



Pedro Carneiro
Sarah Cattan
Gabriella Conti
Claire Crawford
Christine Farquharson
Nick Ridpath

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18 Smith Square

@TheIFS

The effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes



Economic
and Social
Research Council

Introduction



- Sure Start was a cornerstone of UK early years policy throughout the 2000s.

“The package of [Sure Start] services will work with parents to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of the children served” – Comprehensive Spending Review, 1998

- Over the last 10 years, the IFS has produced a body of work examining the effects of Sure Start throughout childhood and adolescence.
- We have harmonised methodologies across outcomes, so some results are updated relative to previous reports

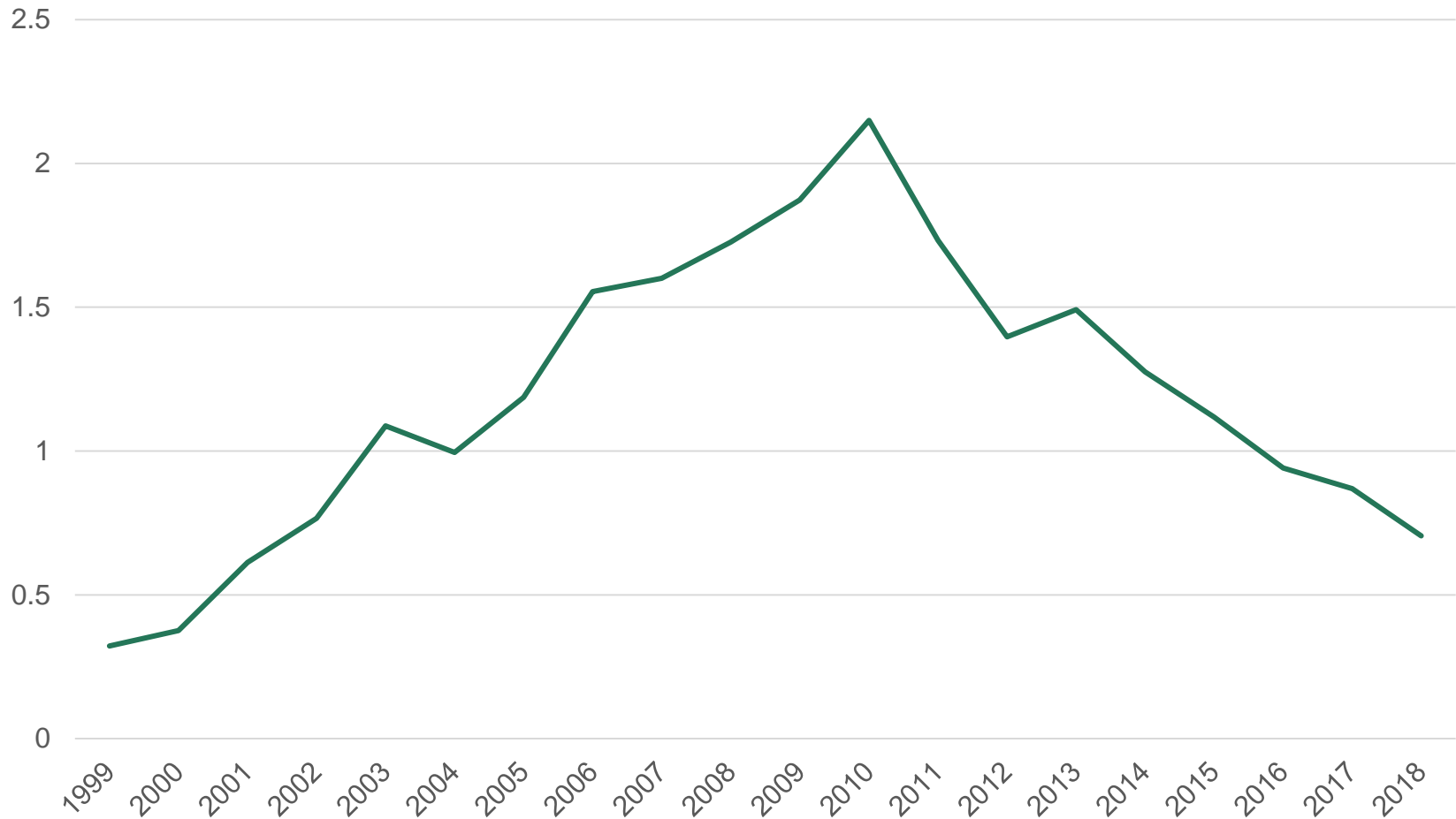
Background



- Sure Start was introduced in 1999, and expanded until 2010.
- A 'one-stop shop' of services for children aged 0-4, including:
 - Early learning and daycare
 - Parenting support
 - Pre- and post-natal health services
 - Parental employment support
- By 2010, received a third of total early years funding.

