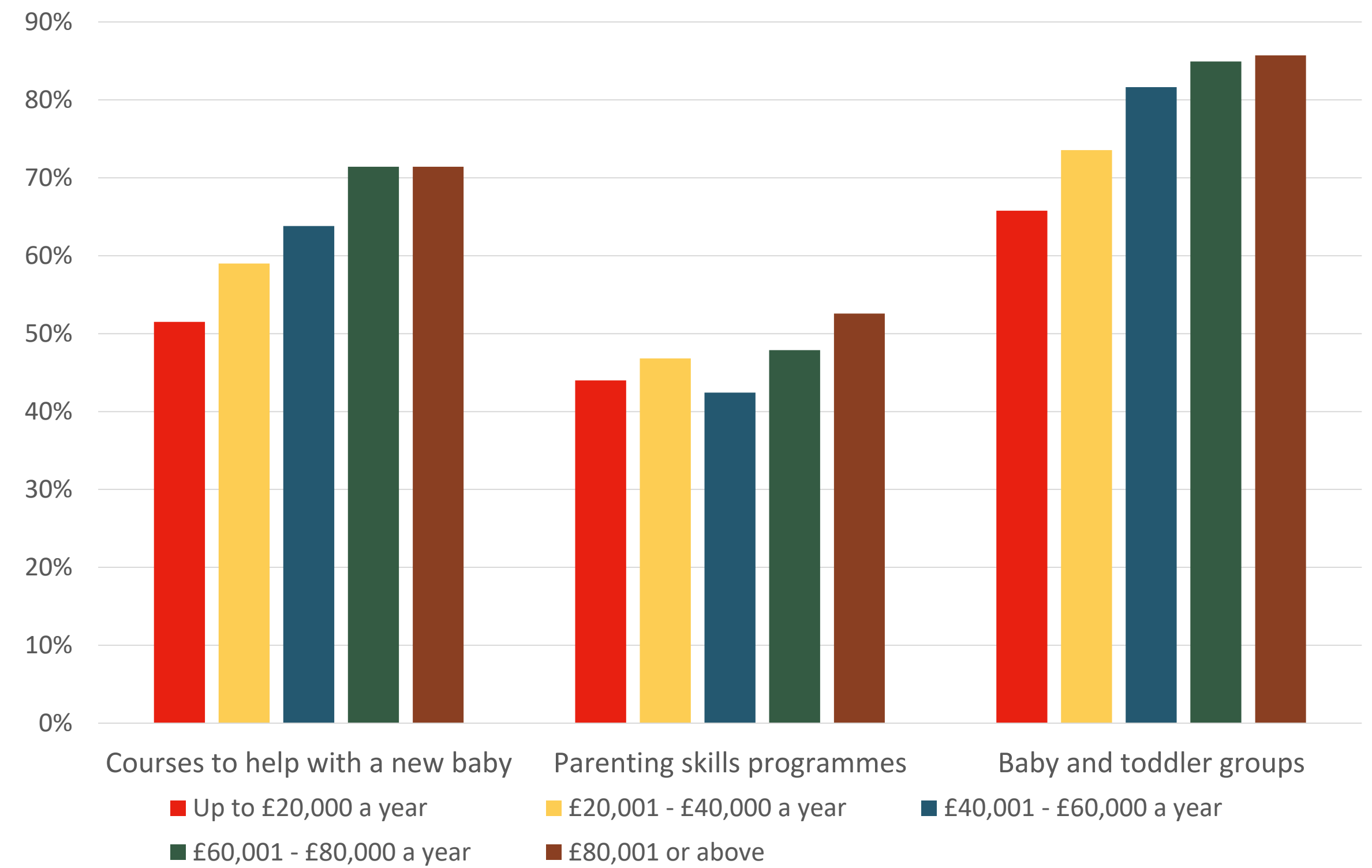
** Percentages of parents who agreed with the statement 'I wish there was more access to high quality parenting support to help with my parenting': Household income of up to £20,000 a year, 64%; £20,001 - £40,000 a year, 66%; £40,001 - £60,000 a year, 65%; £60,001 - £80,000 a year, 66%; £80,001 or above, 74%.

For levelling up to succeed, government will need to focus on correcting this imbalance.

Parents' access to service types by social grade



Parents' access to service types by annual household income



Region

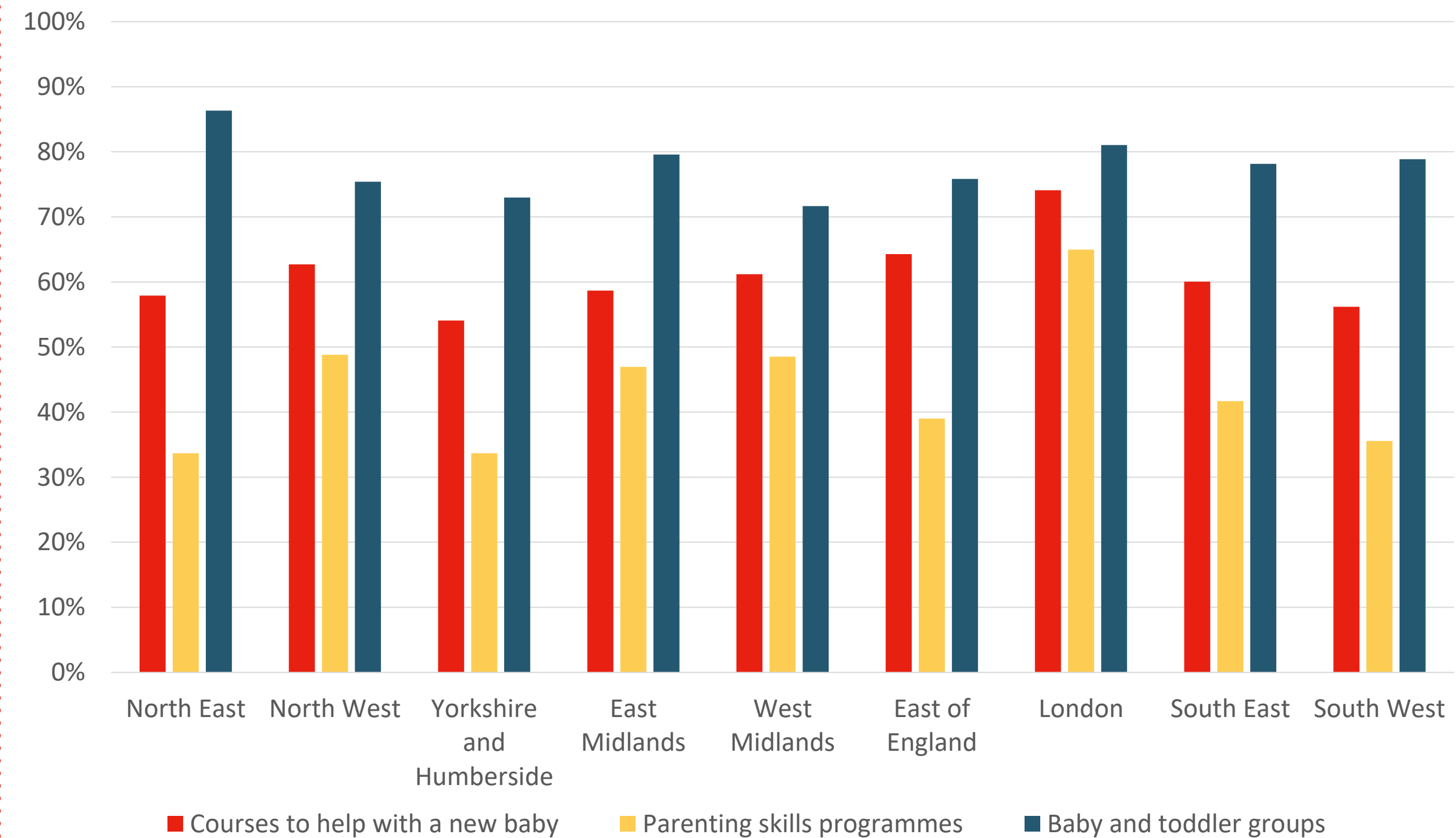
Levelling up aims to tackle ‘unfairness’ of opportunity, and ‘geographical inequality’.³⁷ In our survey, the geographical spread of results reveals a real patchwork of access between different regions, with a pattern emerging in terms of areas of high and low access.

