

## **Developing and sustaining sufficient affordable, accessible childcare for Suffolk families**

### **Assessment of sufficiency summary.**

The Childcare Act 2006 places new statutory (legal) duties on local authorities in England. One of these new duties (section 11) means that local authorities must carry out an “assessment of sufficiency” for childcare services. The act states that a detailed investigation of the local childcare market needs to be carried out in terms of both current and future supply and demand. The purpose of this assessment is to establish where there are gaps in childcare provision for parents who are working or making the transition to work. This detailed investigation needs to be completed on a three yearly cycle with an annual review.

### **The Suffolk Context**

Systems are largely already in place in the county to identify particular gaps in childcare provision through partnership arrangements with key services and organisations. The close working with the Suffolk Childcare Information Service, where parents call with their childcare needs and are matched to existing registered childcare providers, the Early Years and Childcare Service with regular reports of cases where parents particular needs could not be met locally.

Similarly a quarterly report is received from Job Centre Plus identifying cases where the lack of accessible childcare has been a barrier to parents seeking work or looking to return to work. These regular reports are used to inform future childcare development activity. Suffolk County Council employ teams in South, West and North Suffolk who have a high level of local knowledge of their local childcare market.

The current definition of childcare relates to Ofsted registered childcare for children from birth to eight years (childminders, out of school childcare, day nurseries and preschools). The Childcare Act, however, considers the position for all children aged from birth to nineteen and for the first time requires local authorities to consider care that is not registered by Ofsted.

### **The Assessment**

In May 2007 Suffolk County Council defined its requirements to assess the sufficiency of the current childcare market for parents in the county. . The Daycare Trust (DCT) was appointed in June 2007 to carry out this detailed analysis after a full tender exercise. Their brief was to add to the county's current knowledge by:

- Identifying the barriers parents face in accessing current registered provision.
- Measuring the barriers that parents face using childcare, particularly if they are on low income or their child has additional needs.

- Identifying the barriers that rural based families face in accessing childcare services.
- Identifying what unregistered care is used by families for children over eight and those under eight if any.
- Measuring the needs of children and young people by consulting with and involving them in the survey.

### **Methodology**

It was important to use a variety of methods to make sure that the views of as many people living in Suffolk were heard.

### **Questionnaires**

Self-completion questionnaires were distributed through primary and first schools throughout the county. This resulted in 6,000 families having the opportunity to make their views heard. The questionnaires were also published on the council's internal Intranet site and on the Suffolk County Council's public website.

### **Focus Groups**

19 focus groups were held in 15 of the 18 community clusters across the county. The composition of the groups varied but included representation from the following groups identified as those who, did or might face particular barriers accessing existing childcare provision:

- 1) Lone parents
- 2) Young parents
- 3) Black and minority ethnic groups
- 4) Parents of children with additional needs
- 5) Parents living in rural areas
- 6) Travellers

Some of the groups also included children and young people.

### **Phone Interviews**

Of those parents that returned the self-completion questionnaires, 39 indicated that they would be willing to be contacted for a detailed follow up interview by phone.

Key stakeholders were also interviewed by phone to establish their views of the childcare market in their area. The key stakeholders included:

- Children Centre Managers
- The Childcare Information Service Development Manager
- Childcare Inclusion and Diversity Officer
- Childcare Support and Development Manager
- Senior Childcare Support and Development Officers
- Extended Schools County Co-ordinator
- Children's Centre Service Development Manager

- Job Centre Plus Childcare Partnership Manager
- Health Visitor Team Manager

### **Summary of Findings**

Suffolk County Council received 506 valid responses. Using government guidance on sample sizes and confidence level we are able to predict that if the survey had been repeated in every household across the county the results obtained would be the same as this smaller sample give or take a 4% or 5% variance. Respondents came from every single community cluster in the county.

Mothers completed 92% of the questionnaires and 79% of the respondents were in the 31-45 year age group, 18% were lone parents. 92% of the respondents described themselves as being White British, which is lower than the 2001 Census results for Suffolk and shows a national trend for immigration from Eastern Europe. 3% of the children were identified in the survey as having some additional need.

### **Types of Childcare Used**

Nationally 40% of families use formal registered childcare. In Suffolk this was significantly lower at 31%. If we include the use of informal unregistered childcare the figure in Suffolk rises to 71%.

There is no national statistic for us to compare this. More than three quarters of those using unregistered childcare (78%) depended on family members and friends. Many families questioned using a patchwork of providers to meet their needs. 113 families made use of three or more different providers to meet their family's needs.

### **Barriers to Using Childcare**

58% of those families questioned felt that their needs were being fully met although 36% felt that their needs were not being fully met.

The main barriers to using the existing childcare services available were:

- Cost 38%
- Unsuitable childcare 22%
- Not open at the time needed 17%
- Inflexible, not able to cover varying needs 15%
- Childcare not in the right location 8%
- No childcare places available 8%
- Poor quality childcare 5%
- Transport problems 5%

Some parents identified multiple barriers.