Sure Start's rollout

Current Spending, £bn, 2023/24 prices



Understanding if Sure Start achieved its goals



- Sure Start targeted improvements in different types of development, which align with different outcomes
- Intellectual and cognitive development
 - Developmental scores at age 5
 - Test scores throughout school
- Health and physical development
 - Hospitalisations
 - Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
 - Authorised absences from school
- Social development
 - Behaviour in school
 - Criminal behaviour
- Work from NESS and ECCE also provided detailed evidence on the effects of Sure Start on children's development

How might Sure Start have affected these outcomes



- Improvements in children's development
- Parenting behaviour and the home environment
- Patterns of interaction with other services
- Relationships with peers

Data sources and outcomes

We focus on **large-scale administrative datasets** that capture all (or most) of the population.

National Pupil Database (NPD) contains test scores, SEND, absences and children's social care

NPD is linked to the **Police National Computer** data on youth crime.

Hospital Episodes Statistics data on children's hospitalisations.

Evaluation method

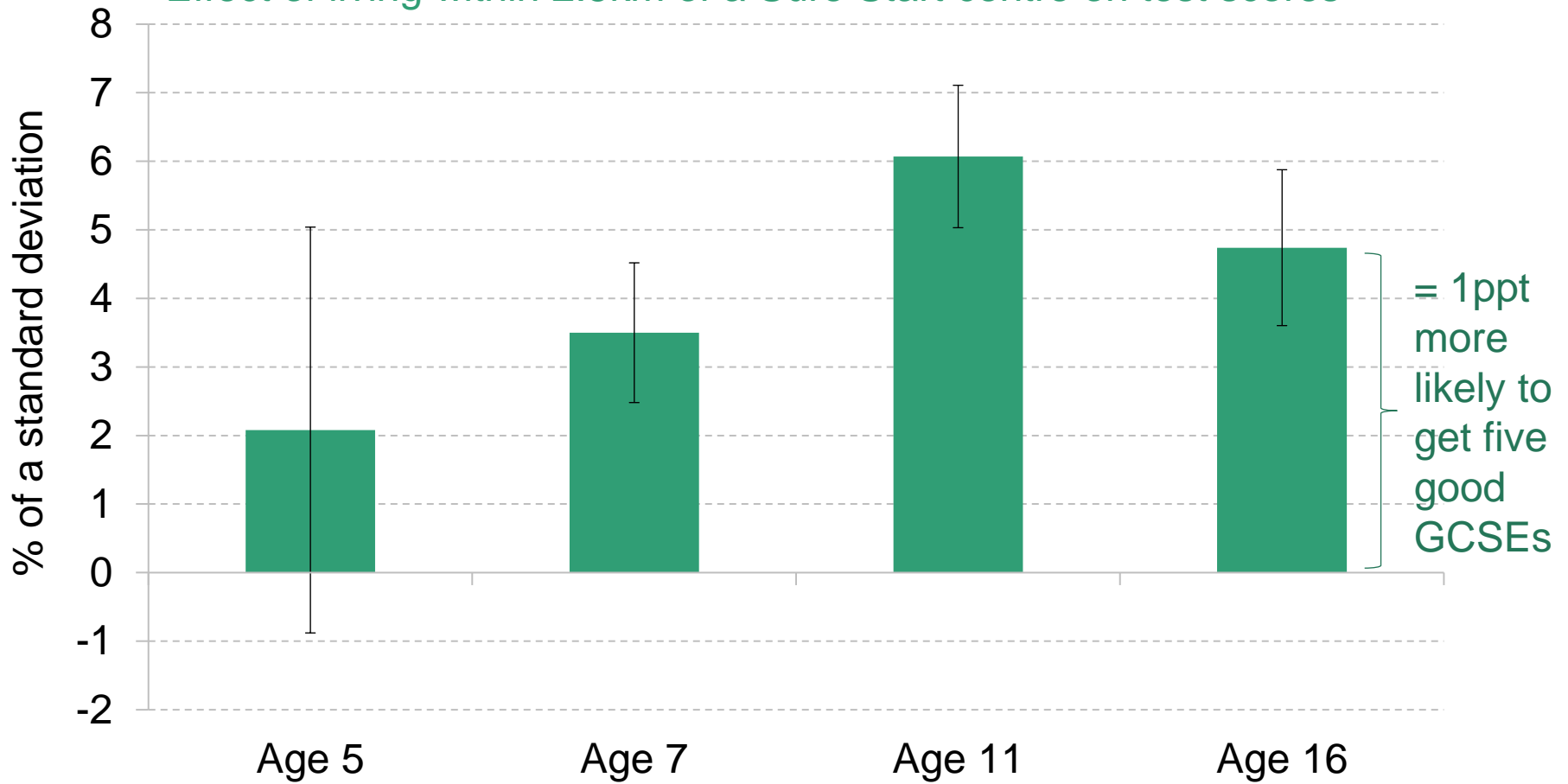
- Use the difference between changes in outcomes for children with increased access to centres, compared to changes in outcomes for children in comparable areas with no change in access.
- This means our results don't differ across time or differences across place.
- For non-hospitalisation outcomes, we define access as living within 2.5km of a Sure Start centre as a child.
- For hospitalisation outcomes, we define it as having higher density of centres within the Local Authority a child grew up in.