- London saw the highest access for both courses to help with a new baby and parenting skills programmes, and second highest access for groups. The North West was in the top three areas of highest access for courses to help with a new baby and parenting skills programmes.
- Yorkshire and Humberside, the North East, and the South West were the three areas with the lowest access for both courses to help with a new baby and parenting skills programmes. Yorkshire and Humberside was also near the bottom for access to baby and toddler groups.

There were also significant differences between the areas with highest and lowest access for each service type.

- Nearly three quarters of parents had accessed courses to help with a new baby in London, compared to just over half in Yorkshire and Humberside.
- Nearly two thirds of parents had used parenting skills programmes in London, in comparison to just over a third in Yorkshire and Humberside, the South West and the North East.
- Baby and toddler groups saw higher levels of access generally, but still a big variation between different areas. Nearly nine in 10 parents had accessed them in the North East, down to 72% in the West Midlands.

Parents’ access to service types by region



In our interviews with parents, several mentioned that they had had very different experiences of accessing support in different areas of the country.

One mother had moved midway through her pregnancy, and so her antenatal care was transferred. She felt that the experience of antenatal care was very different between the two areas, with the professionals in her first area placing more emphasis on birth outcomes, parental mental health, and bonding, which she welcomed. In comparison, she felt that some topics were ‘glossed over’ in her new local area.

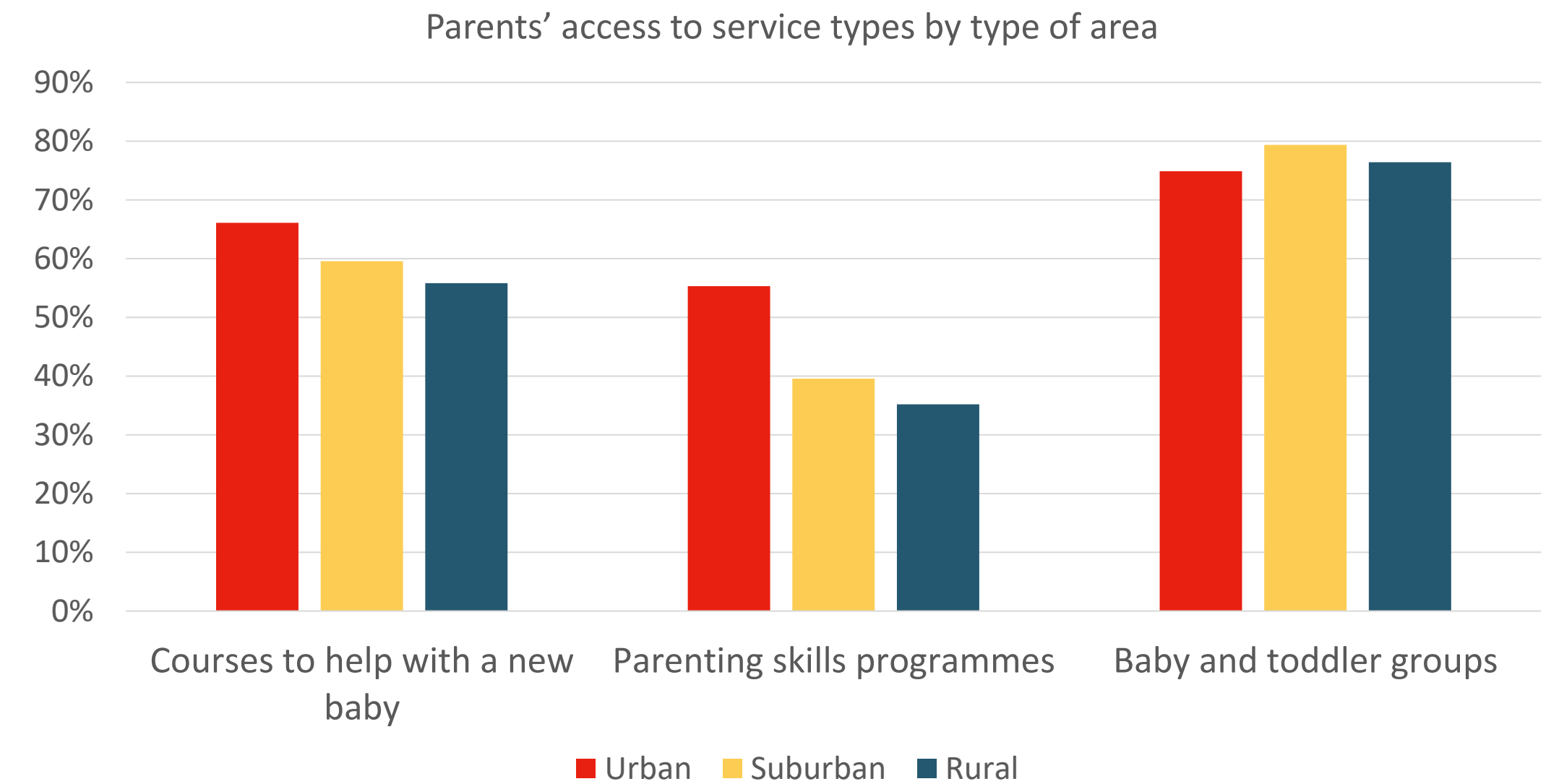
Another parent noted that she really appreciated the level of provision of Stay and Play and other community services in her local area. However, her friends in the neighbouring borough ‘really struggle to find out what council is putting on in terms of children’s centres and community centres. So we’ve been lucky in our area.’

One mother appreciated that the baby and toddler groups she accessed with her younger child had ‘stayed pretty much the same’ as when her older child was first born. She was aware that this wasn’t the case in all areas, so felt ‘really lucky’.

This regional variation demonstrates the need for better regulation of early years services between areas. The family hub programme guide includes the aim to ‘increase consistency of the services accessible through the family hub network, within and between local authority areas’.³⁸ This is clearly much needed, but the question remains of what will happen to the local areas not currently eligible for family hub funding. Access to vital services shouldn’t depend on ‘luck’ or be a postcode lottery: parents in every area of England should be able to access the support they need.

Type of area

Urban parents were more likely to have accessed courses to help with a new baby, and parenting skills programmes, than those in suburban and rural areas. The balance of access to baby and toddler groups was more equal between area types.



Urban parents were more likely to access parenting courses and programmes. We found earlier that parents in urban areas were most likely to feel confident in their parenting skills – which is a good sign when linked with their high level of access to these types of support. On the other hand, it’s worrying that suburban and rural parents were less likely to feel confident in their parenting skills, and also less likely to have accessed parenting courses and programmes.

Referral to services

We asked parents if they'd been referred to the support they accessed by a professional, or whether it was open to all parents.

For courses to help with a new baby or preparing to have a baby:

- 64% who accessed said it was open-access.
- 27% said they were referred.

For programmes to help with parenting skills:

- 60% who accessed said it was open-access.
- 33% said they were referred.

For baby and toddler groups:

- 80% who accessed said it was open-access.
- 16% said they were referred.

