

# Worcestershire Childcare Sufficiency Assessment



## Summary of findings

Worcestershire County Council March 2011

Find out more online:

[www.worcestershire.gov.uk/childcaresufficiency](http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/childcaresufficiency)

# Background



All local authorities must secure the provision of childcare “so far as is reasonably practicable”<sup>1</sup>. They are required by law (Childcare Act 2006 section 11) to carry out research which helps to identify whether there is sufficient childcare in their area. The Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) details the findings of this research.

Parents, carers, children, young people, childcare providers and local employers from across the county have taken part in a consultation to find out whether childcare in Worcestershire is meeting the needs of families with children aged 0 to 14 (and up to 18 for children with a disability).

# We did this because...



To continue with plans to raise families out of poverty and to help strengthen the economy, parents must be empowered with the tools that enable them to go to work.

Childcare, interlinked with specialist support to help families access it, has a vital part to play in achieving equality, raising children out of poverty and enabling better access to employment.

The Childcare Sufficiency Assessment looks at the childcare needs of families and compares this to the current supply in Worcestershire. It identifies whether gaps exist in the childcare market and sets out recommendations for how these should be addressed.

<sup>1</sup> 'Reasonably practicable' definition can be found in the full CSA report at [www.worcestershire.gov.uk/childcaresufficiency](http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/childcaresufficiency)

## We asked...



Families who used childcare to tell us about their experiences and we asked those who did not use childcare to share their reasons for this.

We asked employers for their views on whether childcare impacted on work life balance, creating added difficulty and challenge for those employees with children.

We asked childcare providers to tell us about their challenges and plans for the future.

The consultation attracted responses from 1,699 parents, 125 children and young people, 14 local employers and 195 childcare providers in Worcestershire. 151 face to face discussions took place with parents and carers.

## Place gaps



There are 1,150 registered childcare providers in Worcestershire. Between them they offer a total of 23,482 childcare places. 337 providers offer free childcare places for eligible three and four year olds totalling 11,707 places. Worcestershire also provides 187 specialist childcare places for children with disabilities and/or additional needs.

The consultation with parents and carers suggests that currently there are sufficient places overall, however changes to welfare benefits may impact on a demand for before and after school care in parts of Worcester City, Wyre Forest and Redditch. Partnership work with Job Centre Plus and ongoing consultation with parents will identify the impact of this. Any rise in demand for out of school childcare is likely to happen gradually over the next few years as welfare and cultural changes shift.

# Time gaps



Flexibility in the time that childcare is available was a recurring theme throughout the parent consultation.

Before and after school care is a problem for many families as often, even though it is available, it ends too early to be convenient for working parents. Early morning care is also problematic with many parents asking for nurseries to open before 8am as they have difficulty getting to work on time after dropping off their child.

Shift working is also increasing in the UK and this has inherent problems for families with children. Shift patterns are variable and are often on a rotating pattern which means that childcare needs vary too.

# Geographical gaps



Population research and consultation feedback suggest that there do not appear to be significant geographical childcare gaps in Worcestershire and most incidents of families not being able to secure childcare are isolated.

Changes to how families receive welfare benefits may place an added pressure on demand for childcare due to a potential increase in the number of parents who are supported back into work. This is not expected to have an immediate effect, as we expect welfare and cultural changes to take place over the next few years.

Ongoing communication with parents, childcare providers and Job Centre Plus will help to identify an increase in demand particularly in areas of disadvantage.

# Quality gaps



According to the latest Ofsted care and education ratings, overall the childcare available within Worcestershire is of a good quality.

In addition to meeting Ofsted criteria, providers must take part in quality improvement processes with appropriate local authority teams. In Worcestershire, the local authority has chosen to use the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) in partnership with childcare providers to support the evaluation, monitoring and development of childcare provision.

ECERS will enable the local authority to identify training needs and target support for childcare providers.

From April 2011, participation in ECERS will be a key indicator, together with the Ofsted grade awarded, in determining whether a childcare provider is eligible to offer free early education funding.

# Age and type gaps



Population research and consultation has not identified any particular gaps in type of provision for different age groups other than more flexible care for those who require it before and after school. Again, there are no significant pockets of need; it is more often interspersed throughout the county.

Parents reported a need for longer before and after school care hours to enable them to work both typical office hours or atypical hours.

# Information gaps



Lack of information creates a lack of choice.

Research has found that a lack of knowledge about the early years free entitlement plus a lack of knowledge regarding childcare options were the main barriers to families taking up free places, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas.

Only a quarter of respondents to the consultation found out about childcare through the Family Information Service and the rest through family and friends. Whilst friends and family can supply information, it is essential that parents know how to access impartial, specialist, tailored information to help secure childcare that meets their needs.

# Income - costs gaps



It is difficult to confirm whether cost is the defining factor in the use or non-use of childcare because cost and value are personal to each person's circumstances.

Parents have ranked the following criteria as being important when choosing childcare, showing cost to be the least important of those ranked:

1. Staff well qualified, trained or experienced
2. Warm and caring atmosphere
3. Good Ofsted report
4. Cost

The coalition government has, however, announced a series of welfare reforms, some of which may have an effect on the ability of families to pay for childcare.

Cost was commented on as a barrier to accessing childcare for children with additional needs. Some parents stated that they were unable to pay for additional fees to provide specialist one to one support for their child.