Key effects of Sure Start

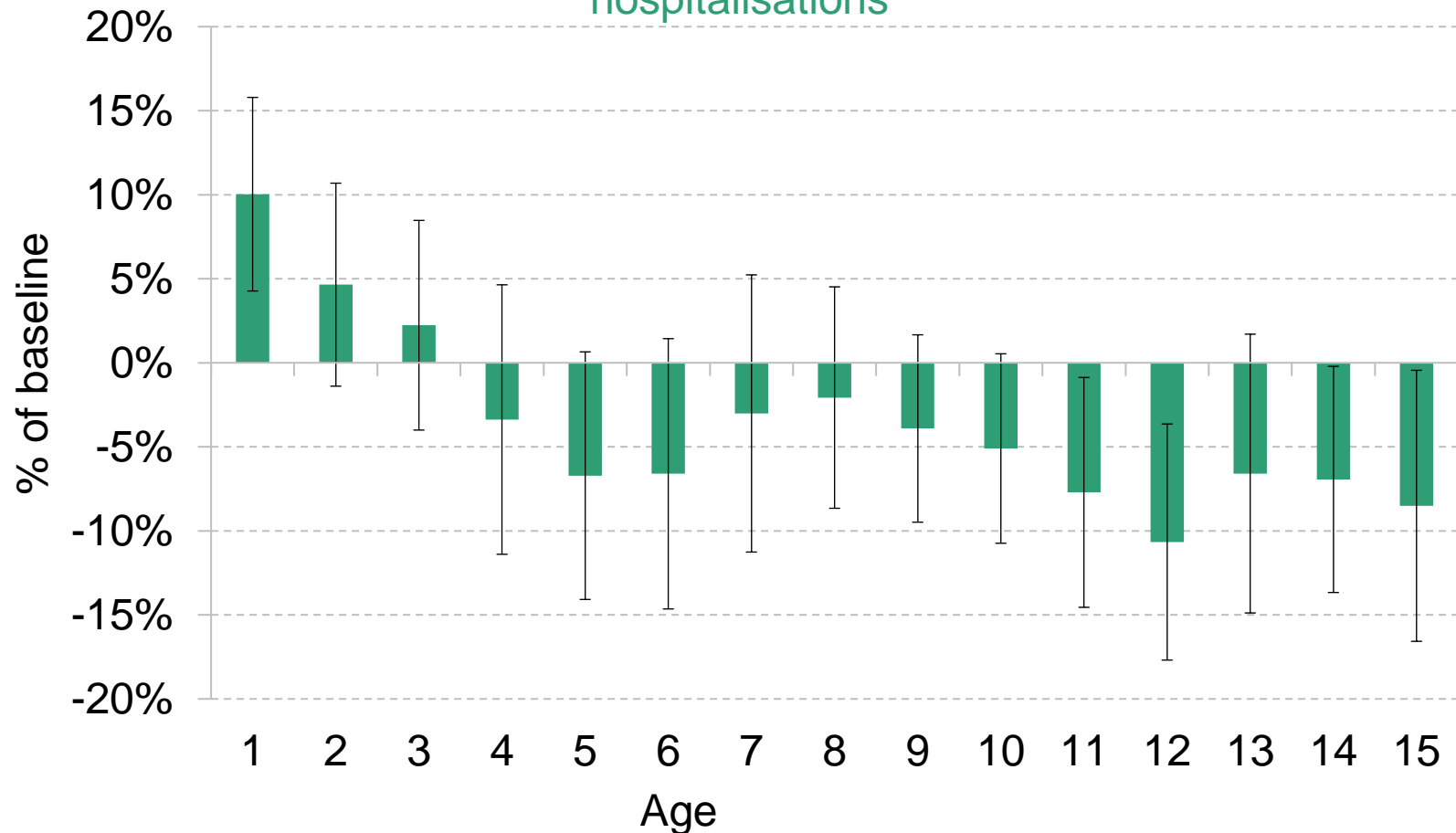
Sure Start benefited children's education and health