This aligns with what we might expect: that programmes to help with parenting skills are more likely to be targeted / subject to a referral from a professional, while baby and toddler groups are largely open-access.

We looked into the demographics of parents being referred to services.



Regional variation

There was a big variety between regions in patterns of referral to services vs open-access services. In London, for instance, over a quarter (26%) of parents accessing baby and toddler groups were referred to them, as opposed to only 5% in the South West.

This chimes with what we know about the significant variation in the landscape of support for families across the country. Different local authorities have responded to budget pressures by configuring their services in different ways. We've seen that the Sutton Trust's 2018 report identified a shift away from universal provision in children's centres towards more targeted support, with 'financial pressures' being the most commonly cited reason for changes in provision. The report highlights many local authorities undergoing a 'change of focus', 'a way of integrating children's centres into a wider package of 'early help' as part of local teams with a much wider age range (0 to 19), with more than 40% of authorities extending the age range to include school age children.'³⁹ More recently, government announced that 75 local authorities across England were eligible for funding to develop their local services into family hubs. Some local authorities had already begun this journey before the funding was awarded. Our survey results reinforce the fact that different local areas are at different stages of, and taking different approaches to, this journey.

Other demographic differences

We found that, across all service types:

- LGBTQ+ parents were more likely than heterosexual parents to be referred.
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents were more likely than white parents to be referred.
- Men were more likely than women to be referred.
- The youngest age group of parents were more likely to be referred.

For programmes to help with parenting skills (which we've seen are most likely for parents to be referred to, and we know from experience are more likely to be targeted), parents in the lowest income group were the most likely to be referred, with likelihood of being referred decreasing as income increased.

We can propose that the groups more likely to be referred are those most likely to be identified by professionals as in need of further support.

The importance of universal support

Some parenting services, particularly programmes to help with parenting skills, are designed to be targeted towards parents identified in need of help. But open-access parenting support also holds a vital place in systems of support for families. In our interviews, parents' stories highlighted the importance of universal services. One parent alluded to stigma attached to more targeted support: 'Social services, down here if you have that on you, you're considered to be a bad parent. There's not a very good name for them down here.'

Another spoke of the stigma around the local children's centre:

'I was a bit confused though, I remember the first time, I always thought that Sure Start was means-tested and you had to have a bit of a problem to go there, but it's not, it's open for everybody. [...] I think certain people are put off going. I think they perhaps think a certain type of person goes there, but it's not like that at all. [...] A bit of work needs to be done just to break down the barriers a bit, so there's not so much stigma attached to going. [...] I don't know what the big deal is, they're really helpful.'

- Mum, Midlands, White, heterosexual, married, annual household income £50,000 - £59,999.

Government's Early Years Healthy Development Review recognises that 'a targeted approach can leave families feeling stigmatised and therefore less willing to ask for help.' It asserts that 'Much more work needs to be done to make it easier for families to feel it is OK to need support and to ask for help – to remove the stigma many parents feel'.⁴⁰ The family hub programme guide states that open-access services are important for 'reducing stigma, making sure services across the network are viewed as accessible to all'.⁴¹

An essential element of this will be ensuring that all families can access universal parenting support, including baby and toddler groups, in their local areas. In our survey of Action for Children frontline staff earlier this year, 86% said that baby and toddler groups had enabled them or their service to reach families they think they wouldn't have otherwise.⁴² A report from the Early Intervention Foundation in 2020 looked at the local arrangements for delivering early childhood services in a group of local areas across England. The local areas 'made the case strongly for the importance of retaining sufficiently resourced open-access services in order to reach and support vulnerable families, and questioned the benefit of retaining only a vestigial universal offer'.⁴³

Difficulty accessing support

We've seen that these parenting support services are in high demand, with 85% of parents having accessed at least one of the service types over the past five years. However, as with our 2021 survey, we also found that many parents struggled to access these service types. Overall, 42% of parents had either struggled, or been unable, to access at least one parenting support service over the past five years. 23% – nearly a quarter – had been completely unable to access at least one service.

Importantly, **some groups struggled far more than others. This is a concern when it comes to levelling up, which aims to tackle inequality in opportunity and outcomes.**

Lower-income parents

Corresponding with our earlier finding that families in lower-income households were less likely to have accessed services, we also found that they were more likely than higher income groups to have faced difficulties in accessing support. 44% of parents in the lowest income group struggled, or were unable, to access support, compared to 37% in the highest income group. Looking just at those parents who did access support, parents in the lowest income group had found it significantly more difficult to access: 35% compared to 25% in the highest income group.

Fathers

Men were more likely to have struggled, or been unable, to access support than women (43% compared to 40%). Significantly, of parents who did access support, men were far more likely to have found it difficult to access than women (33% of men compared to 22% of women).

Government's Early Years Healthy Development Review identified barriers to dads and other partners accessing support. The Review heard from dads who had experienced postnatal mental health problems, but either did not speak out because they didn't want to draw attention away from their partner, or felt ignored by professionals. It heard that dads often didn't feel confident accessing services or attending groups.⁴⁴ In our parent interviews, one father highlighted that groups for first-time dads, 'just to talk things through, would be really helpful for men in general.'

'One of the things that I haven't started doing yet but I always wanted to do was the opportunity to get together with fathers. ... I haven't got the impression that there's actually enough support for first-time fathers.'

- Dad, London, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, separated, annual household income less than £9,999.

Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents

Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents were more likely to have struggled or been unable to access support than white parents (47% compared to 40%). Looking just at those who did access services, Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents were significantly more likely to have found them difficult to access, across all service types (40% compared to 25% of white parents). In particular, they were twice as likely to have had found it difficult to access baby and toddler groups (23% versus 12%).

The Early Years Healthy Development Review explored the barriers that families of ethnic minorities can face in accessing support, highlighting that services, and information around services, 'do not always feel inclusive'. The Review noted that families from minority ethnic groups are less likely to receive mandated health reviews for their babies, and that Asian/Asian British and Black/Black British respondents were less likely to feel they had the information they needed during or after pregnancy.⁴⁵

Our own recent report with the Early Intervention Foundation and the Race Equality Foundation, based on research with ethnic minority families about their experiences of accessing family support services, found that many of the families faced barriers when trying to seek support. The young people and parents cited experiences of discrimination and racism when accessing support, as well as a lack of cultural sensitivity.⁴⁶ Clearly, there is work to be done to ensure that families from all backgrounds have access to the support they need.

Other demographic groups

The youngest age group were significantly more likely to have problems accessing support. Half (50%) of parents aged 18 to 24 had struggled or been unable to access support, compared to 38% of those aged 45 to 54.

It's worrying to find that many of **the groups more commonly identified as in need of support (Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents, young parents, and men - all more likely to have been referred), were also more likely to struggle to access support.** The recently published family hub programme guide includes an aim for 'increased awareness and uptake of family hub services, including by disadvantaged and vulnerable groups'. It instructs local areas to 'ensure that the support which is available is inclusive, tailored to suit your population's needs and addresses any access barriers'.⁴⁷ Our survey results demonstrate how urgently this is needed.

Immigration

Our interviews demonstrated that early years support for immigrant parents and families is also vital. One father, who had arrived from another country just over a year ago, was very appreciative of the support a local service provided:

'They gave us a lot of things, like baby clothes, shoes for the baby, nappies.'

