

Leicestershire County Council

Childcare Sufficiency Research Executive Summary

Final report

Full report is available at
www.leics.gov.uk/childcare

Written by
Becky Gulc, Angela Browne, Anne Heaven,
Susannah Witts & Emlyn Lucas

Independently prepared by QA Research

Executive Summary

Introduction and background

The Childcare Act 2006 places a new duty on local authorities to secure 'so far as is reasonably practical' sufficient childcare which meets the needs of working parents and parents making the transition to work. QA Research was commissioned by Leicestershire County Council's Early Learning and Childcare Service to undertake this childcare sufficiency research. Below is a summary of the key findings. The full report can be referred to for more detailed analysis of the information.

Methodology

A mixed methodology was adopted to provide both quantitative robust data as well as in-depth qualitative data. QA conducted a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) survey with 1425 surveys with local parents. The interviews took place in September and October 2007. Data was weighted to boost the number of surveys completed in Blaby as these proved difficult to achieve, weighted figures are based on 1400 surveys.

In addition, six focus group discussions were also held with parents and carers in November 2007 involving 32 participants. The focus groups aimed to gather more qualitative information to add additional dimensions to the quantitative. The groups included young parents; parents of children with SEN / disabilities; BME parents, lone parents and two with 'generic' parents.

The views of children and young people were also sought through ten face to face paired interviews in an out of school club (ages 5 to 12) and specifically designed feedback forms (pre-school).

Finally a range of relevant stakeholders were interviewed, from a range of backgrounds including local employers, council staff, charities and employment agencies.

Key Findings

Profile of participants

The majority of parents who took part in the surveys were female (84%). This was also true in the focus groups where 32 participants took part but only five were male. In the survey most participants were married or living with a partner (91%) with 9% lone parents. Four parents were foster carers. One focus group was comprised solely of Lone parents, and one solely of Foster carers.

The largest proportion of survey respondents were in their thirties (49%). One focus group was held for younger parents.

In terms of ethnicity, 93% of parents were White British. This result reflects the actual population; the 2001 Census also found that 93% of Leicestershire residents were White British. One focus group was comprised solely of BME residents.

Employment status of participants

A fifth of those completing the survey described themselves as looking after their families (21%); a quarter work full-time (27%) and 50% work part-time. Focus group participants were a mix of working and home based parents.

A third of those not currently working (32%) said they are likely to go into employment in the next 12 months whilst 12% were unsure.

Some participants in the focus groups chose to work part time to be there for their children and to limit childcare bills. Others saw no financial gain in going full-time if they lost entitlements as a result. Those who are employed mostly work weekdays between 8am and 6pm (80%) and 14% work mixed shifts.

Focus groups participants whose skill set largely dictated they work shifts found childcare highly problematic. Some also felt childcare issues stopped them from training, or in the case of some BME parents, improving their English on courses.

A fifth of parents (21%) were known to be within lower income families, with an annual household income of less than £20,000.

Age of children

Parents that took part in the survey and the focus groups had children of a variety of ages; this ranged from expectant parents to parents of children up to 17 years old with Special Educational Needs or disabilities.

SEN and Disability

Overall, 9% of parents (131 people) had children with additional needs, along with parents in one specific SEN focus group. From the survey the largest proportion of the children had cognition and learning needs such as dyslexia / dyspraxia (41%) followed by communication and interaction needs such as autism and poor speech (24%). A further 21% said their children have sensory and / or physical needs (e.g. physical disability; visual / hearing impairment).

SEN childcare

In total, 74% of parents with children with a SEN or disability do not use any kind of formal childcare for their children; however, this falls to 60% when asked if they will be using it in the next two years. This shows increased demand for provision which caters for these children.

Within the next two years the most discernible differences between use and demand are in relation to after-school clubs and holiday play schemes. This is also likely to reflect children having different childcare needs as they get older.

Two thirds of parents not using formal childcare for their disabled or SEN children do so as they don't need it or prefer to care for their child themselves, whilst 12% said they did not use formal childcare because they couldn't find any suitable for their child/ren.