Effect of living within 2.5km of a Sure Start centre on test scores



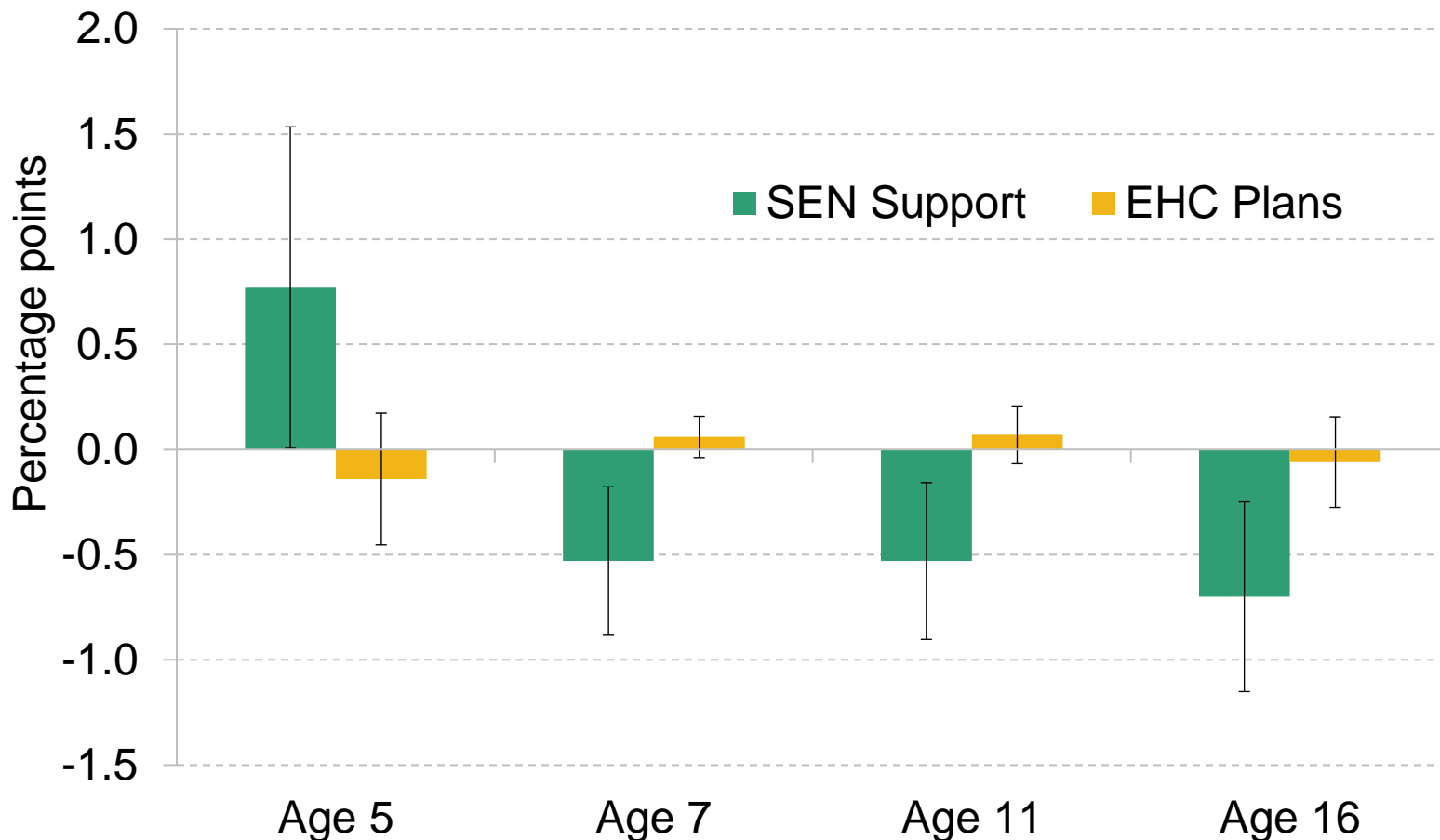
Sure Start benefited children's education and health

