



International Innovations in Childcare – What can Manchester share and learn?

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Executive Summary

This report discusses the issue of childcare provision in three distinct Metropolitan regions of Europe: Greater Manchester, UK; Cagliari, Sardinia and Barcelona, Spain. [Childcare is important social infrastructure](#), an essential aspect of a caring economy and [the single most important driver of the gender pay and labour market participation gap](#). In the UK context, [a recent survey of more than 4,000 women](#) found that three-quarters (67%) felt childcare duties had hindered pay increases and stalled their career progression. [Formal childcare is a lifeline that helps parents to stay in work](#) and it can have a serious impact on supporting mothers especially, back into work. Good quality childcare and early years education not only supports children's development and [helps them to settle into and thrive at school](#), but it is also [particularly beneficial for children growing up in poverty](#). Crucially, in England, it is the most disadvantaged families who are least likely to access funded childcare hours. Take-up is also lower among ethnic minority families for whom English is an additional language, as well as amongst [families who have children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities \(SEND\)](#).

The report outlines some of the issues surrounding the current childcare infrastructure in the UK, namely affordability and accessibility, and considers existing childcare provision in Sardinia and Barcelona, before providing some examples of innovative childcare provision within Manchester, Cagliari and Barcelona. In bringing together learning from across these three Metropolitan regions of Europe, we hope to provide Manchester City Council, and specifically their 'Anti-Poverty Strategy' (2022-2027), with future possibilities for change in further developing progressive childcare policies.

To this end, the report makes three recommendations which are aimed at both regional and national policy makers:

- 1) Extend free available hours; expanding subsidised childcare beyond the current 3- and 4-year-old offer with a subsidy rate that varies by household income; improving working conditions within the industry by ensuring staff with Level 3 qualifications receive the national living wage, and higher wages based on primary school teachers' rates for degree holders.**
- 2) Improve the availability of childcare for *all* children, and to eliminate any socio-economic barriers for families with children who have SEND. We further recommend continuing to provide additional support to enable families from ethnic minority backgrounds to access childcare and early years education.**
- 3) Invest in social spaces designed with children in mind so that they can be used as intergenerational spaces of care.**

Introduction

Why Barcelona (Spain), Cagliari (Sardinia) and Manchester (Greater Manchester)?

The regions of Greater Manchester, Barcelona Province in Catalonia, Spain and Sardinia in Italy, were chosen as the focus of this report on childcare because of several, shared characteristics. Firstly, they are located in [areas heavily impacted by the austerity measures](#) implemented by national (and in Catalonia, regional) governments within their respective countries, following the Global Economic Crisis (GEC) of 2008. Swingeing and ongoing public spending cuts have significantly exacerbated deeply entrenched inequalities of gender, class, race and age in Spain, Italy and the UK [1] [2] [3] [4]. Secondly, austerity is also profoundly shaping young people's lives in these regions, affecting their choices about where to live [1] [2] [3], [how and where to work](#), and [delaying decisions about having children](#). Fears about the increase in precarious employment, unaffordable rents, insecure private and social housing sectors, as well as the affordability and availability of state childcare provision, have provoked [falling birth rates or the postponement of childbearing](#) in all three countries. Thirdly, and finally, these regions share the distinction of having devolved or autonomous political powers, which increases the opportunity for innovation in childcare in order to address those aspects of life most affected by austerity.

Why Childcare?

Childcare is a vital component of a modern state and a city's infrastructure. However, [in the UK the childcare sector is chronically underfunded](#) and is failing to meet the needs of parents, children and the economy. According to analysis from the Women's Budget Group, an estimated 1.7 million women are prevented from taking on further hours of paid work due to childcare issues, resulting in up to £28.2 billion in economic output being lost every year. A [professional, high-quality childcare system](#) is therefore an essential part of a caring economy and enables parents to remain in paid work, undertake training, or to engage in other activities such as volunteering or caring for other relatives. [Access to affordable, high-quality childcare](#) also has the capacity to improve educational outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and to provide social networks and parenting support for parents, thereby narrowing social inequalities.