- Dad, Yorkshire and the Humber, Black/Black British, bisexual, married, annual household income £10,000 - £19,999

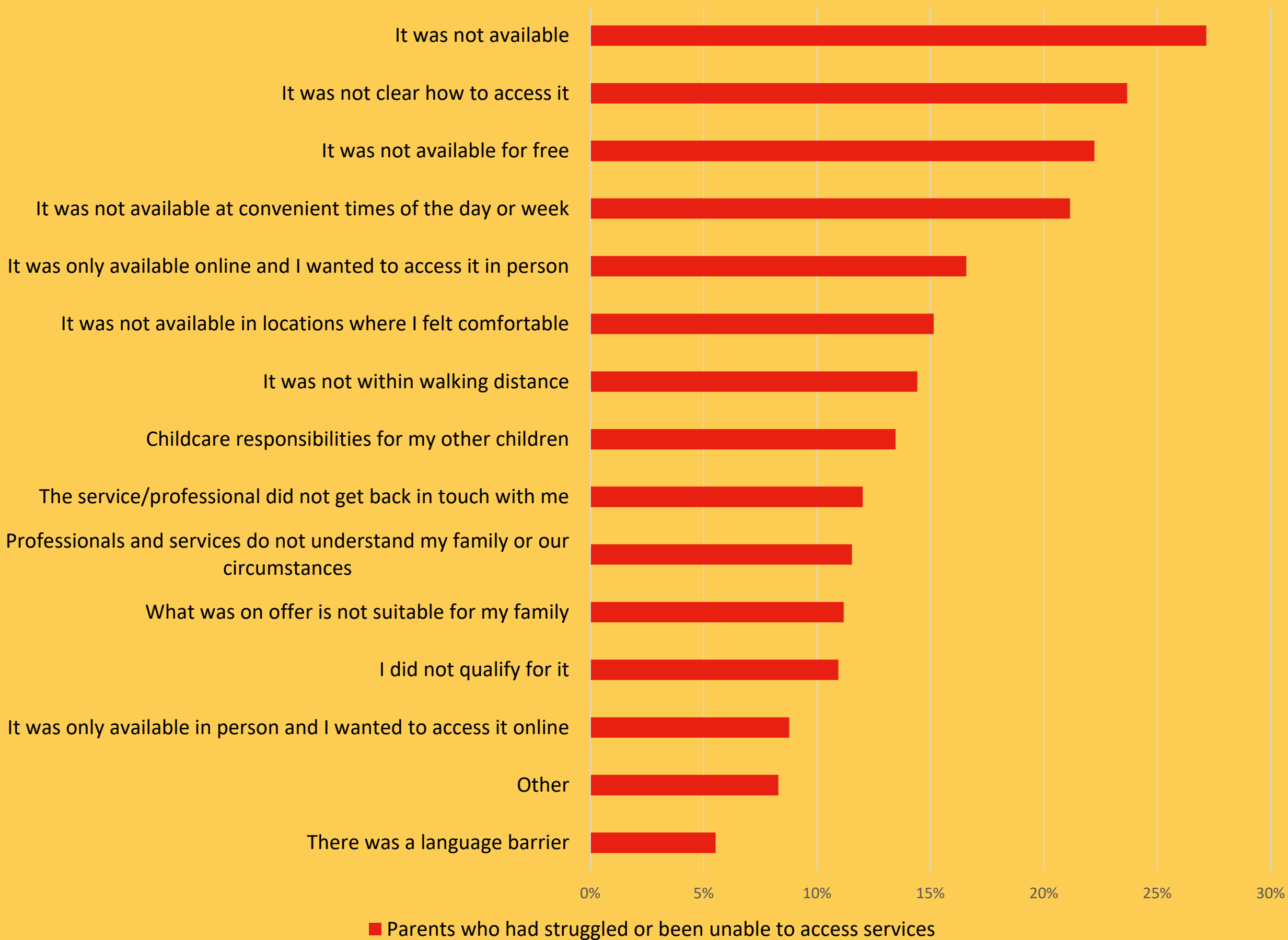
Another father highlighted that there was insufficient support for immigrant parents and families. 'We definitely didn't have enough hands-on support. Partly because we don't have any family here.'

'You don't have any family, you're not even familiar with how council groups are organised or how childcare systems work in the UK unless you have to go through them yourself. ... Trying to provide services aimed especially at immigrant families is an important step. Because there might be some things that you don't know you should ask for in the first place.'

- Dad, London, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, separated, annual household income less than £9,999.

Barriers to accessing support

As in our 2021 survey, we asked parents who had struggled or been unable to access support what the barriers were that they faced. The barriers they selected are outlined in the chart below.



Availability

It's striking that, similarly to our 2021 survey, the top barrier that parents faced was that services were not available. 27% of parents who'd struggled, or been unable to access support, cited this as a barrier. We've outlined the challenges that local authorities have faced in their ability to provide these types of services over recent years. We know that spending on early intervention services has reduced, with spending on children's centres falling dramatically.⁴⁸ Our own research showed that usage of children's centres fell by a fifth between 2014/15 and 2017/18.⁴⁹

We've welcomed government's recent commitments to the early years, through initiatives such as the family hub rollout, and the Early Years Healthy Development (Start for Life) Review chaired by Andrea Leadsom MP. We were pleased to see this supported by commitments in the 2021 Spending Review. However, much of the money earmarked for family hubs so far is focused around local authorities re-configuring their offer to meet the criteria of a family hub, rather than investing into delivering and expanding services. The recently published family hub programme guide states that 'The transformation funding is not intended to cover the costs of family hubs and Start for Life services. For family hub services that are not funded as part of the programme, you should continue to fund these from existing funding sources (for example, core grants and other programme funding).'⁵⁰ Many of the Start for Life recommendations also focus on innovating delivery of services, and improving information around them, rather than increasing reach. If family hubs are to be open and welcoming to all families, as the Start for Life Review posits, there need to be sufficient services available within them for families to be able to use.

This is especially important as our survey found that parents in different regions of the country had different experiences of availability of services. We saw earlier that Yorkshire and Humberside, and the South West, were in the lowest three areas in terms of parents' access to courses to help with a new baby, and parenting programmes. Yorkshire and Humberside was second lowest in terms of access to baby and toddler groups. Parents' responses about barriers show that Yorkshire and Humberside also had the highest percentage of parents who cited unavailability as a reason for struggling to access support, with South West the third highest.

In our interviews, one parent felt strongly about the reduction in open-access, baby and toddler-type groups he had noticed in his local area. The children's centre he had attended regularly with his older daughters for Stay and Play sessions has since closed, so he was unable to access it with his third daughter. He felt that nothing had replaced this in his local area, saying that there is now a **'definite lack there'**, with **'nothing, no similar type of free service or support available'**. Even without taking account for the pandemic, he felt that **'there's been a complete lack of those services'**.

This parent had also heard from other friends who have recently had children about this 'distinct lack of groups': his friends had really struggled to find free baby and toddler sessions in their local area.

In general, he felt that there is not enough support for parents of young children in his local area. **'There's a definite shortage now compared to five years ago.'** Now, **'there's a lack of a connection, where a lot of it is down to you to find out yourself.'**

He felt that this was 'unfortunately a legacy of cutbacks'; 'The council that runs the city where I live have huge financial issues. It's cutback upon cutback upon cutback.' This has meant that 'there is a definite gap ... for that additional support ... Just because they're looking [at] money first, as opposed to needs.'

Another parent felt lucky that her local children's centre was still running:

'We keep getting threatened with cuts, because Sure Start are often under threat aren't they. But I'm not sure if I've just been lucky and our centres just keep getting saved, but I think the level of service and level of classes are good. ... I definitely wouldn't want them shut down, I noticed in the news at the minute for [my area], I think it's the city ones, whereas I'm county, I think they're looking at shutting them and putting them all under one. So quite a lot of people on the city boundary would lose a lot I'm imagining.'

- Mum, Midlands, White, heterosexual, married, annual household income £50,000 - £59,999.

