

SUMMARY REPORT
CHILDCARE SUFFICIENCY AUDIT
SUNDERLAND
2007

1. Introduction, Aims and Objectives

QA Research was commissioned by Sunderland Extended Services and Attendance Group to undertake research with parents and carers across the borough. The research was concerned with establishing parents and carers' current use of childcare; the childcare needs they have and the barriers faced in accessing childcare.

The aims were to establish specifically:

- Type of childcare currently used;
- Satisfaction levels;
- Demand for childcare in the future;
- Reasons for not using formal childcare;
- Sufficiency of local childcare provision and how it could be improved;
- Employment / training details and impact on childcare responsibilities;
- Awareness and use of tax credits and other relevant schemes and services for parents;
- How parents would prefer to use their Nursery Education Grant / Free Entitlement;
- Where parents generally get information regarding childcare.

2. Background

Sunderland

Sunderland is situated in Tyne and Wear in the North East of England. It is the most deprived city in the North of England, with 11 of the 24 wards featuring in the list of the 2000 most deprived wards in England. The most deprived areas are Southwick and Thorney Close with high levels of unemployment.

In total 66% of men and 54.7% of women of working age within Sunderland are economically active, with 6.7% of men and 3% of women being unemployed and a further 12.2% of men and 8.6% of women being permanently sick or disabled.

In terms of ethnicity a majority of the population is White, with a small Asian and mixed-race population. According to the 2001 Census 8% of households in Sunderland are comprised of single parent families with dependent children, slightly higher than the national average of 6.5%.

The Health Profile for Sunderland for 2006 stated that the teenage pregnancy rate is significantly higher in the city compared to England as a whole. Life expectancies for males and females at birth are also lower than national average figures.

Sunderland Extended Services and Attendance Group

In relation to the development and support of childcare Sunderland's Extended Services and Attendance Group has three specific roles; delivering services for young children and their families; supporting children's learning and development and creating and sustaining childcare. These services are available through Children's Centres, Children's Information Service and the Sandhill Centre.

They develop education and childcare services including:

- The provision of free universal nursery education in accordance with national and local government direction;
- The entitlement of children in need and their families to services provided on an inclusive and equal basis;
- The development of childcare services for working and studying parents to enable parental access to employment and training and to support economic regeneration locally;
- The support of local community providers of valued childcare services (parent and toddler groups, playgroups for example) for non-working as well as working parents and their children.

The team also aim to achieve the above objectives by working to ensure that the services provided are:

- Affordable;
- Accessible;
- Of the highest quality.

The role of the research

Local authorities already work in partnership with the private, voluntary and independent sectors to shape and secure children's services and to provide sufficient, sustainable and flexible childcare that is responsive to parents' needs.

Under the Childcare Act 2006 local authorities have a duty to guarantee sufficient childcare which meets the needs of working parents and parents making the transition to work. Childcare sufficiency assessments give local authorities the chance to work with local partners, filling gaps in the market and shaping childcare and services in their area. The ultimate aim is to provide the best possible childcare market for local families.¹

This research was thus important in terms of gathering the views and intentions of parents and carers with regards to childcare so Sunderland Extended Services and Attendance Group can subsequently assess whether the childcare facilities available at the moment will meet the needs of parents by April 2008, when any 'gaps' between supply and demand must be filled.

¹ <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/files/EA809E2B87C528D509FA1949AF1E0124.doc>

3. Methodology

A mixed methodology was adopted for this work to provide a mixture of quantitative robust data as well as more in-depth qualitative data.

To gather predominantly quantitative data QA conducted a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) survey with 454 local parents and carers using a bought-in database of likely parents.

Calls were completed on weekday afternoons, evenings and on Saturdays to ensure that the research was as inclusive as possible.

Although young people aged 12-19 were covered in this research, survey respondents were screened to ensure that they also had children aged 0-11 that they could comment on. By boosting the sample of parents interviewed with children aged 0-11 Sunderland Extended Services and Attendance Group is provided with more statistically robust and meaningful data which will ultimately help to assess the sufficiency of childcare provision for this age group whilst also capturing information for the older age group.

In addition to the survey nine focus group discussions were held with children, young people, parents and carers. These groups included BME parents, parents of children with special educational needs and parents recruited through the survey. Two groups with young people also took place and children at an after school club were also consulted. The groups were concerned with gathering more qualitative information from parents. The groups enabled the issues covered within the survey to be explored in much greater detail with parents and carers being able to share their own opinions and experiences more fully.