However, childcare costs remain a significant barrier to work for many parents, particularly mothers, who shoulder a disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care. Childcare is therefore the [most important driver of the gender pay and labour market participation gap](#). Despite this, [childcare in England is costly, complex and there are significant gaps in provision](#), leading the [Women's Budget Group to declare that the childcare system in England is in crisis](#). Moreover, the childcare sector also struggles to deliver care that is attuned to the needs of shift workers, freelancers and others with 'atypical' work patterns. These issues are discussed in further detail below.

Structure and Focus of Report

The report is structured as follows. Section 3 offers some wider context for the writing of this report. Beginning with the economic landscape, we discuss the austerity measures implemented across Europe by national (and in Catalonia, regional) governments, following the GEC of 2008. We offer some insight into the backdrop against which existing childcare provision within the three metropolitan regions takes place. Firstly, we consider the impacts of austerity measures within Greater Manchester; then we discuss the impact austerity measures have had on inequality in Barcelona, and finally we reflect on rising unemployment and poverty rates in Sardinia.

Following that, we outline the existing childcare provision in the three localities, exploring the issues in greater depth, beginning with Manchester and discussing the issue of affordability and accessibility. It is important to acknowledge that this is not the only issue associated with childcare provision in the UK; other issues, such as low pay and staff retention have been reported elsewhere, such as [here](#). We then cover progressive pricing systems in Barcelona and finally, the issue of geographical variation of early childhood services within Italy is discussed. The report's focus then turns to imagining what progressive and inclusive childcare could look like in section 4, which it does by providing examples of good practice and innovation from all three regions. Section 5 concludes the report and offers recommendations for local and national policy makers, based on current issues with existing childcare provision in the UK, and drawing from the examples presented herein.

Context

Austerity

Greater Manchester, UK

Manchester is a growing, diverse, multi-cultural city which, together with its neighbouring city of Salford and surrounding towns, make up the Greater Manchester conurbation in the North-West of England, UK. The Greater Manchester region has a [population of approximately 2.87 million](#). Inequality within the UK has risen more sharply than anywhere else in Europe, with notoriously '[stringent conditionality in welfare entitlements](#)'. This region, and Manchester as a city, have experienced significant public spending cuts and is [one of the areas of the UK most heavily impacted by austerity measures](#). Across a decade of austerity, Manchester City Council has lost £419 million of public funding, and [by 2025 will be facing a £153 million shortfall](#). In 2015 [Greater Manchester was the first English region to obtain devolved powers](#) for health, transport and housing, and a [£500 million skills budget to help reduce high rates of youth unemployment](#).

Historically the area has high levels of deprivation and unemployment, following [changes in the labour market and reorganisation of the social security system](#), which no longer prevents people from slipping into crisis. In October 2022 [approximately 76,000 people claimed Universal Credit in Manchester, 49,000 of whom were not in paid employment, and 28,000 of whom were](#), indicating issues of low-paid, insecure work. It is the second most deprived authority in England, and second of the top 20 local authorities for [incidence of destitution](#). Recent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the rising costs-of-living along with persistent economic uncertainty, have further exacerbated inequality in the city where [an estimated 46,700 \(42%\) children are living in poverty](#). In order to provide an overall strategic direction for the city, the City Council published '[Our Manchester Strategy, 2016-2025](#)', a framework that prioritises improving equality in the city. Following the publication of Sir [Michael Marmot's report](#) on the ways in which systemic inequalities and wider social determinants of health determine life outcomes in Greater Manchester, the council have developed the [Making Manchester Fairer Action Plan](#) (2023) which sets out four themes for addressing poverty. This report was written alongside the development of this action plan (see funding statement).

Barcelona Province, Catalonia, Spain

Barcelona is the third largest metropolitan area in the EU with a population of 5.6 million¹. While Spain is the third most unequal country in Western Europe after the UK and Italy, inequality rates have declined from 2015 to reach pre-2008 crisis levels². Spain has the highest rate of unemployment (13.1%) in Europe and the second highest rate of youth unemployment (30.2%)³. Although the unemployment rate is lower in Barcelona (7.3%) and household income is significantly higher in Barcelona than the Spanish average, there are