Financial barrier

22% of parents who'd struggled to access support said that services not being available for free was a barrier to access. The Sutton Trust's 2018 report showed that children's centres were increasingly focusing on targeted provision, rather than open-access services.⁵¹ With the reduction of open-access support such as Stay and Play-style groups as part of the children's centre programme, alternatives have been set up in many local areas, by other agencies, faith groups, or by volunteers. While it is welcome that local authorities, individuals and agencies have innovated to fill gaps, this has often meant that groups must run with a cost attached to be sustainable.

A greater focus on, and investment in, these types of parenting services from government could tackle this, and ensure that no parents are excluded from this vital support on the basis of cost. This will be more important than ever in the context of the mounting cost of living crisis.

In our interviews, one mother said: **'[Baby and toddler groups] are a lifeline for some people, some people if they can't afford to go to a paid group or anything, it gets them out of the house for the week.'** If the free groups hadn't been available, **'I probably wouldn't have got out as much and I'd have had to go to paid groups, so wouldn't have been able to do as much.'**

Another mother said about baby and toddler groups:

'I wish there was more, and more variety. I know there are some out there that you have to pay for ... so I want some more free things for people, for parents that can't afford to pay. ... Groups are something that need to be improved on – or at least more accessible.'

- Mum, London, White and Asian, heterosexual, married, annual household income £30,000-£39,000

Digital vs face-to-face support

While 17% of parents wanted to access services in person that were only available online, only 9% wanted to access services online that were only available in person. This demonstrates that while there is a definite need for digital support, face-to-face support must not be replaced. The restrictions introduced throughout the pandemic have seen many services working hard to develop, innovate and expand their online offers. Our report from January 2021 outlines how Action for Children services pivoted rapidly in order to continue supporting families during the first lockdown.⁵²

For many families, the increase in online support has been valuable, enabling greater flexibility and removing the need for travel time. But the risks of fully online provision have also been raised. These include challenges in identifying safeguarding issues, building positive and trusting relationships with families, and judging children's development and parental mental health issues. Babies have been identified as being particularly vulnerable to being 'invisible' during online contact.⁵³ Our own report with the Early Intervention Foundation in June 2020 explored some of the benefits and drawbacks of virtual delivery.⁵⁴

Our interviews with parents also highlighted both benefits and risks to online delivery. One mother felt that more virtual courses in her area would have been beneficial during the pandemic: 'then the mums wouldn't feel so lonely, they'd be able to speak with other mums in the same boat.'

A few of the parents highlighted that virtual services could have benefits regardless of Covid, too.

'And the mums who can't get out, maybe those with mental health problems or something like that. So to have the choice, of face to face or virtual courses, would be such a great help for some of the mums.'

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

One mother had given birth before the pandemic, but reflected that she would have welcomed virtual groups during that time, as she couldn't go anywhere in the first six weeks after giving birth because she'd had a C-section.

‘I was feeling quite lonely, I was spending all day with the baby on my own ... I didn’t have anybody else to speak to.’

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

Another mother had accessed Stay and Play groups online during lockdowns, which worked well for her at the time because she was suffering from post-natal depression and agoraphobia after giving birth:

‘They had a lot of online stuff, so during that period, that was quite nice, because it worked perfectly for me because of my agoraphobia and my depression. Not going out of the house was a big thing back at that time. So accessing those things online just made it ten times easier for me.’

- Mum, London, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, living as married, annual household income £10,000-£19,999.

‘That’s why something virtual – even when we haven’t got a pandemic, some mums can’t get out straight away – would be a really useful thing to have’

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

However, parents also stressed that there are elements of face-to-face support which virtual contact can’t replace. One mother’s daughter turned one just before lockdown, and she chose not to join children’s centre groups virtually, as:

‘I just don’t think a toddler would engage for very long. ... And the whole idea of going to groups is for us both to meet people and have a chit chat, and for her to play with different toys. Her own toys on a video is not as interesting.’

- Mum, Midlands, White, heterosexual, married, annual household income £50,000-£59,999.

Another mother felt similarly:

‘Since my daughter’s turned one, the face-to-face ones are a lot more beneficial for her – in terms of socialising with other children, seeing other people’s faces, playing with different toys, outdoor activities, and just all that good stuff.’

- Mum, London, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, living as married, annual household income £10,000-£19,999.

One mother was aware that families who didn’t have digital access could be excluded. ‘I use the internet and I can Google and use Facebook and stuff, so that’s how I found out when groups were on. If you didn’t have access to that, and you didn’t live near one, I’m not sure how you’d know about them.’

Geographical access

Parents in suburban (32%) and rural (28%) areas were more likely to say that services were unavailable than those in urban areas (21%).

And 14% of parents overall cited services not being in walking distance as a barrier. It was the seventh most common barrier selected: more common than childcare responsibilities, not qualifying for support, and professionals and services not getting back in touch. We asked parents who selected walking distance barrier what the challenges were, and the top answer among them was the cost of petrol or public transport (40% of parents who cited walking distance as a barrier identified this challenge).

The Sutton Trust's 2018 report explores the impact of the reduction in availability of children's centre services on parents' geographical access to support:

'Reduced services were reported by 55% of local authorities, with only 35% providing a range of 10 or more services. There was a greater focus on more limited services targeted at referred families, with less open access and different services distributed across centres in the same authority. This meant families needing services also needed access to public transport and better information.'

The report continues that the result of this shift in provision 'has been to move children's centres away from the original idea of an open access neighbourhood centre. Services are now 'hollowed out' - much more thinly spread, often no longer 'in pram-pushing distance'.⁵⁵

This is particularly poignant in the current financial landscape and looming cost of living crisis mentioned above. We've already seen above that parents of C2DE grades and lower income are less likely to have accessed support. With the cost of services being the third most commonly selected barrier to access, and those who can't walk to services citing the cost of getting there as a challenge, there's a clear financial obstacle to access for many parents.

The parents we interviewed felt strongly that it was important for services to be easily accessible geographically.

'It's difficult, because you're carting around a newborn, sometimes you don't know what you need.'

- Mum, South East, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, married, annual household income £100,000 or more.

'Obviously when you're a new mum with a baby you have to take half of your flat with you!'

- Mum, London, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, living as married, annual household income £10,000-£19,999.

Other parents pointed out that there can be significant barriers to going to groups that are further than walking distance from home. One mother said that although there were three children's centres in driving distance from her home, as she had had a C-section, she wasn't able to drive for six weeks after birth. She wanted to be able to attend the one centre that was in walking distance.

Another mother reflected that when groups are further than walking distance, they can become inaccessible for families who struggle to afford to drive or take public transport: **'you've got to factor in the time to get there, and whether you've got enough money for petrol and stuff.'**

One father felt that local community venues in his area were underused. By centralising services into 'larger hubs', **'you're lacking that community feel, you're lacking that ability to just wander down the road and find something. ...** Within a 5-mile radius of where I live, there are only two hubs, but there could have been 10 smaller centres. It's just been pushed into two hubs.' In his city, it can be hard to get between areas, as buses tend to go into the centre of town. **'If you want to get to a hub that's not on the way to the city centre, you're stuck. ... If I was going to design it, I'd say use existing buildings that are there, but make sure they're used almost 24/7.'** This would be for services including play groups, health clinics, and more.

Barriers by demographic groups

Different demographic groups had different reasons for struggling to access support. Men were more likely than women to want to access support online when it was only available in person. This reflects our 2021 report on digital provision, which found that the increase in virtual support as a result of the pandemic meant an increase in fathers attending and using support.⁵⁶

Men were also more likely than women to select the following answer options:

- 'What was on offer is not suitable for my family' (14% of men vs 8% of women).
- 'Professionals and services do not understand my family or our circumstances' (15% vs 8%).
- 'It was not available in locations where I felt comfortable' (18% vs 12%).