The final element of the methodology included 33 semi-structured telephone interviews with a range of stakeholders including childcare providers and representatives from the local authority amongst others. Contact details were supplied by Sunderland City Council and the majority of interviews were audio recorded with the respondent's permission.

4. Summary Conclusions of Research

Current use of provision

In total, 57.5% of survey respondents were using some kind of provision for their children. Just over a third were using formal childcare (35.5% - equivalent to 161 parents) whilst 28.4% were using informal care; a further 15.6% use other provision for their children.

The most widely used registered provision was after-school clubs (24.5%) followed by day nurseries (16.1%); sports groups (14.9%) and breakfast clubs (11.9%).

The average vacancy rate for settings across Sunderland is for after school clubs (64%), for day nurseries is (47.6%) and for childminding is (20%). However this is based on a return of 33% of the PVI daycare sector and 42% of the childminding sector.

The survey revealed that parents of children with disabilities or SEN were very unlikely to be using formal childcare provision. The focus group findings show that there is reliance upon informal care with family or friends who understand the individual needs of the child.

The survey findings show that the least used provision includes youth clubs and holiday clubs. The focus groups identified however that there is a perception that there is a lack of provision for young people in Sunderland.

Satisfaction

The survey data shows overall high levels of satisfaction with childcare provision, particularly with the quality and reliability of provision. Areas for improvement are mainly in relation to cost, location, premises and opening hours / times.

The findings from the focus groups support this in that although parents felt that provision was costly, they felt that the standard of care was high. Parents in the focus groups also expressed a preference for leaving their children with 'older' childcare workers.

It is evident from the survey and focus groups shows that parents of disabled / SEN children are less satisfied with the provision available. In particular, some parents were dissatisfied with the support workers provided and others had experienced problems accessing Children's Centre provision which they felt should be available for children over the age of 5 as well.

Although the survey data shows that demand is low for holiday and weekend provision, a lack of this type of provision seemed to be an issue for parents in the focus groups, especially parents with disabled / SEN children. The findings from the interviews with stakeholders also suggest that the uptake of holiday provision is erratic. This contradiction could suggest that there is some issue with the appropriateness of the provision or a lack of publicity.

Parents in the focus groups also referred to a lack of supervised play/leisure opportunities for children aged 5-11; this was also acknowledged by stakeholders.

The focus groups and stakeholder interviews also point towards some issues in relation to transport and pockets of sparse provision. Young people participating in the focus groups also experienced transport problems in relation to accessing clubs and activities. Some stakeholders were also conscious of a disparity of provision in certain areas. On the other hand, there was also some concern about 'saturation' in some areas, arising in part from a lack of partnership working between the public and private sectors and the prohibitive conditions of some funding streams.

Reasons for not using provision

It is evident from the survey that the main reason for non-use of childcare was parents' preference for looking after their children themselves, especially those aged 0-4.

High cost was also a barrier to accessing provision (particularly for children aged 0-4). The high cost of private day nursery care was also acknowledged by stakeholders. The specific difficulties faced by lone parents and working parents of under 3's were highlighted. An expansion of free nursery provision was seen as the solution to the latter issue.

Black and minority ethnic parents that participated in the focus groups were satisfied with the way in which their cultural needs were taken into account by the providers that they had used and did not perceive unmet cultural needs to be a barrier to accessing childcare. They felt that lack of information was a more pressing need although it was clear that there was a general tendency for BME parents to prefer not to use any formal childcare provision.

Future use of provision

In total 116 people (25.6%) of survey respondents intended to use provision for their children in the next 12 months. Interestingly, further analysis shows that a significantly higher proportion of BME respondents plan to use provision than White British respondents (50.0% compared to 24.2%). However, focus group findings suggest that BME parents would be unlikely to want to use provision.

Parents in the South East of Sunderland were most likely to use provision in the next twelve months (33.0%) followed by Coalfields (28.8%); Central (27.3%); Sunderland North (20.0%) and Washington (20.0%). In total 69 out of the 202 parents with 0-4 year olds planned to use provision for these children in the next 12 months (34.1%). This equates to 75 of the 0-4 year olds covered by the research.

Although, generally, the data indicates that the demand for most types of childcare and related provision will fall within the next 12 months. After school clubs and day nurseries appear to be the type of provision most likely to continue being used. Again, reasons for future non-usage relate to parents' preference to care for their children themselves.