¹ Eurostat data

² OECD data

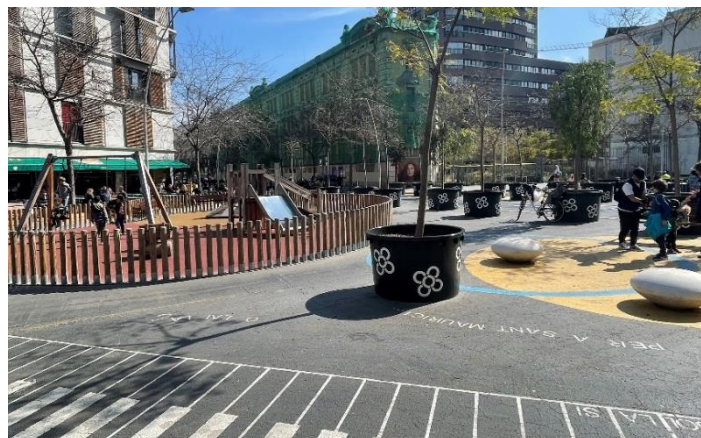
³ Ajuntament de Barcelona data

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great levels of geographical and intergenerational inequality. The at-risk-of-poverty rate in Barcelona's richest district, Sarrià-Sant Gervasi, is 7.4%, while in Nou Barris, a poorer district, it is 38.7%. Of those aged 16-34 in Barcelona, 22.65% are at risk of poverty, whilst for people aged 35-74 it is 16.2%⁴. The poverty rate is even higher (32%) for households with children and one single earner. Barcelona also has high levels of income and housing asset intergenerational inequality. In the metropolitan area, only 33.7% of the population aged 18-39 have an annual income of more than €35,000 and 71.5% of people aged 16–34 are tenants⁵.

Impacting young adults' decisions to have children is the disproportionate concentration of unemployment, precarious, insecure employment, poverty and housing unaffordability, as well as childcare provision. Currently, Spain has the second lowest fertility rate (below 1.2) in the EU after Malta, and this is even lower in the city of Barcelona (1.09)⁶. In Spain and Barcelona, childcare greatly relies on family intergenerational support. Since 2008, practices such as prolonged periods of residence in the parental home, the provision of childcare by grandparents (disproportionately grandmothers) or other family members, residence proximity, or the use of pensions to sustain several generations have intensified.

Post-crisis austerity measures have widened inequalities, and increased levels of deprivation and debt, [making it difficult for many households to meet their financial obligations](#), particularly households where children are present. The Covid-19 pandemic intensified social exclusion across the whole population, but due to the difficulties involved in raising children, and the weakness of public support for families with dependent minors, the risk of social exclusion for larger families is considerably higher (47%) than for childless couples (18%), and higher still for single-parent households (49%)⁷. Since 2015, the Barcelona City Council has developed an innovative childhood strategy that aims to soften the caring burden on families while reconceptualising childcare provision. Innovative approaches to childcare, such as an income-based nursery pricing system and the idea of a playable city, will be examined in this report.



Playground in Barcelona – photo credits Santiago Levya del Rio

⁴ Ajuntament de Barcelona data

⁵ Iermb and Indescat data

⁶ Eurostat and Ajuntament de Barcelona data

⁷ Fundacion Foessa, Fomento De Estudios Sociales Y De Sociologica Aplicada: Expelled Society and Right to Income (2021)

Sardinia, Italy

The autonomous region of Sardinia, located to the West of mainland Italy, is the [second largest island in the Mediterranean Sea after Sicily](#). The metropolitan region of Cagliari, which includes the island's capital, [consists of 17 municipalities and has a population of 421,488](#). Italy has been significantly impacted by the GEC of 2008; measures brought in included [increasing VAT, increasing taxes on households, freezing salaries, increasing the retirement age, and cuts to social spending at both local and national levels](#). The recession and the subsequent measures taken by the Italian government have impacted the ability of families to cope and have increased inequality within the country [1] [2]. Low-income groups and younger people have been [disproportionately affected](#), especially when considering the cuts the state has made to welfare support and services.