Effect of an additional Sure Start centre per 1,000 children on hospitalisations



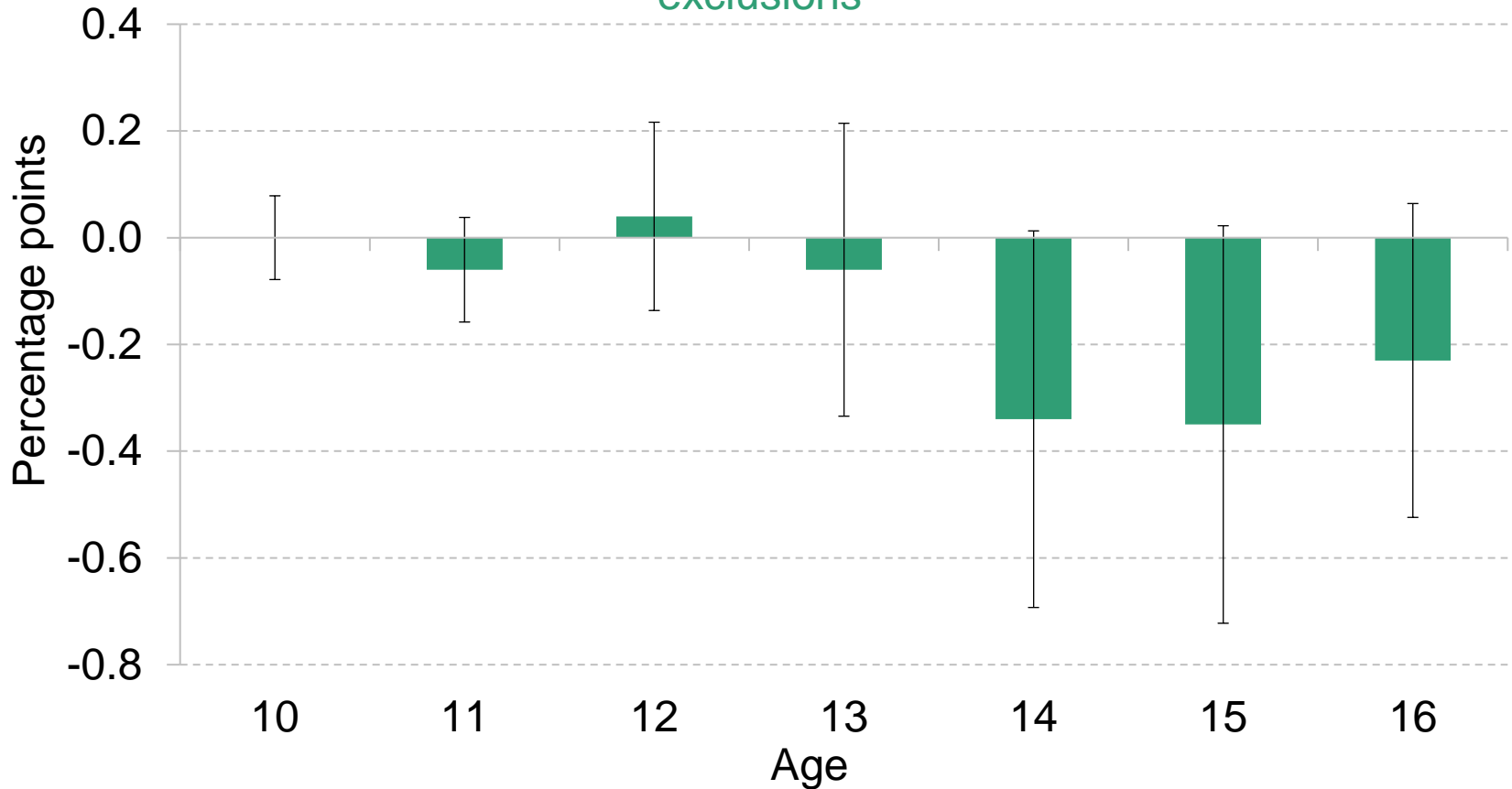
Sure Start benefited children's education and health