Employment

In total, 69% of survey respondents were working either full or part time. The majority of these had not been affected by childcare issues in relation to employment.

However, parents of disabled / SEN children were less likely to be working. The focus group findings highlight issues for parents of disabled children who wish to work; these include a perceived lack of support from the Jobcentre and concerns about lack of understanding from employers.

The survey data shows that just over half of those not working said that they intended to enter employment in the next three yrs (68 people in total); however responses were evenly split between those requiring and not requiring childcare. Generally, it was more likely for single parents to state that they intended to enter employment.

Several of the parents in the focus groups expressed concern around combining childcare and work, particularly in terms of finding employment with flexible working hours. It is evident that some parents may not be aware of the right to request flexible working hours. Furthermore, some stakeholders interviewed felt that there was a lack of provision for shift workers.

Tax credits and childcare information

The survey findings showed high levels of awareness of Tax Credits; however awareness was lower for the Nursery Education Grant. Just over a third of respondents were aware of the CIS, however only 7% had used it. The focus group findings suggest that there may be a lack of understanding of the exact nature of the information / help available via the CIS. It was clear from the survey and focus groups that word of mouth and schools were the most popular information sources on childcare.

Over 70% of survey respondents were aware of children's centres; although awareness tended to be higher in the Coalfields cluster than in the South East. No clear pattern emerged in terms of parental preference for use of the NEG, although a number of stakeholders noted the insufficiency of this as a tool for supporting working parents as only children 3 and over are eligible, so it seemed that most parents tended to use the NEG as an opportunity for their child's social development and respite rather than a support mechanism for returning to work.

The findings from the stakeholder interviews suggest that there may be a lack of understanding about childcare vouchers amongst employers, particularly in relation to the benefits to the employer.

5. Executive Summary

5.1 Profile Information

5.1.1 In total, 454 parents / carers completed a survey whilst over 50 participants (including children and young people) took part in focus group discussions;

5.1.2 The number of completed interviews in each cluster area generally corresponds well with the actual make-up of Sunderland's population;

5.1.3 A majority of the respondents were female (78.0%) and most were White British (94.7%);

5.1.4 The largest proportion of respondents were 35-44 years of age (53.1%), followed by 25-34 year olds (28.7%); 45-54 year olds (13.0%) and 16-24 year olds (3.5%);

5.1.5 A large majority of respondents were either married or living with a partner (83.9%), 16.1% were single parents;

5.1.6 Thirty-five parents stated that they have a disability;

5.1.7 Whilst most respondents didn't wish to state which bracket their annual household income falls into, a fifth had an income of 20,000 - £30,000 (19.6%); 18.1% that had an income of £0-£14,000 whilst 13.5% of respondents had an annual household income of £14,000 - £20,000. A further 18.9% had an annual household income of £30,000 or more.

5.2 Number of children

5.2.1 Altogether the respondents had, or were expecting 880 children aged 0-19;

5.2.2 Four respondents were currently pregnant;

5.2.3 The 202 parents with 0-4 year olds had 251 children in this age group;

5.2.4 In total 347 people had 457 children aged 5-11;

5.2.5 In total, 123 parents had 137 12-16 year olds;

5.2.6 There were 31 17-19 year olds covered by this research.

5.3 Children with Special / Additional Needs or Disability

5.3.1 Overall 9.3% of all respondents had children with special / additional needs or a disability;

5.3.2 Nine respondents had 0-4 year olds with additional needs; 21 respondents had 5-11 year olds with additional needs; 13 parents had 12-16 year olds with additional needs whilst four parents had 17-19 year olds with additional needs;

5.3.2 Very little provision, either formal or informal is being used for these children. Just seven of the parents were using some kind of provision for these children;

5.4 Provision currently used

5.4.1 In total, 57.5% of respondents were using some kind of provision for their children. Just over a third use formal childcare (35.5% - equivalent to 161 parents) whilst 28.4% use informal care; a further 15.6% use other provision for their children;

5.4.2 Out of the 261 respondents who used some provision for their children, just under half were using informal family carers (46.4%). The most widely used registered provision was after-school clubs (24.5%) followed by day nurseries (16.1%); sports groups (14.9%) and breakfast clubs (11.9%);

5.4.3 A further 10.3% of these parents use toddler groups (10.3%) whilst 9.2% use drama / music classes. In total 20 parents were using childminders (7.7%); 7.3% use Children's Centre provision whilst the same proportion use informal friend / neighbour carers;

5.4.4. The types of provision which were least likely to be used by parents in Sunderland at the moment were youth clubs (6.1%) and holiday clubs (5.8%); two parents were using a special needs / day centre and one person was using a nanny;

5.4.5 However, focus group findings seemed to suggest a lack of suitable holiday provision, particularly for children with disabilities / SEN.