[Poverty rates, including in-work poverty, have been rising in Italy in recent years](#), with 9.4% of the residential population and 7.7% of families living in absolute poverty in 2020; this includes 1.3 million children, and 1.5 million non-national Italians (29.3% of this population). Poverty disproportionately affects younger people in Italy; [in 2016 nearly half of those living in absolute poverty were under the age of 34](#). Unemployment rates, another factor disproportionately impacting younger people, are also increasing across Italy. In 2021 the national rate of unemployment was 9.5%, the fourth highest in the EU; [this number rises to 13.5% in Sardinia](#). Youth unemployment (those aged 15-24) across Italy stood at 29.7% in 2021, with women being more affected than men, [a gap that is set to increase](#). In Sardinia this figure is higher; [in 2021 nearly two fifths \(38.7%\) of young people aged 15-24 were unemployed](#).



Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy – photo credits Elizabeth Ackerley

The context of a challenging economic climate is one of the reasons for what has been referred to as [‘la crisi di natalità’](#) [the birthrate crisis] due to the decrease in the birth rate since 2010. The fertility rate in Italy is 1.24, whilst in Sardinia it is 0.97, [the lowest across the country](#). Life expectancy is high (80.1 for men and 84.7 for women) and the ratio of older

people to younger people is one of the highest in the EU [1] [2]. The demography of the country impacts on state spending; although in 2020 state spending on social protection was equal to 34.5% of national GDP and therefore in line with the European average (27%), nearly half of this spending went towards pensions and nearly a quarter went to sickness and health care [1] [2]. Whilst there have been some shifts in policy [towards increasing employment and childcare support for younger people](#), some of which this report discusses, [there is a recognised need for more to be done to support people of all ages](#).

Existing Childcare Provision in the UK, Catalonia, Spain and Sardinia, Italy

Affordability and Accessibility: The UK

The [total cost of childcare in the UK is approximately twice the average for the OECD](#) (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development) as a whole and ranks as the second highest in the Global North, with fees out of the reach of many low to middle-income families. Childcare prices have consistently outstripped wage growth since the 2008 financial crisis and [continue to rise above inflation](#). Childcare is more expensive for younger children, with [latest analysis](#) highlighting the average weekly cost of a full-time (50 hours/week) nursery place for a child under two is £269.86 across Great Britain, or £14,030 per year. The cost of a full-time place for a child under two with a child-minder (a person who looks after children in their own home for payment) is £237.28 per week or £12,340 per year. To put this into perspective, these high costs absorb at least half of women's median earnings in Great Britain, and although state support for 3- and 4-year-olds makes a big difference to affordability, [childcare for this age group remains between a fifth and a quarter of women's salaries](#).

Support with these growing childcare costs is patchy [with the largest gap in financial support being for children under the age of 2 years](#). In England, accessing childcare entitlements and allowances means navigating seven different childcare support schemes, leaving [many hard-pressed working parents – particularly those on Universal Credit - struggling in the face of spiralling childcare costs](#). Although there is additional support for parents on low incomes who claim Universal Credit, there are high up-front childcare costs and steep trade-offs for parents returning to work or taking on more paid work.

Since women are still largely expected to be the primary carers of their children, and also make up the greatest proportion of single parents, the unaffordability of childcare provision has a direct negative impact on women's earnings and career progression, [severely restricting the choices they can make within the job market](#). In 2022, a cross-party group of MPs seeking to change the law so that [childcare is treated as necessary infrastructure like public transport and schools](#), declared that without high-quality, affordable childcare, England would continue to see parents (especially mothers) locked out of the labour market for years, impacting their future earning potential.

In England, [two-year olds in the 40% most disadvantaged families are eligible for 15 hours/week of funded childcare, whilst children aged three and four are entitled to 15 or 30](#)

[hours a week](#), but there is a significant gap between the end of maternity or parental leave and the start of this offer. Moreover, while over 90% of eligible households are aware of this 'free entitlement', only 4 in 10 parents of pre-school aged children had heard of tax-free childcare in 2019. Even once the scheme has been explained, confusing eligibility rules or perceived difficulties with the application process [deter almost 40% of potentially eligible families from applying](#). Once children enter school full-time, the lack of reliable wrap-around care for children before and after the school day starts and finishes, [poses additional challenges for parents](#) in terms of costs and availability of breakfast/after school clubs.