Effect of living within 2.5km of a Sure Start centre on SEND

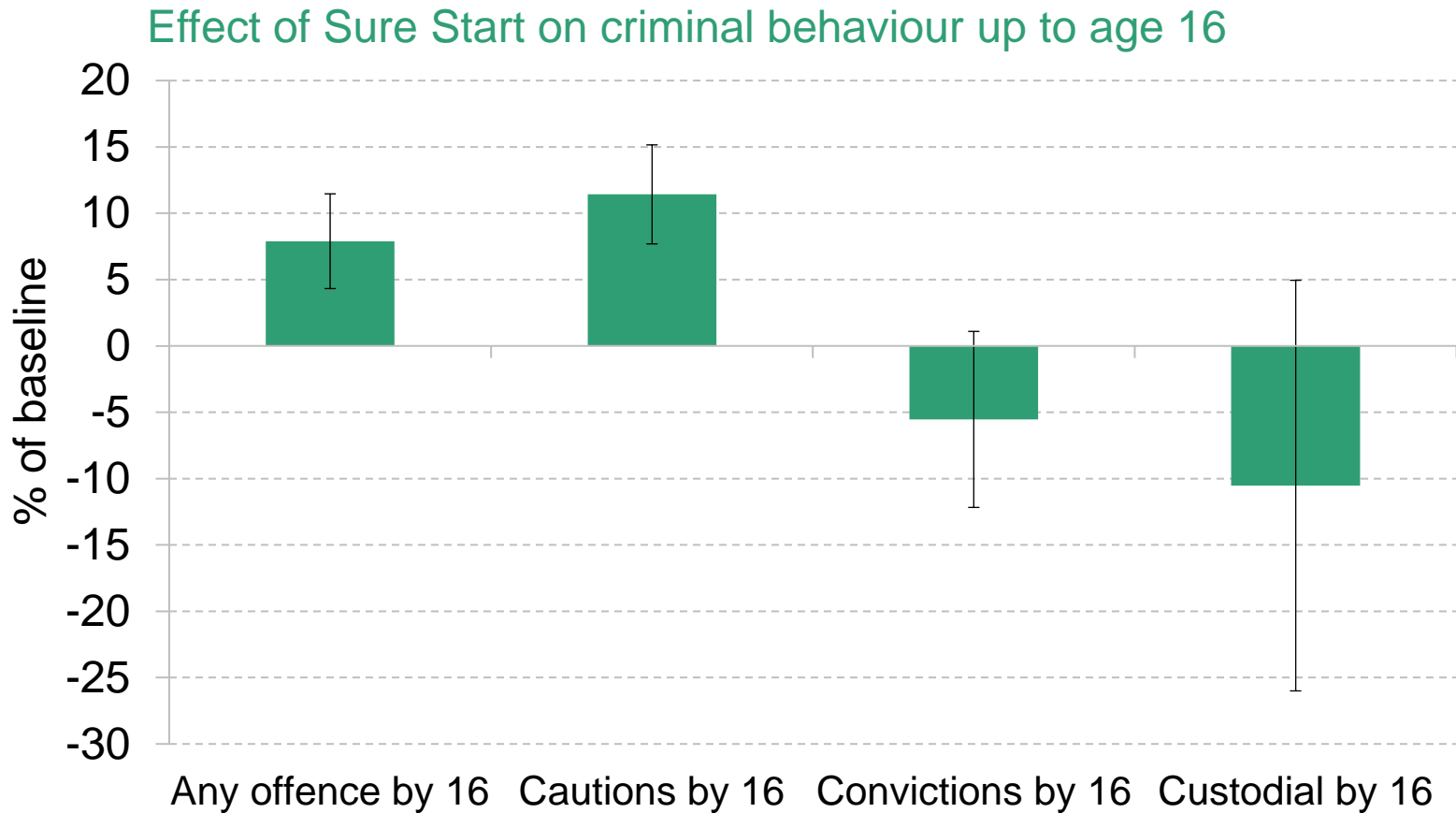


Mixed effects on socio-emotional and behavioural development

Effect of living within 2.5km of a Sure Start centre on school exclusions

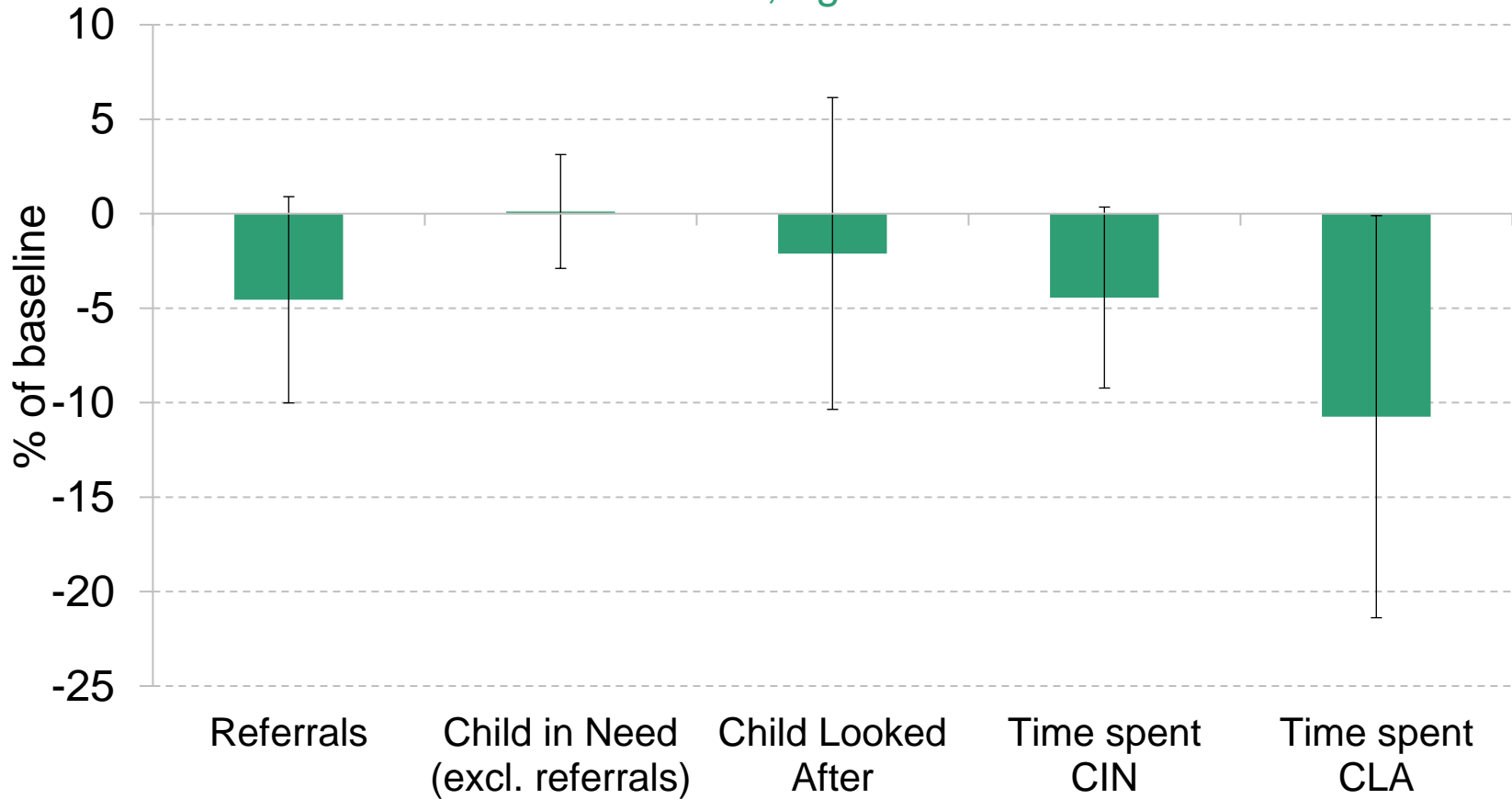


Mixed effects on socio-emotional and behavioural development



Sure Start was not a silver bullet

Effect of living within 2.5km of a Sure Start centre on social care interactions, age 7 to 11



Overview of key results

- By adolescence, children with access to Sure Start:
 - Performed better in school
 - Were less likely to be hospitalised
 - Were less likely to have special educational needs
 - Were less likely to be suspended from school, but more likely to have received a police caution
- Likelihood of serious criminal behaviour and social care interactions were relatively unchanged, but:
- Many long-lasting positive effects

How did Sure Start generate long-lasting effects?