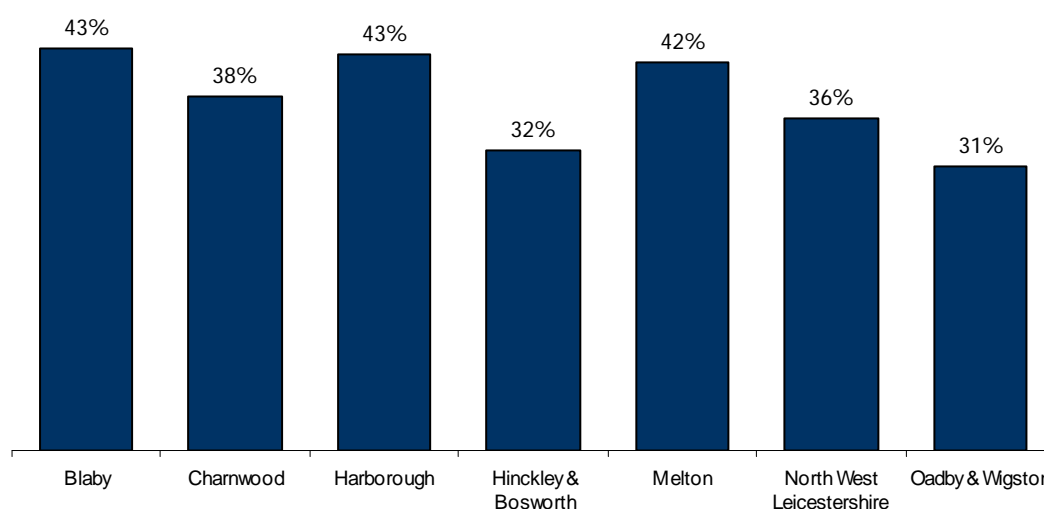
Overall 66% of parents said their childcare needs were fully met for their child/ren with SEN/ disabilities. A further 21% said their needs were partially met and 12% said their needs were not met at all.

Stakeholders felt that there was a need to increase the number of appropriately skilled staff, both in specialist care and general provision to be able to meet the various needs of SEN children.

Childcare currently used

Overall 38% of parents were using formal childcare¹ with those in the Blaby and Harborough areas most likely to be using childcare and those in the Oadby and Wigston area being least likely.

Figure 1.1: Proportion of parents using formal childcare in each district



Source: Leicestershire County Council, Parents Survey. Weighted Bases range from 108-328

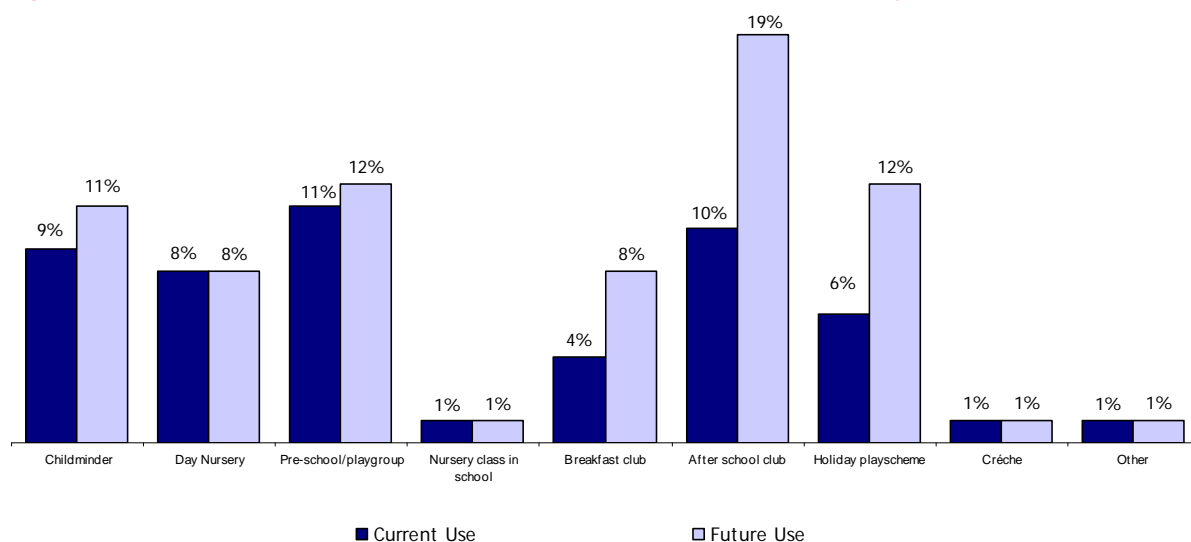
There was a statistically significant difference in the use of formal childcare according to marital status; 44% of lone parents use formal childcare compared to fewer married / co-habiting parents (38%).