# Inclusion - Specific needs gaps



This consultation has shown that in the main, parents are able to access childcare for children with additional needs. Where this is not the case, the needs of the child are often complex. The most common additional needs stated by parents taking part were those relating to behaviour, emotional and social difficulties.

In this consultation, trust in the experience and confidence of staff to care for children with additional needs was the most commonly recorded barrier accessing childcare.

# Sustainability



Childcare providers were asked to predict the likely sustainability of their businesses and the results were very encouraging with 170 providers expecting to remain in business for more than 5 years, 13 for the next 4 to 5 years, 27 for the next 3 to 4 years, 17 for the next 2 to 3 years and 19 for 1 to 2 years.

31 providers have plans in place to increase the number of childcare places they offer, and only 5 providers expect to close within the next year.

# Conclusion

The county of Worcestershire represents a mix of rural and urban areas. There is affluence throughout the county but this is interspersed with pockets of deprivation, particularly in urban areas.

Worcestershire has a relatively sufficient level of childcare. Where gaps have been identified, they are localised and often concern the circumstances of individual families.

Taking into consideration the requirements of the Childcare Act and what is 'reasonably practicable', this report suggests that local research has not uncovered significant childcare sufficiency gaps, and that for the vast majority childcare provision is meeting the needs of families in Worcestershire.

What the research has shown throughout is that a lack of flexibility is a recurring theme. Parents have told us

that working patterns have changed in response to the challenging economic climate and consequently so have their childcare needs.

Research has also shown that many parents do not access specialist information to support them in their search for appropriate childcare, or seek advice on options for how to make childcare work more flexibly for them. A number of families, particularly those living in disadvantage, do not appear to be benefiting from specialist support provided by the Family Information Service for example.

It is concluded therefore that in the current climate of financial challenge for the local authority, recommendations for improved childcare sufficiency focus around themes which are strongly linked to inclusion and raising children and young people out of poverty.

# What we aim to do next



To address childcare sufficiency gaps uncovered through local research, the local authority will now need to plan how it can make improvements by focusing on:

- Encouraging improved flexibility in childcare provision to support changes to traditional working patterns which can impact on all families, but particularly on low income families
- Offering opportunities for and encouraging appropriate professional development for childcare providers to ensure that parents of children with disabilities and/or additional needs (including those from a range of ethnic minority groups) can access high quality childcare that understands and meets both the needs of the child and the parent
- Providing information, advice and assistance, and in particular a robust brokerage service, to support those for whom access to childcare is a barrier to taking up or remaining in work or training, particularly for parents of children with additional needs.

# What we recommend...



## 1. Improve flexibility of childcare provision

To ensure childcare is sufficient to meet the needs of parents who wish to take up or remain in work, the local authority will need to take into account that childcare needs are changing. Atypical hours of care will enable parents to work flexibly in line with the new economic climate and related pressures placed upon them. Longer after school hours in particular are required by some parents, as are earlier opening times.

Business support, advice and guidance for childcare providers should continue to enable them to explore options for increased flexibility that would benefit children, young people and parents.

# What we recommend...



## 2. Improve inclusive practice

Although issues have not been significant in numbers in this consultation, additional local research<sup>2</sup> must be kept in mind in terms of inclusion in its widest sense. Some concern has been raised around lack of confidence and specialist expertise in supporting children with additional needs.

The local authority should endeavour to provide access to a range of professional development and support for childcare providers to upskill practitioners. This support should aim to equip them with the skills and confidence required to meet the needs of all children.

A brokerage service should continue to be provided by the Family Information Service to parents of children with additional needs to help them access suitable childcare.

## What we recommend...

### 3. Improve access to information

The Family Information Service (FIS) should refine its outreach service to ensure it reaches those parents who would not normally engage with and access formal childcare. Empowering parents with information about how to access childcare and the benefits of formal childcare will help to build trust and confidence in those who may not have previously chosen to use it.

Specialist information, advice and advocacy services must continue to be promoted to all parents because, as discovered through the consultation, only a quarter of respondents found out about childcare through the FIS and the rest through family and friends.

Whilst friends and family can offer information, it is essential that parents know how to access impartial, tailored information. This is vital to empower parents to make the right choices for their family.

Information in a range of formats, including outreach, should be focussed in areas of disadvantage and to vulnerable groups to ensure that parents are informed, in particular about Nursery Education Funding so that they are encouraged to access formal childcare for their children.

## What we recommend...

### 4. Improve engagement with working and non working parents through employers and Job Centre Plus (JCP)

Information, advice and advocacy services should aim to reach working parents through employers, and non-working parents through partnership with JCP. This is key to supporting the eradication of child poverty and identifying actual barriers to childcare for non users, especially from low income families.

Protocols have been developed between JCP and the FIS regionally and locally, and this partnership should be strengthened to ensure that childcare is not a barrier to taking up training or employment.

Building on the current work being undertaken with local employers to promote work life balance practices will ensure that childcare does not impact negatively on the recruitment and retention of working parents.



**You can contact us in the following ways:**

**For further information about this summary document or how to access a full copy of Worcestershire's Childcare Sufficiency Assessment please contact:**

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This document can be made available in other formats (large print, audio tape, computer disk and Braille) on request from the Marketing team on telephone number 01905 728912 or by emailing [lbarnett2@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:lbarnett2@worcestershire.gov.uk).

To the best of our knowledge all information was correct at the time of printing: March 2011.

Find out more online:  
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