This suggests a higher likelihood among men of feeling that services are not suited to them, or inclusive environments for them. We've seen above that men were significantly more likely than women to have found accessing support difficult. Government's Early Years Healthy Development Review heard that dads and partners 'can feel that support services are only available for mothers'.⁵⁷

We've explored above the barriers that Black, Asian and minority ethnic families can face when it comes to accessing early year support. Concerningly, in our survey, Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents were more likely than white parents to select the following answer options, which imply a less welcoming and accommodating experience of services:

- 'The service/professional did not get back in touch with me' (17% vs 11%).
- 'What was on offer is not suitable for my family' (18% vs 10%).
- 'Professionals and services do not understand my family or our circumstances' (19% vs 10%).
- 'It was not available in locations where I felt comfortable' (22% vs 13%).

This builds on our recent research with the Early Intervention Foundation and the Race Equality Foundation, which found that ethnic minority families felt they were treated unfairly, or not understood, by professionals.⁵⁸

Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents were also more likely to select the below options, implying a greater impact of other elements of their lives forming obstacles to service access:

- 'It was only available in person and I wanted to access it online' (15% vs 7%).
- 'It was not available at convenient times of the day or week' (27% vs 20%).
- 'Childcare responsibilities for my other children' (21% vs 11%).

Unfortunately, both LGBTQ+ parents in comparison to heterosexual parents, and lower income parents in comparison to higher income parents, were more likely to say that services weren't available in locations where they felt comfortable. This again creates a picture of a service environment that isn't accommodating to all.

Professionals designing, implementing and investing in parenting support services must take account of these varying experiences of access between demographic groups. It's essential that all groups are able to access parenting support whenever they need it.

Worries as a result of being unable to access support

We asked parents who had been unable to access support if they had any concerns as a result of this. 79% had at least one worry as a result of being unable to access support. The worries are listed below, ordered by how frequently they were selected by parents.

Worries	Percentage of parents unable to access support
Feeling isolated / lonely *	41%
My mental health and emotional wellbeing	41%
My ability to handle difficult behaviour from my child such as temper tantrums	37%
Feeling scared, daunted or anxious about issues relating to parenting	35%
My housing, finance and employment situation	35%
My child's social, emotional and personal development	34%
My child's ability to make friends/socialise with other children	34%
My child's ability to meet key development milestones e.g. toilet training, feeding themselves, crawling and walking, talking	33%
My child's communication and language development	32%
My child's ability to share toys with other children	32%
My child's mental health and emotional wellbeing	29%
Feeling like I don't have the skills or confidence for parenting	28%
My physical health	26%
My relationship with my child	24%
My relationship with my partner	23%
My child's physical development	21%
Our home environment	18%
My family's safety	17%

Parental wellbeing tops the list, with loneliness/isolation and mental health being the two most commonly selected answers. The next two most commonly selected options relate to confidence with parenting – followed by practical concerns around housing, finance and employment.

This array of issues covered by the top five most commonly selected concerns is revealing of the multifaceted nature of parenting support, and the range of help it wraps around children and parents. Not only do these services support parents themselves, by tackling isolation and boosting wellbeing, but they instil confidence and positivity when it comes to parenting skills and handling challenging behaviour. On top of this, parenting support services provide practical and logistical help, improving housing, finance and employment situations to ensure families are able to focus on giving their children the best start in life.

Worries by demographic group

Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents were more likely to worry about issues relating to development and the home environment, as well as safety and practical concerns (housing, finance and employment):

- 'My child's ability to meet key development milestones, e.g. toilet training, feeding themselves, crawling and walking, talking' (40% vs 32%).
- 'My child's social, emotional and personal development' (40% vs 34%).
- 'My child's physical development' (28% vs 20%).
- 'Our home environment' (26% vs 16%).
- 'My family's safety' (28% vs 16%).
- 'My housing, finance and employment situation' (42% vs 34%).

Parents of the C2DE social grades were significantly more likely than ABC1 grades to be concerned about their relationship with their child (31% vs 22%).

Those in rural areas were more likely to be worried about feeling isolated or lonely (47%) compared to parents in urban (38%) and suburban (42%) areas.

Single parents were more likely than those married or in a relationship to be worried about the impact on their housing, finance and employment situation (54% vs 33%).

And those in the lowest income group were four times more likely to be worried about the impact on their housing, finance and employment situation (40%) than those in the highest income group (10%).

Parenting support as early intervention

We know from Action for Children's frontline service delivery that parenting support services can be a vital way of spotting challenges facing families early, and ensuring the right support is in place to stop issues escalating. In our survey of frontline staff earlier in 2022, 71% said that in their experience, parents attending baby and toddler groups had enabled the identification of more serious challenges facing families.⁵⁹

We asked parents who had accessed any type of parenting support service we asked about whether this led to them accessing further support for a particular issue. Overall, nearly a third (32%) of the parents who had accessed parenting support had gone on to access further support as a result of this.

Broken down into service types:

- 40% of parents who had accessed courses to help with a new baby or preparing for a baby went on to access further support.
- 51% of parents who had accessed parenting skills programmes went on to access further support.
- 32% of parents who had accessed baby and toddler groups went on to access further support.

We then asked parents what the issues were that they accessed further support for. These are listed below, in order of the issues most commonly selected.

Issues parents accessed further support for	Percentage of parents who accessed further support
Child development needs	33%
Mental health needs (for me or my or child)	21%
Parental loneliness/isolation	20%
Need for support with parenting	19%
Physical health needs (for me or my child)	19%
Financial hardship	18%
Need for practical support, e.g. with housing, employment, accessing benefits, nutrition	14%
Parental conflict	11%
An undiagnosed special educational need or disability	11%
Domestic abuse	10%
Substance misuse	7%
Other	5%
Prefer not to say	4%

In our frontline staff survey earlier in the year, we also asked staff what the issues were that had been identified in parents attending baby and toddler groups (from a nearly identical list of options to the one we gave parents). The most commonly selected issues were very similar across both surveys, with the top issues selected by our staff being:

- Child development needs.
- Poverty/financial hardship.
- Parental loneliness/isolation
- Need for support with parenting.⁶⁰

Both staff and parents identified child development as the top issue identified for further support after accessing a parenting service. As we've seen, government's levelling up goal for five-year-olds focuses on learning outcomes. This is further evidence that parenting support services will be vital for achieving this goal.

The parents we interviewed felt that a key benefit of parenting support services was being able to get trusted information and advice, and to access further support for specific challenges.

'They have all the information at places like that ... they can give you the information you need to know.'

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

'The sessions were really helpful, really practical information.'

- Mum, South East, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, married, annual household income £100,000 or more.

‘You can speak to them about anything from financial stuff to housing, to food, to breastfeeding, all of that stuff. So they’re really helpful.’

- Mum, London, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, living as married, annual household income £10,000-£19,999.

One mother mentioned that there are family support surgeries linked in with her local Stay and Play groups, **‘so you can go to the Stay and Play and you can speak to someone as well.’**

One mother attended a mum and baby course run by community nurse. The nurse heard about the mother’s traumatic birth experience, and the consequent mental health impacts. ‘So she suggested - and gave me the information to book in - a birth debrief, which changed my world, because I was really struggling with my mental health, and that birth debrief really did a lot for me.’ Because of attending the mum and baby sessions, the mother was able to access further support that she needed: **‘I wouldn’t even have thought about [the debrief] otherwise. After I’d got that information I asked my midwife also about it and they connected me up. But [the group] was where the idea came from in the first place.’** If she hadn’t been going to those sessions, the mother wouldn’t have known what to ask for, and may not have found the support she needed.