Overall, pre-school / playgroups (11%); after school clubs (10%) and childminders (9%) were the most commonly used formal providers. Nannies (4 people); day care at Children's Centres (3 people) and crèche provision (1%) were least likely to be used.

In the next two years, future demand for out of school activities appears to be increasing compared to current use, whilst the demand for day nurseries, pre-schools and childminders appear to remain consistent over the next two years. These changes could be partly explained by children getting older and requiring different childcare. The most likely childcare services to be accessed in the next two years by parents who completed a survey are after-school clubs (19%); holiday playschemes (12%) and pre-school / playgroups (12%).

¹ Formal childcare is usually defined as registered care including; childminders, nurseries or play groups and out of school childcare

Figure 1.2: Current use and future demand for different childcare types



Source: Leicestershire County Council, Parents Survey. Weighted Base: 1400

N.B. Not a mutually exclusive response question

Stakeholders generally predicted a rise in the need for childcare for various reasons; pressure for parents to return to work; greater awareness of what provision exists leading to use; teen pregnancy rates; and growth of young migrant communities. The growth of Leicester was also seen as a driving factor.

Parents from the focus groups were likely to report using a variety of childcare including those noted above, but also private provision such as *Barney's* or a *Wacky Warehouse*. Some also viewed Brownies, football and similar activities as, in part, a form of childcare. Parents chose the most suitable type of care to their situation and child's needs.

Older children interviewed at out of school provision also regularly played games, both computer based and physical, and enjoyed healthy food more than 'hotdogs and pancakes'.

Reasons for using childcare

Two-thirds use formal childcare to enable them to work (61%) whilst 43% use it for their child's development. Just 13% of parents use formal childcare because they receive it through the Early Education Entitlement, or because childcare enables them to study or for a break.

Most children interviewed understood that they used provision because their parents 'need to go to work'.

A fifth of parents with SEN children said they use formal childcare for respite reasons. These parents were also more likely to be using formal childcare for their child's development (48%) rather than to enable them to work (45%).

Parents in the focus groups primarily used childcare so they can work, and also for their child's development. SEN parents in particular emphasised the respite aspects of childcare.

However, several also used clubs for primary age children, as they offered enjoyable activities and friendships. Foster carers noted that they try to maintain the continuity of attendance at the same provider the child used (if at all) before moving to care. Formal care was seen as useful in its structure and range of activities, but could also be seen as remote and impersonal.

Distance to childcare

Two-thirds of respondents (65%) currently only travel up to a mile with a further 23% travelling up to 3 miles. One in ten parents travel further than three miles (11%). A greater proportion of parents in the Harborough area travel three or more miles to access formal childcare than parents compared to other areas.

Parents in the main were willing to travel further than they do to access childcare currently; Nearly a third (30%) were willing to travel up to 3 miles and a fifth of parents were willing to travel up to 5 miles.

Focus groups discussions highlighted that most care was within easy walking distance. However, transport and distance to childcare were particular problems for a Lone parent (who could drive). Most SEN parents had transportation arranged, although one whose child had particular requirements not catered for in the county found travel problematic.

The children interviewed used an out of school club that was not at *their* school, which they felt helped them meet new friends.

Stakeholders interviewed were asked to consider the overall provision in the county. Location and distance were key elements of their considerations. There were mixed opinions regarding childcare in Leicestershire. Some respondents said that the variety and choice needed expanding, whilst others said that choice was good but there was a lack of flexibility. Another viewpoint was that places were available in the area, but it is questionable as to whether they were in the right places, especially regarding rural versus urban communities and in pockets of deprivation.

Stakeholders also noted that available data on what provision exists and in particular times of access, is not as up to date as it could be.