**Costs** This was the single largest barrier to using formal registered childcare. Interestingly 18% of those interviewed were receiving childcare cost help through the Working Tax Credit System, where the national average is 20%. Most parents identified newspaper reported problems with the system and the complexity of the application process as being major barriers to its more widespread use. This figure was, however, significantly higher than previous estimates in Suffolk which had been as low as 11%.

Only 2% of parents responding paid more than £200 per week for their childcare with the vast majority (90%) spending less than £100 per week. This may reflect the high use of unregistered childcare through families and friends but never the less reflects the true cost of childcare.

### **Location and Transport**

Transport and its lack of availability were highlighted as a major barrier to the use of childcare by parents living in isolated rural locations. This was particularly identified by the Health Visitor team and in the focus groups for rural families.

### **Quality**

87% of parents surveyed thought that the quality of the registered childcare they used was high.

88% felt that staff had the necessary skills and experience to meet the needs of all children.

83% agreed that the registered care they used met their child's needs. Parents that used unregistered informal care felt that their child's needs were not being fully met and the quality of the care was not good, but they felt it was all that they could afford.

### **Identified Gaps**

Before school, after school and holiday care was seen as a major gap in provision for school aged children. The availability of a varied menu of activities available through the school was not seen as the answer, as these specific clubs did not run regularly or until later when they were needed. Holiday care for school age children was identified as a major problem for working parents and was also identified as being an issue for those teenagers who were consulted.

Care for children with additional needs was identified as a problem area. Parents looking for care for children with additional needs often pointed this out as a need for respite care and not to enable them to work or move into work. Whilst this is recognised as being vitally important to those families concerned, it is beyond the remit of this assessment, which is to assess the current market for working parents and those wishing to access work.

Parents of children with additional needs highlighted the experience and qualifications of childcare staff as a problem. They thought that they might not have the skills needed to meet their child's requirements.

Lone parents and teenage parents did not feel that they faced any particular barriers accessing childcare, distinct from other parents in their area.

### **Black and minority ethnic groups.**

One focus group for black and minority ethnic groups was held in Ipswich. Most parents expressed the same concerns about cost and childcare for school aged children that others had expressed. One issue that came to light was that black families felt that they were not welcomed in the same way as others and felt uncomfortable in the way that they were treated in some nursery settings. They felt that there was a certain level of institutional racism.

### **Views of children and young people.**

Three focus groups were held for children and young people to find about their expectations and to see if their needs were being met. The groups' main findings are listed below and some of these findings were not what had previously been expected or assumed.

Many children under 8 thought that after school activities should allow them time to relax and wind down as they felt tired after a full day at school and didn't want to engage in high energy physical activities.

This was a view held by most children under 11 as well. Both groups of children identified traditional arts and crafts, and board games as being their favoured options for activities and there was little or no mention of computers and computer games.

Teenagers consulted wanted to make better use of redundant buildings in their area and could see real value in developing disused county council buildings as a "youth asset". Many felt that their needs were not being taken into account and that solutions were imposed on them.

### **Summary.**

The research showed that:

- Most parents felt that their childcare needs were being met even if it meant the widespread use of friends and family to meet these needs.
- The vast majority of users of registered childcare felt that the service being delivered was of high quality and that staff were suitably experienced and qualified.
- Transport was a particular issue for parents in rural areas.
- Cost was the major barrier to the use of more registered childcare.
- There was mistrust of the Working Tax Credit scheme to support childcare costs.
- Parents of children with disabilities felt that there wasn't enough specialist support in settings to meet their child's needs.

- Black and minority ethnic group members felt that institutional racism was sometimes present in childcare settings.
- Parents of school-aged children identified the lack of school holiday care as a particular issue.
- The views of children and young people has caused us to reassess our views on what after school and holiday provision should look like.

This research will allow us to plan our future development work and ensure that we allocate resources and time to those areas and issues that we can make a real change for parents and families.

### **Forward planning**

The results of the survey have identified key areas for development and the plans for the Childcare Development area teams will reflect the need to close the gaps identified in the survey.

We will continue to host a childcare provider forum in partnership with the National Day Nursery Association. The aims of this forum will be to strengthen the working relationship with childcare providers and include them in the development decision-making process.

The Childcare Support and Development teams will continue to work with the Extended Schools team in order to develop school based childcare to meet the needs of working parents as lack of sufficient school age childcare was seen as a gap by parents.

Children and young people are to be more involved in the delivery and design of services as the focus group for young people highlighted this as being an area for improvement. The views of children and young people will be sought in all school based childcare development and young people will be involved in development groups.

There will be an ongoing consultation with small samples of parents, children and young people, childcare providers and partner organisations to ensure that the information we hold is constantly updated and relevant.

We will use Acorn or Mosaic market segmentation tools to update our information annually to take notice of new housing developments and migration and movement around the county.