A key element of the services being a route to further support is the expertise of the staff. In the case of the mother mentioned above, who was referred to a birth debrief, the experience of the community nurse allowed them to identify the challenges and signpost to the correct service.

Other parents felt a strong sense of trust in the professionals running these types of groups in their local area.

‘There’s people there you can ask advice from that are experts, that do it every day for their job.’

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

‘That was the whole point of it - implicit trust, without even questioning, that it was run by very experienced professionals in their field.’

- Dad, West Midlands, White, heterosexual, divorced, annual household income £50,000-£59,999.

‘There’s always play workers and early years workers in there, like if you’re unsure about something, like ‘I’m not sure if to drop his milk’, or just any sort of question really, they’re always really helpful.’

- Mum, Midlands, White, heterosexual, married, annual household income £50,000-£59,999

‘The people that run the baby groups are generally people that have had a lot of experience in child services and support.’

- Mum, South East, White, heterosexual, single, annual household income £20,000-£29,999.

‘Because you see these people so often as well, you see the workers pretty much three to four times a week when you’re going to the Stay and Plays, you build up that relationship, so you can tell them about your situation and it feels comfortable.’

- Mum, London, Asian/Asian British, heterosexual, living as married, annual household income £10,000-£19,999.

We've seen that the Sutton Trust's 2018 report on children's centres found 'a greater focus on more limited services targeted at referred families, with less open access'. This meant that in many areas, the universal offer was being delivered by volunteers, rather than by qualified children's centre staff: in one area, it was reported that 'The professional children's centre staff have gone and their work is now being done by community volunteers'.⁶¹ This can lead to concerns about the ability of volunteers to, for instance, identify families who might be facing more serious challenges, or to identify any gaps in children's development.

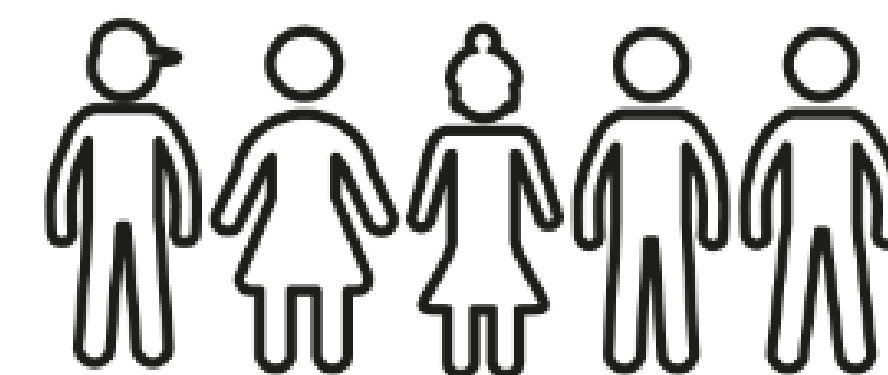
A father who had attended Stay and Play sessions at a local children's centre in the past had more recently gone to a similar group run at a local church, since his children's centre closed. While he appreciated the availability of the group at the church, he felt that it 'wasn't the same' in comparison to the '**size, scope, scale, of different activities that were available through the centre**'. He felt that the group at the church was 'no real replacement' for what the centre had offered.

Our survey and interviews demonstrate that parenting support services should be valued not only for their immediate benefits to families, **but as an effective form of early intervention** to prevent needs escalating. Government's recently published programme guide for family hubs states that early intervention is 'essential': 'Evidence shows preventative early intervention can deliver better outcomes for babies, children and their families'; 'There is no better time to address risk factors in a child's life, prevent problems from occurring, or identify emerging difficulties than in a baby's first 1,001 days'.⁶² Parenting support services must be understood as a vital element of the early intervention provided within family hubs.

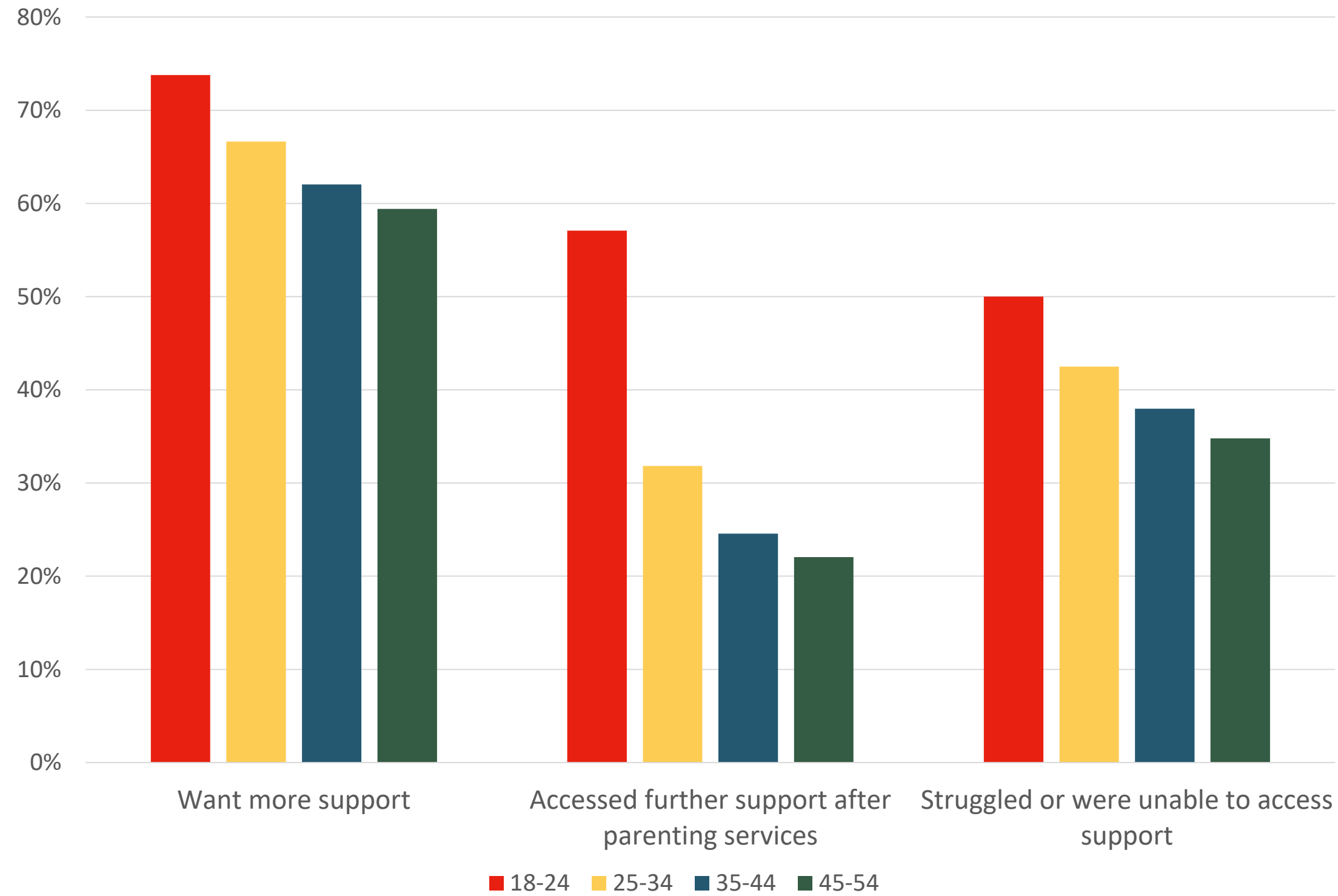
Looking in more detail at parents in our poll who said they had gone on to access further support, there were a few notable demographic differences.