There is also geographical unevenness across and within urban and rural areas in relation to costs as well as the sufficiency and quality of provision. This matters because [the high cost of quality childcare can be a barrier for children getting the best start in life](#). The lack of good quality childcare in areas of deprivation is of particular concern since [disadvantaged children start school having met fewer developmental milestones](#) compared to their more affluent peers. [This is more likely to be the case in the North of England](#) where children have a 58% chance of living in a local authority with above average levels of low-income families, compared to 19% in the rest of England. [Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic](#), 72% of local authorities in England reported that there was enough childcare for children under two years of age, whilst only 19% had enough childcare for children with special educational needs or disability (SEND). The pandemic has had a significant impact on the childcare sector, [provoking a net loss of 4.4% of childcare providers and a net loss of 1.1% of childcare places in England](#), largely driven by childminders leaving the market. Such losses disproportionately impact mothers, [72% of whom have worked fewer hours and reduced their earnings due to a lack of childcare](#).

In Manchester, childcare fees vary between types of childcare provision and within different areas of the city, with the average cost being [approximately £248/week](#). This is higher than the [North West average of £238/week](#). Whilst there is sufficient childcare provision for pre-school children and early years places for children entitled to the current free childcare offers mentioned above, [across the city's wards there are disparities in availability and accessibility](#). [Analysis by Nesta](#) (the UK's innovation agency for social good) shows a potential link between areas with higher childcare affordability ratios and lower uptake of funded childcare hours. This indicates that even with the provision of free childcare hours, affordability is an acute challenge for low-income families.

Longstanding challenges facing the childcare sector (nationally and locally) regarding increased running costs and the recruitment and retention of qualified staff, are negatively impacting many private nurseries across Manchester in their ability to deliver their maximum capacity. Ongoing concerns relating to a decline in the take-up of Free Entitlement to Early Learning (FEEL), prompted Manchester City Council to prioritise affordable childcare for parents and to raise and protect family incomes in their [Family Poverty Strategy \(2017 – 2022\)](#). This resulted in [an improvement in take-up of FEEL funding in early education settings](#), which averaged 75% in the period September 2021 – August 2022, 3% above the national average. In their recently launched [Making Manchester Fairer: Anti-Poverty Strategy \(2023 – 2027\)](#), there is a renewed commitment to improving access to and take-up of good quality affordable childcare, so that it is not a barrier to employment and a good work-life balance, especially for women.

Progressive Pricing Systems: Barcelona, Catalonia

Currently, Barcelona City Council offers 8,528 public nursery places for pupils aged 0-3. Since 2011-2012 [the number of public nurseries has grown from 92 to 103](#). In 2017-18, the Council introduced a social pricing system whereby nursery fees are paid in relation to family incomes. [Under this progressive pricing system](#), if a family's annual income is less than €16,732, they pay a minimum of €50 per month, whilst families with incomes exceeding €75,295 pay a maximum of €395 per month. Although childcare in Barcelona is significantly more affordable than in Manchester, the supply of public nursery places is lower than the demand. In 2021-22, [43% of the applications were rejected, and only 23.7% of children aged 0-3 are currently enrolled in public nurseries](#). Given this, the progressive pricing system aims to encourage low-income families to apply for places in the public nursery network without being discouraged by costs. A recent report shows that since the social pricing system was put in place, [applications from low-income families have increased by 16%](#).

Crucially, the Catalan government has recently announced that from September 2023, [public nurseries will become free at the point of access for babies](#) aged 4 months to children aged 3 years. The Catalan regional government will also provide €800 per year for families with children in private nurseries, and €1,600 for vulnerable families. Foreseeably, these measures will increase demand both in the public and private sector, which will put pressure on the Barcelona City Council to expand the public nursery network – [currently, 44% of children in Barcelona are enrolled in a nursery](#) (public and private). The Council [plans to build thirteen new nurseries in the next 3 years](#). Recently, it has been reported that the Barcelona government is also [considering bringing private nurseries to the public sphere](#). The challenge in the years to come is to increase the capacity of pre-school education so that it becomes a universal public service available to everyone.