Timing of childcare

Just under half the parents use formal childcare all year round (41%) – the same proportion expects to do so in the next two years. Overall, 57% use it in term time only. Most of the children interviewed went to their out of school club every night.

Of the parents using the early education funded sessions, 71% take up the full-entitlement. For 93% of parents the days and times of the Early Education Fund meet their needs. This is a particularly positive result and could in part be due to the fact that in April '06 the Private, Voluntary and Independent settings (PVI) changed the way the funding was offered. The change was designed to make it more flexible;

allowing parents to be able to combine their sessions without having to take an hour break in between.

Morning provision was the most useful to most parents in the focus groups. However, pick-up from school and general after school provision was a problem for some working parents. Young parents would like more evening care to allow them to socialise.

Stakeholders also felt that out of hours childcare (holiday and evenings/before school) was an area needing improvement; also more consideration is needed for families with more than one child.

In the focus groups, parents of pre-school children found holiday childcare to not be a problem, as with BME parents who felt holidays were to be shared with their children anyway. Note that none of these parents worked, however. Those that did require holiday provision felt it was often sport orientated, and therefore not suitable for all. Some SEN parents, particularly those with other non-SEN children, found summer holidays stressful and expensive.

Some children interviewed were regularly spending all day at out of school clubs in the holidays (c8am to 5pm) and felt this was too long, causing boredom and frustration.

Informal childcare

Half (50%) of parents stated they do use informal childcare²; 28% purely use informal childcare and 22% use both informal and formal childcare. In most cases, the informal care is provided by grandparents, but also other family members and friends.

A third of working parents only use informal childcare. A fifth of working parents use informal childcare in addition to formal childcare. At least three in ten working parents do not use any informal childcare. Further details regarding the employment status and hours worked cross referenced by the childcare use can be found in the full report.

Young and SEN parents within focus groups most often used informal childcare, largely from family members and for respite or taking children to and from school (SEN). Some BME parents preferred not to use informal childcare unless they were truly unable to look after a child themselves, and preferred formal care as staff were seen to be 'qualified'. Foster carers were careful not to upset the children in their care by placing them with people they do not know well, even for short periods. Informal care was seen as preferable by those that felt they did not always trust formal provision, but also raised feelings that they were 'putting upon' friends and family, particularly in the BME group.

² Informal childcare is that which is provided mainly by friends and family but within this study on the basis for allowing parents to work, train or study not for casual babysitting

Satisfaction with provision used

Overall, satisfaction levels with the opening hours, location and quality of childcare are reasonably high with the largest proportion of parents stating that they were 'very satisfied'. However, parents are less likely to be satisfied with the cost of childcare; less than half of parents (42%) were 'very satisfied' with this aspect.

Overall, 85% of parents stated that their childcare needs were being fully met at present; 12% stated they were partially met and 3% stated they were not met. There was little variation in this level of satisfaction when the different ages of parents' children was taken into account.

The key reasons why parents felt that their needs were partially or not met at all included:

- Cost
- A lack of suitable out of school / holiday provision
- Lack of breakfast and after school clubs
- Impractical opening hours (start and finish)
- Lack of provision for older children

Positively, 88% of the 136 children that completed 'fun feedback forms' distributed via their pre-school or nursery indicated they feel 'happy' when they go to their place of care. The most commonly enjoyed element of the provision was 'playing with toys' 48%, with 'seeing friends' next at 33%. Most ate the food the provision gave them, and most enjoyed it.

Two thirds of the children indicated they were happy to come to the playgroup or nursery, while a third preferred to be at home. Possible improvements included 'more story telling time' and 'if mum and dad could be there too'.