- Men were much more likely than women to access further support (42% vs 24%).
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents were much more likely to access further support (52%) compared to white parents (28%).
- Young parents were significantly more likely to access further support (57%) than any other age group, with the likelihood of accessing further support decreasing as age of parent increased.

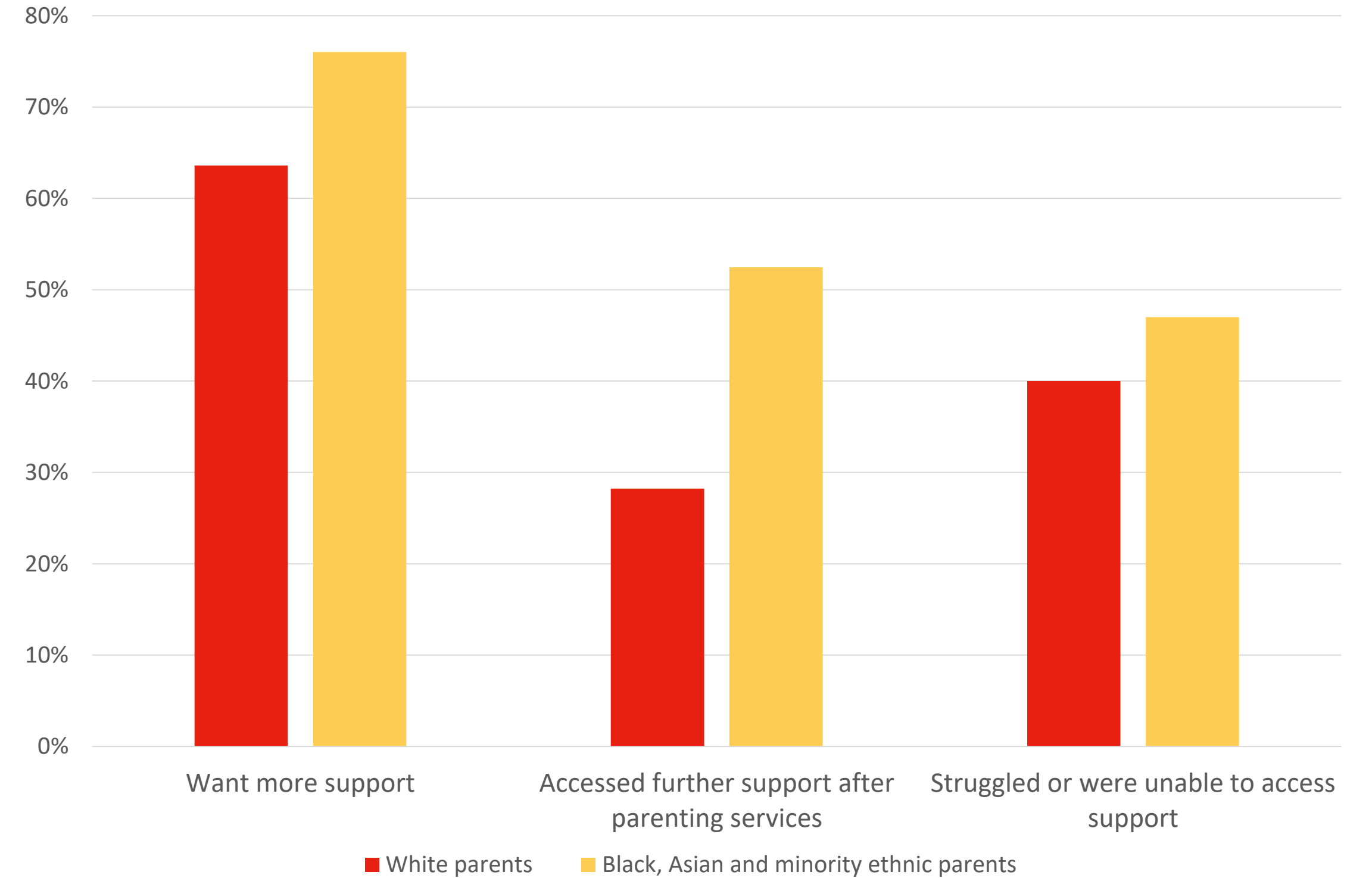
Comparing these demographic differences with our earlier results shows that these same groups were also more likely to be referred for support, and also to struggle to access support. This reveals a worrying pattern: **the groups who were most commonly identified as in need of support, and who were most likely to access further support after using parenting support, were those who had found it difficult to access parenting support in the first place.**



For young parents and Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents, we see a particularly worrying pattern. These groups were most likely to wish there was more support available, most likely to access further support after initially accessing parenting support, and unfortunately also more likely to have struggled to access support in the first place.



We included parents aged over 55 in our survey, but only received 7 responses from over 55s, so have left them out of this reporting.



We know that many parents were completely unable to access services they wanted, and that a third who did access services went on to access further support for particular issues. This suggests that many issues will have gone unidentified as a result of parents missing out on services. We estimate that there were **415,979 parents with missed needs**.^{*} This demonstrates both why these services are so important to families, and why it's a big problem that too many struggle to access them.

^{*} In our survey of 2000 parents of children aged 0-5 in England, 468 (23%) were unable to access support. 468 / 2000 * 6,452,585 (parents of 0-5s in England) = 1,509,905 (1.5 million). Of those in our survey who accessed support, 551 (32%) went on to access further support. We can estimate that if that 1,509,905 had been able to access support, at least 32% of them would have had needs identified. 32% of 1,509,905 = 415,979.

What should government do?

Our research has revealed that parenting support is in high demand among parents, could play a key role in levelling up, and can prevent issues escalating. However, a lack of vision and investment from government for parenting support has led to:

- Too many parents struggling to access these services, and concerned about the consequences of missing out.
- A varied and unequal pattern of access across the country, and between demographic groups.

It's not too late to change this. It was promising to see funding allocated for family hubs, and for implementing the recommendations of the Early Years Healthy Development (Start for Life) Review, in the 2021 Spending Review. Earlier this year, we welcomed the Independent Care Review's vision of a shift in the social care system back towards early intervention. And we've mentioned the positive developments in the recently published family hub programme guide, including the expanding of the service offer to incorporate parenting support services, and the requirement to collect data on service usage and reach, including demographic breakdowns.

These commitments represent a significant opportunity for government to act on early years. However, to make a success of these plans and achieve the levelling up mission, there is more still to be done.

Levelling up must be about giving every child an opportunity for a safe and happy childhood, and the foundations to thrive. There's no better place to start than in the earliest years.

Government must ensure that every family can access the parenting support they need.

This will not be possible without:

Addressing inequality in access

We found variation in access to parenting support, between regions and between demographic groups. Currently, family hub plans apply to just over half of local authorities. Government must clarify how it plans to improve access to parenting support in areas which are not eligible. No area, or family, should be left behind.

Investing to improve access

The most common barrier to accessing parenting support in our survey was that services were not available. The lack of access to services is a function of the sharp reduction in spending on early intervention services; spending fell by £1.9 billion between 2010/11 and 2020/21.⁶³ Little progress can be made on parenting support without further and sustained investment. We'd welcome a long-term plan for investment into early years services.

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Methodology

In July 2022, with Opinium, we surveyed 2,000 parents of 0 to 5s across England. We asked about whether they had accessed parenting support services, how easy or difficult it was to access them, the barriers they faced, any worries they had as a result of being unable to access support, and whether they'd gone on to access further support after accessing parenting services.

Over the winter (December 2021-January 2022) following our 2021 survey, we also interviewed nine parents of 0 to 5s across England. We asked about their access to early years services in their local areas, whether they found these services helpful, what had gone well and what could be improved in terms of their journeys to access.

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