Geographical variation: Sardinia, Italy

Nationally, 59.6% of municipalities across Italy offer early childhood services. However, in Sardinia this coverage is 23.3%; [the second lowest percentage across the country](#). Nearly half of the 13,542 early childhood services across Italy are public institutions. In Sardinia however [there is a higher percentage of private facilities](#) (58.8). At the end of 2019 there were [335 early childhood educational facilities in Sardinia, which equates to 8,556 posts for children](#); two fifths of these are in the public sector (39.6%), whilst the majority (60.4%) were found in the private sector. The island has [only 11.2 places available to children aged 0-2 out of 100](#), a figure lower than the Italian average and below that of the Central, North-East, and North-West areas of the country.

In 2018 the total expenditure on early childhood services in Sardinia was €21.6 million. Of this municipalities spent €17.4 million (80.7% of the total), and Sardinian families spent €4.2 million (19.3% of the total). This amounts to [the Sardinian state spending €404 per head](#), a figure lower than that in the centre-north of Italy (€521) and the South of Italy (€453). The higher proportion of private services, as well as the consequences of decreased spending on childcare during the pandemic, have increased prices for Sardinian families; [in 2021 Sardinian families were spending on average 43% more on early childhood care than in 2018](#). In Cagliari costs of public nurseries vary by income on a 12 point scale, with those

earning under €5,317.65 paying €31 a month for children between the ages of 3-17 months, and €30 for those ages 18-36 months. [Those earning over €40,000 pay €440 a month for children between the ages of 3-17 months, and €380 for those ages 18-36 months.](#) For those with more than one child, subsequent children receive a third off nursery costs. In addition, for those children with a health care needs, families receive €1500 a year, in monthly payments, for early childhood care.

[There is a recognised need to encourage nursery attendance, especially for children from low-income families](#) in order to reduce disadvantage, support parents' participation in work, and to reduce the gender burden in terms of responsibility for childcare, as well as reducing gender disparity in relation to work prospects. One of the key barriers to childcare in Sardinia is [access to and availability of services](#); the majority of early years services are located in and around the city of Cagliari, leaving smaller, more rural areas, with very limited provision. As mentioned in section 3.1.3, the fertility rate in Sardinia is the lowest in Italy and this, along with an ageing population, [is a significant cause for concern in terms of the short and longer-term socio-demographic context](#). One of the measures brought in to tackle this is to provide some free and subsidised childcare, which Cagliari council, as well as other councils across the island, are doing through the 'nidi gratis' scheme, this is discussed in more detail below.

What would inclusive childcare look like? Ways of thinking about innovation

The city of Manchester takes pride in being an all-age accessible, multi-cultural city and [2022 was Manchester's Year of the Child](#). Manchester has [recently been accepted onto UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities and Communities Programme](#). This is the first step to being awarded Child Friendly city status, which is achieved by demonstrating the ways in which all children can feel safe, heard, cared-for, and therefore, able to flourish. Following consultation with families on their experiences of childcare provision across the city in order to understand why take-up of free childcare was so low, Manchester City Council have begun to take steps to facilitate better promotion of, and access to childcare, particularly for vulnerable families. These are discussed below.

Access and Inclusion: Manchester

Widespread recognition that inclusivity and multi-cultural diversity within childcare settings produces multiple benefits for children, their parents and the city as a whole, has led Manchester City Council to [express a commitment to ensuring that all childcare settings provide high-quality learning environments that are welcoming to all types of families](#). In order to address the decline in the take-up of Free Entitlement to Early Learning (FEEL) funding for example, [renewed efforts were made by the City Council to engage with and raise awareness amongst families from Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities](#) who were among the least likely to access early childhood education and childcare provision. To this end, several community groups received funding from Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) to help target these communities in late 2021. A further project has been funded to promote the benefits of FEEL through a network of mosques, as well as through printed leaflets giving information in Urdu, Bengali and Punjabi. Other strategies have included working with the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit to identify families who have recently arrived from overseas who meet the extended two year-old criteria, to help them access early childhood education.

There is also acknowledgement of the need to build knowledge and skills around early identification of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) among staff within the private sector, and to ensure that all childcare settings are meeting children's needs appropriately, and equally. To this end, improving access to early years education and childcare for parents of children with SEND is being prioritised in Manchester through the [Rodney House Outreach Service](#) which aims to provide effective learning support for children, as well as support for parents. In addition, [Manchester City Council has recently secured entry onto a 5-year project funded by the charitable organisation 'Comic Relief'](#), that will provide access to training resources designed to assist nursery settings in improving their services to children with SEND.