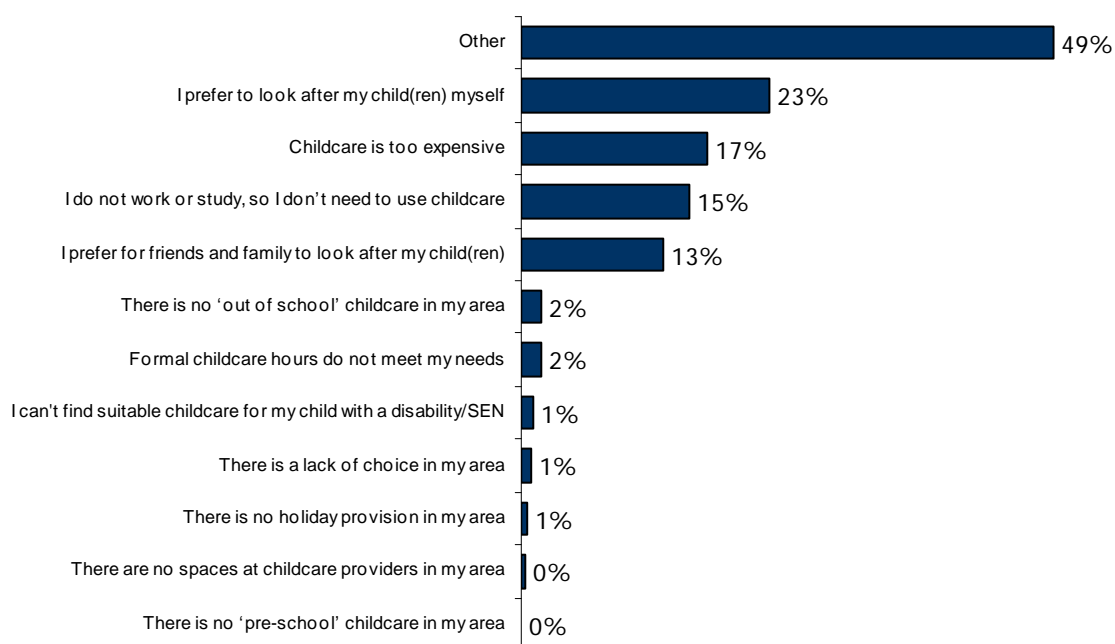
While stakeholders felt that OfSTED and various accreditation schemes went some way to ensuring quality is high, many raised concerns that a lack of funding and low pay meant that staff training may be neglected and that the overall quality of staff was hampered by high turnover of staff.

Barriers and Improvements

A third of parents surveyed do not use any formal or informal childcare at present (35%).

The most frequently reported reason for not using formal childcare was because the respondent preferred to look after their own child (23%). Expense was highlighted as the next most common reason (17%). This was followed by those individuals who do not work or study so see no requirements (15%) or had a preference for informal childcare such as friends and family (13%).

Figure 1.3 Reasons for not using formal childcare



Source: Leicestershire County Council, Parents Survey. Weighted Base: 866
N.B. Not a mutually exclusive response question

A quarter (25%) of parents felt that their childcare responsibilities are preventing them from doing what they want to do in terms of work or training. Many of these parents have difficulties sourcing appropriate childcare and have to work around school hours due to issues regarding flexibility. It is also clear that many parents are working hours or in jobs to fit in with their childcare responsibilities rather than being their preferred hours of working and types of jobs.

There was a feeling amongst stakeholders that childcare was available and supportive for those undertaking further education courses at FE colleges. However there needs to be more available for those doing other training. It was felt that offering comprehensive childcare to entice more to train would help meet key targets on skills and employment amongst young parents.

Parents of 12-14 year olds were significantly less likely to say their childcare responsibilities are preventing them from doing what they want to do (22%) compared with parents with 0-2 year olds (33%). Lone parents were also significantly more likely to say this was the case compared to married / co-habiting parents (31% compared with 24%).

Over a third of parents with SEN children said their childcare responsibilities are a barrier in terms of what they want to do for work / training (35%); this compares with 25% on average.

While issues of cost were commonly addressed in the focus groups, issues of a lack of flexible provision, unsupportive employers and appropriateness of care available also arose. In more than half the groups, concerns over the quality of care and staff in formal provision were raised, often based on real experiences. This was a worry for those parents of children with SEN whose child was too young to communicate or had communication problems.

Language was sometimes an issue to BME parents, especially in terms of information provision. Equally, some women in the BME group felt that cultural pressures for women not to go out of the home made it hard to consider childcare. Stakeholders noted the need for greater outreach provision and better multilingual information.

Children interviewed at out of school clubs were also asked what could be improved about their place of care. Generally they were positive, but felt that more activities tailored to different ages would help alleviate occasional boredom, and more outside activities. Older children wanted a quiet space for homework.