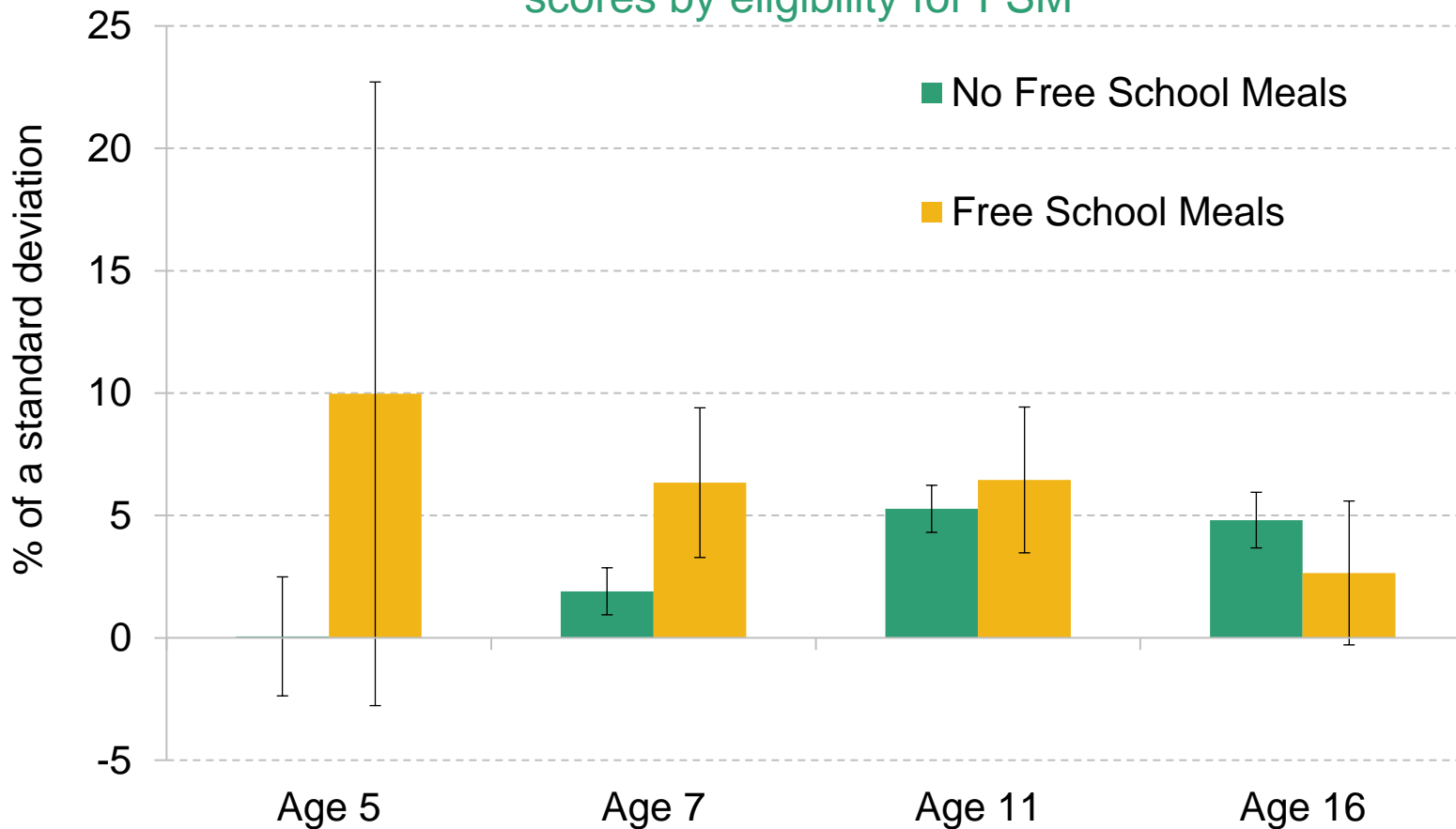
- Changes to children's development
 - Improved communication and language skills at age 5
- Changes to parenting and the home environment
 - Reductions in unauthorised absences from primary school
 - Reductions in hospitalisations for external causes
- Changes in interaction with services
 - Increased SEN support at younger ages
 - Increased hospitalisations for preventable causes
- Changes in relationships with peers

Widespread benefits, with some groups possibly benefitting more

- We see evidence of widespread effects across different subgroups.
- In some cases, we see some evidence of larger effects for some groups.
 - FSM-eligible students may have experienced bigger benefits.
 - Boys experienced larger effects than girls in some cases.
 - Non-white children tended to experience larger benefits.

Widespread benefits, with some groups possibly benefitting more

Effect of living within 2.5km of a Sure Start centre on test scores by eligibility for FSM





Calculating the costs and benefits

Calculating the costs and benefits



- Many of these outcomes are associated with significant financial benefits or costs.
- We estimate the benefits and costs for a representative cohort at the peak of Sure Start.
 - Looking across the lifecycle, all the way until retirement
 - Discounted back to age 5
- These estimates are inherently uncertain – many of the benefits are still in the future
 - Provide a best estimate, and give a sense of scale

Calculating the costs and benefits

Long-run costs and benefits of Sure Start, for a representative cohort of children at the programme's peak

Direct Costs	Value
Up-front costs of Sure Start	£2.7bn
Benefits	Central Estimate
Government: reduction in later spending for the government	£0.6bn
Total increase in earnings	£5bn

Note: All figures in 2023-24 prices.

Calculating the costs and benefits



Long-run costs and benefits of Sure Start, for a representative cohort of children at the programme's peak

Direct Costs	Value
Up-front costs of Sure Start	£2.7bn
Benefits	Central Estimate
Government: reduction in later spending for the government	£0.6bn
Government: increased tax income	£1.9bn
<i>Total benefits to government</i>	<i>£2.4bn</i>
Individuals: increased earnings and other private costs/benefits	£3.1bn
Total benefits	£5.7bn

Note: All figures in 2023-24 prices.

Key takeaways



- Sure Start benefited children and young people's health and education
- Effects on children's socio-emotional and behavioural outcomes were mixed
- Many impacts of Sure Start were remarkably long-lasting
- Sure Start was not a silver bullet
- The benefits were widespread, but some groups were more strongly affected
- Long-run benefits are likely to significantly exceed the costs

The Institute for Fiscal Studies
7 Ridgmount Street
London
WC1E 7AE

www.ifs.org.uk