An excellent example of a setting committed to addressing structural inequalities and the effects of poverty through education and community development, can be found within the charitable sector. ['Manchester Settlement'](#) is located within a culturally diverse suburb of East Manchester, and aims to be a welcoming, inclusive setting that encompasses a holistic,

whole-family approach where children and families with complex needs can be supported through a wide variety of childcare provision. For instance, both private and funded places are available in baby/toddler/preschool rooms for children aged six months to four years, as well as in a not-for-profit Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) registered community nursery. Additional activities for both children and parents include stay and play sessions, parent peer supporters, art/exercise activities, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, as well as a food pantry for those families experiencing food insecurity. Staff here are fully qualified Early Years Professionals, who plan and deliver a wide range of inclusive and purposeful activities to enable all children to make good progress, resulting in [the nursery being awarded a 'Good' rating in their most recent Ofsted inspection](#).



Urban Spaces: Barcelona

As mentioned in the third section, the City Council in Barcelona has been developing an innovative childhood strategy that aims to soften the caring burden on families while reconceptualising childcare provision. The [Child Friendly Cities initiative](#) that was launched in Spain in 2002, encouraged participating municipalities to design and implement public policies that would improve the well-being of children, defend their rights, promote their participation, and make cities more liveable, equitable and sustainable. Cities committed to fulfilling children's rights are publicly recognised by the UNICEF Spanish National Committee with a [Child Friendly City Seal](#) which is granted for a period of four years, during which time municipalities submit a report on their progress. Barcelona is one such city.

Following continual and extensive consultation with the city's children and young adolescents, the city council has produced the following reports: [The Children have their Say: The Well-being of children in Barcelona \(2016\)](#); [The Strategy for Inclusion and Reducing Social Inequality in Barcelona \(2017\)](#), and the [Plan for Play in Barcelona's Public Spaces \(2019\)](#).

International Innovations in Childcare – What can Manchester share and learn?

These strategies have implemented policies that have begun to have a positive impact for all children and their families. The following are examples of urban innovation that are enabling children's play, as well as facilitating interactions between families/carers that can be conducive to the provision of childcare by communities beyond the biological family. Although Barcelona has over 900 children's play areas, the *Plan for Play in Barcelona's Public Spaces* (2019) sought to transform Barcelona from a city with play areas, to a playable city by 2030. [Actions to improve and diversify existing recreational infrastructures](#) included the closing of several of the city's streets to traffic over weekends for the prioritisation of play; ensuring 60% of public schools have suitable playgrounds with community uses, and increasing and improving opportunities for play for children with SEND. There are approximately 246,453 children and teenagers (up to 17 years) living in Barcelona, 34.4% of whom are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and in 2021, a [Plan for Childhood 2021-2030](#) was introduced to improve the lives of all children and teenagers in Barcelona. This plan focuses attention on the lives of children who are particularly affected by where they live and their family's circumstances, and is based around [seven childhood rights, outlining twenty-three challenges, and seventy actions](#).



Superblocks in Barcelona – photo credits Santiago Levya del Rio

Additionally, any new urban developments must take the well-being of children into account. For instance, [government-funded 'Superblocks' or 'Superilles' in Catalan](#), form a unique part of the urban landscape in Barcelona. These 400 x 400 m 'block' units encompassing open space in the centre, have been designed with the aim of recovering space for communities through limiting traffic; encouraging recreation and social cohesion/collaboration, alongside improving biodiversity. The first 'Superblocks' were introduced in 1993 and 2005, and following pilot projects in 2014, more have followed and are being planned as a result of the increases in journeys being made on foot or by bike. The initiative aligns with the city's 2024 Urban Mobility Plan which aims to reclaim the city from cars by [reducing private vehicle journeys from 26% to 18.5% and to have 81.5% of all journeys on foot, public transport and bicycle by 2024](#).