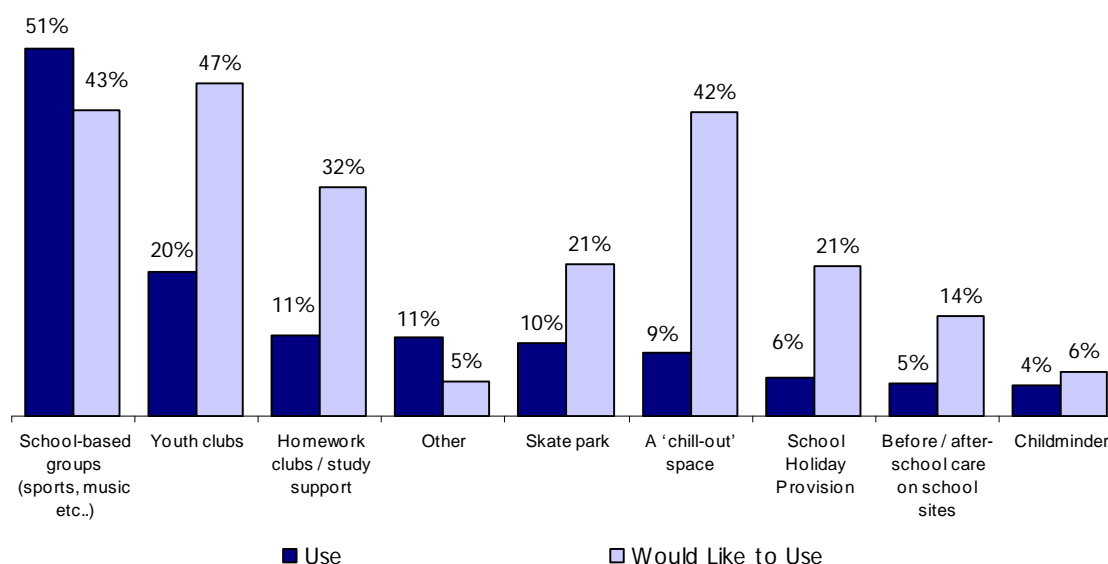
When asked, children generally noted that ideally they would prefer to be looked after by mum and/or dad rather than someone else.

Provision for Young People

Overall, half (51%) the parents of children aged 11+ access school-based groups such as sports and music; with four in ten (43%) parents also saying they would like to use these for this age group in future. One in five parents (20%) were using youth clubs and 11% were using homework clubs / study support for this age group.

The demand for 'chill out spaces'; youth clubs and homework clubs / study support is much greater than current use. This raises the question of whether there are adequate facilities and provision for these older children, but also raises the question about whether parents are fully informed about what is available and also whether young people hold the same views as their parents about what services they prefer.

Figure 1.4 Use and demand for facilities for children aged 11+



Source: Leicestershire County Council, Parents Survey. Weighted Base: 425
N.B. Not a mutually exclusive response question

In total, 79% of parents feel there needs to be more activities for young people aged 11-14 and 15-18 with SEN / disabilities. When analysed by area, this proportion was greatest in Harborough (86%) and lowest in Melton (70%).

This feeling was mirrored in the focus group discussions. There was seen to be a need for semi-structured organisations for young people such as drop in centres. Rural parents felt that travel and cost could be a barrier to this type of provision.

Childcare Information and Awareness

Nearly all (98%) parents were aware of the Child Tax Credit, and 92% are aware of the Working Tax Credit. However, only 60% are aware of the *Childcare* element of the Working Tax Credit and only 8% are using this credit.

Half (49%) of all parents overall were aware of Sure Start Children's Centres. However, just 2% of parents were actually accessing centres. Awareness is greatest in the Charnwood (60%) and Oadby and Wigston (58%) areas.

The data shows that the profile and uptake of schemes such as employer supported vouchers and Care2Learn could be improved. Stakeholders commented that a range of childcare support solutions were offered by employers - vouchers, flexible working, job sharing. Flexibility was noted as being dependent on the size of the organisation, larger organisations being more able to accommodate. Positively, there was a general desire to extend childcare support to staff and parents amongst those employers interviewed.