Cagliari: The 'nidi gratis' [free nursery] programme

Access to and provision of the welfare state in Italy varies widely [in terms of geographical location](#), as well as being a model that relies heavily on families, [particularly mothers, and intergenerational care](#). In this context, the [Sardinian regional plan for social services 2021-2023](#) places the family at the centre of policies on a range of issues, including transport, health, school, housing, culture and sports. It is important to note however, that there are gaps in state supported family policies and provision; [LGBTQ and non-national families \(for example forced migrants\) do not experience universal levels of support and legal recognition](#). Furthermore, the state's reliance on families has been [critiqued as a barrier to gender parity](#).



Sant'Elia, Cagliari – photo credits Elizabeth Ackerley

In recognition of the low birth rate in Sardinia, coupled with high unemployment rates and high rates of those at risk of poverty and exclusion, the Sardinian regional plan sets out a number of policies designed to support parenthood, including establishing equal treatment

for men and women to support more women to (re)enter the workforce. One such policy that the region is currently trailing is the experimental 'nidi gratis' [free nursery] programme. [This programme, which has received 5.5 million euros of funding per year between 2021-2023,](#) offers families with children aged 0-36 months who are already in receipt of means-tested childcare support, an additional maximum amount of €200 per month for up to 11 months to support with state and private nursery fees. The scheme is open to parents (including single, non-married, resident and non-resident parents) with a child between 0 and 36 months, including those adopted or in foster care, who earn less than €40,000 a year, and who apply to the scheme. In recognition of the regional variation in terms of provision of early years care, [the 'nidi gratis' fund can be applied to state and private nurseries,](#) as well as services such as babysitting. Whilst the scheme is not open to everyone, it does provide financial support for low-income families.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this report, we have outlined the current landscape of childcare provision in the Metropolitan regions of Greater Manchester in the UK; Cagliari in Sardinia, and Barcelona in Spain, and discussed some of the inherent issues. In imagining what progressive and inclusive childcare infrastructure could look like we provided examples from these three cities. From the UK, this included positive actions taken by Manchester City Council to address the decline in the take-up of funded childcare places amongst families from Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities. It also included the example of the *'Manchester Settlement'*, a charitable organisation which, through its adoption of an inclusive, holistic, whole-family approach is helping to address structural inequalities and the impact of poverty.

In Barcelona, the introduction of a social pricing system that takes account of a family's income in relation to childcare costs, provides an excellent example of how applications for childcare places from low-income families can be increased. Furthermore, and importantly, the city council's plan to expand the current free provision of public nursery places, alongside expansion of the number of public nurseries in the city, shows a commitment to ensuring that childcare and pre-school education become a universal public service that is available to all families and children.

Meanwhile, in Sardinia, to boost the low birth rate, public investment in the experimental free nursery programme aims to support families with children aged 0-36 months by offering a maximum of 200 Euros/month towards state/private nursery fees, for up to eleven months. Although this scheme falls short of providing comprehensive free childcare for this age group, it at least helps to reduce costs, particularly for low-income families.

In presenting examples of good practice and innovation from all three regions, we hope that we have built an argument for the need for progressive and inclusive childcare policies. To this end, we believe that within the city of Manchester and the wider Greater Manchester conurbation, there is room to innovate in the following areas:

- 1) Improve conditions of childcare provision (for those who access it and for those who work in the sector). This involves recognising that childcare ought to be treated as an infrastructure issue like other public services, and invested in accordingly. This could include extending free available hours; expanding subsidised childcare beyond the current 3- and 4-year-old offer with a subsidy rate that varies by household income; improving working conditions within the industry by ensuring staff with Level 3 qualifications receive the national living wage, and higher wages based on primary school teachers' rates for degree holders.**
- 2) Broaden the availability of childcare. Improve availability of childcare for all children, and to eliminate any socio-economic barriers for families with children who have SEND. We further recommend continuing to provide additional support to enable families from ethnic minority backgrounds to access childcare and early years education.**

- 3) Invest in spaces of childcare. This includes innovations in what we imagine childcare to be, particularly beyond the home. Childcare is not just a formalised service, it is also supported by informal infrastructures, so that requires **investment in social spaces designed with children in mind so that they can be used as intergenerational spaces of care**. This could include alignment with the Council's goals to reduce air pollution with the conception of a playable city with more low-traffic areas and playgrounds. This would facilitate interactions among parents/carers that are conducive to the creation of self-managed childcare systems beyond the home.

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