Within the focus groups, only BME parents had accessed Children's Centres and then for Positive Parenting classes. Most other parents did not know of the Centres. However, Foster and Young parents knew of local *Family* Centres, and users were generally very positive about the quality and flexibility these offer.

In the focus groups it was clear that a wide range of sources of information on childcare was used by parents, in part because many felt it was hard to find the right, or sufficient information in one place. Some felt that while they would go to the Jobcentre, for instance, to find out about entitlements, they had to press staff to go beyond rudimentary information and explain the full set of options.

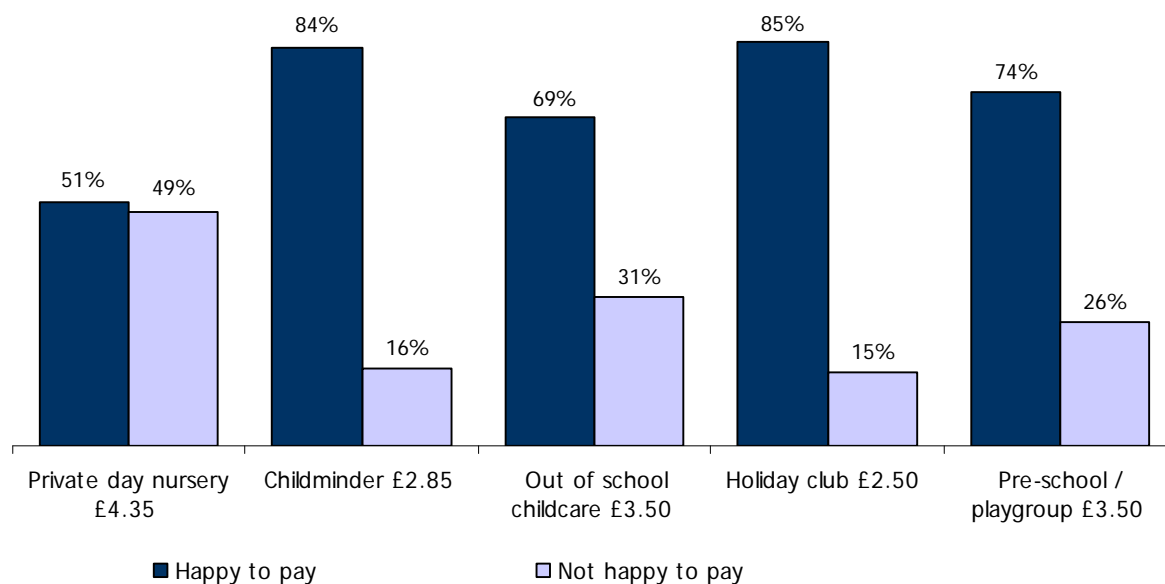
Many felt that a single comprehensive booklet listing all formal providers and their contacts would be very helpful. Wide and obvious distribution was important. Stakeholders felt that if information sources such as the Children's Information Service were better known, many perceived barriers to understanding what provision exists would fall away.

Financing childcare

In total, 17% of parents do not use formal childcare as they consider it too expensive. The majority of parents (84%) would be happy to pay the average cost for a childminder of £2.85 an hour or for a Holiday Club (85%, £2.50 an hour). Seven in ten parents would be happy to pay £3.50 per hour for out of school childcare.

Parents were generally less happy to pay the average cost per hour of a private day nursery (£4.35, 49% unhappy to pay).

Figure 1.5 Whether parents are happy to pay the average childcare costs



Source: Leicestershire County Council, Parents Survey. Weighted Base: 1399

Parents in the Blaby and Oadby and Wigston areas were less likely to be happy about paying these average costs. BME parents were less likely to say they would be happy to pay the average costs compared with White British parents.

Within the focus groups there was often confusion about entitlements relating to employment status, especially for Young Parents. Many parents were aware of Working Families Tax Credits but there was limited use of it in part due to the stressful experience of having over-payments taken back.

Free nursery place provision was well-used, although it was felt by some that the free entitlement should also cover summer holidays.

Lone parents often struggled to get financial support from ex-partners, and while some parents of children with Special Educational Needs and disabilities were able to get funding under the DLA, others found it hard if their financial situation was 'borderline'.

In terms of funding and financial support, stakeholders had concerns that many families might be missing out due to a lack of information and persistent 'myths' about employment being a worse option financially than benefits. There was also identification that sometimes families might choose to opt out of the support on offer due to personal or cultural preferences.

Recommendations

1. In areas where provision is not sustainable due to low demand encourage providers to use a cluster model i.e. 3 after school clubs amalgamated in one venue, and consider the provision of subsidised transport in rural areas.
2. Efforts should be made to encourage the uptake of formal childcare in areas of low uptake i.e. Oadby and Wigston, through outreach workers and taster sessions.
3. Consideration should be given to providers providing discounted rates for parents with more than one child accessing out of school and holiday provision.
4. Links with the local Chamber of Commerce should be made to further promote the WFTC and Childcare Vouchers with local employers and their staff.
5. Children's Centres, the CIS and JobCentre Plus should work closely in providing an advocacy service to parents in order to maximise all the available financial assistance from Early Education Funding and Care2Learn packages to Working Family Tax Credits and Childcare Vouchers.
6. Local Children's Centres should employ bi-lingual advocacy workers to inform parents from BME backgrounds of the benefits of childcare for themselves and their children to encourage uptake.
7. LCC and JobCentre Plus should continue to actively encourage individuals from BME groups to become part of the childcare workforce in order to encourage uptake from these communities.
8. In partnership with JobCentre Plus, Children's Centres should consider the provision of English classes with on site crèche facilities to encourage migrant workers, in particular, to use formal childcare.
9. Children's Centres outreach workers and JobCentre Plus should work closely in encouraging parents who are not working to try childcare 'taster sessions' in addition to informing them about the possible financial assistance available to return to work or training.
10. Give priority and funding to outreach services based at Children's Centres to encourage the uptake of childcare amongst reluctant or vulnerable groups such as Young Parents and recent migrants.
11. Consideration should be given to extending the provision of additional adult funding to support SEN children in Out of School settings
12. To improve childcare opportunities available for disabled children consider the use of outreach workers to inform parents of the options available to them, including the additional funding, and consider the creation of a network of providers who specialise in disabilities/SEN, in partnership with Children's Centres and Extended Services.

13. In line with national recommendations, LCC should increase the confidence and capability of the childcare workforce to deal with disabled children by:
 - ensuring disability equality and inclusion training is undertaken by all settings;
 - evaluating the impact of disability equality and inclusion training;
 - ensuring bespoke training is promptly available to all providers once they have accepted a disabled child, based on the child's needs.
14. Consideration should be given to undertaking an audit of existing out of school provision with a view to funding building alterations or specialist equipment to create universal access.
15. JobCentre Plus should consider the promotion of the Lone Parent Discretionary fund to enable lone parents to become familiar with childcare settings i.e. 'taster sessions' whilst they are looking for a job, before they are employed.
16. Consideration should be given to developing more reliable ad hoc and emergency provision in the home as with the Scottish Sitter Service model.
17. LCC should work with the Chamber of Commerce to encourage major employers, to undertake workforce surveys to clearly establish their needs in terms of childcare.
18. LCC should work with the Chamber of Commerce and other professional organisations e.g. Trade Unions in advocating the benefits of a flexible workforce and provide support and training to encourage Employers to consider alternative work patterns e.g. job shares, split shifts, flexi time and home working.
19. LCC should consider the use of incentives to encourage providers to increase the flexibility of their hours of operation should be considered.
20. Further consideration should be given to the future need of youth provision across the Authority, bearing in mind the school holidays and seasonal fluctuations in demand. Further feasibility studies need to be conducted in targeted areas i.e. North West Leicestershire, Melton, Charnwood and Harborough.
21. Potential gaps in supply should be further investigated through the interrogation of audit data and possibly a targeted survey through the local maternity unit.
22. More positive information about the role and professionalism of childminders should be made available to the public to counter negative perceptions and encourage uptake for older children particularly in areas of low uptake and high need for Out of School Services.
23. A review of the CIS communication strategy should be considered to improve both form and content with the aim of increasing knowledge and awareness of all aspects of childcare information.