5.4.6 In relation to occupancy rates by type of provision after school clubs are (36%) day nurseries are (53%) and childminders are (80%). These figures are based on a return of 33% for PVI day nurseries and 42% of childminders.

5.5 Satisfaction with Provision Used

5.5.1 The findings show that the childcare and related provision used for children and young people in Sunderland is rated very highly by those using it;

5.5.2 All those using childminders; the person using a nanny and the two people using a Special Needs / Day centre were satisfied with all aspects of these providers;

5.5.3 Whilst it is acknowledged that there is a high degree of satisfaction with provision used, the data suggests that the main areas of improvement are mainly in relation to a) cost (across all provider types an average of 96.4% were satisfied with the cost) b) location (across all provider types an average of 97.4% were satisfied with the location) c) premises (average of 97.6% satisfied) and d) opening hours / times (average of 97.8% satisfied);

5.5.4 The main areas where parents were more satisfied with provision are a) quality of care offered (average of 99.8% satisfied) b) childcarer / staff (99.4% average satisfaction) and c) reliability (99.5% average satisfaction);

5.5.5 Cost was also a significant issue within the focus group discussions along with transport issues and having to access preferred provision some distance away (see pages 58-60).

5.6 Reasons for not currently using childcare

5.6.1 The 230 parents who don't use provision for some or all of their children were asked for their reasons for this;

5.6.2 The main reason is that parents prefer to care for their children themselves. In total, 60.0% gave this reason regarding their 0-4 year olds; 57.6% said this about their 5-11 year olds and 40.2% said this about their 12-16 year olds; 31.6% said this about their 17-19 year olds;

5.6.3 The second reason is that parents feel their children are too old so don't need it; this response was given 80 times in total. In total, 84.2% of those with 17-19 year olds said this was the case; 52.2% of those with 12-16 year olds said this;

5.6.4 Cost was mentioned as a barrier 25 times by parents overall, this was most likely to be stated as a reason for not using provision for 0-4 year olds compared with other age groups (12.5%);

5.6.5 A very small number of parents said they don't use provision due to reasons concerning availability; poor quality of care; location; not being available at specific schools; simply not having looked for information on provision; language barriers; due to children attending nursery classes in school or due to concerns about leaving children in formal care. It is acknowledged that these reasons can be based on parent's perceptions rather than reality;

5.6.6 The focus groups and stakeholder interviews support the fact that parents who do not use childcare provision simply prefer to care for their children themselves, particularly the 0-4 age group.

5.7 Future use of childcare

5.7.1 All parents surveyed were asked whether they intended to use formal childcare or respite / youth provision for their children in the next 12 months;

5.7.2 Generally, the data indicates that the demand for most types of childcare and related provision will fall within the next 12 months. The largest fall between current use and future demand relates to after-school clubs and sports groups. However, there is a slight increase in demand for childminders; holiday clubs and nannies (see page 40);

5.7.3 In total 116 people (25.6%) of respondents intend to use provision for their children in the next 12 months;

5.7.4 One of the four expectant parents that took part in this research intends to use provision for this child in the next 12 months;

5.7.5 In total 69 out of the 202 parents with 0-4 year olds plan to use provision for these children in the next 12 months (34.1%);

5.7.6 In total 65 parents out of the 347 with 5-11 year olds intend to use provision for this age group in the next 12 months (18.7%);

5.7.7 Just five parents were planning to use provision for their 12-16 year olds in the next 12 months;

5.7.8 The provision most likely to be used by parents are after-school clubs (39.7%); private day nurseries (30.2%) and breakfast clubs (22.4%). A further 19.8% will use childminders; 15.5% will use holiday clubs; 13.8% will use pre-school / playgroups whilst 12.9% will use sports groups; 9.5% will use drama / music groups;

5.7.9 A small number of parents are planning to use Children's Centre provision (10 parents; 8.6%); youth clubs (10 parents; 8.6%); three people will use a nanny / au pair and two will use a special needs / day centre.

5.8 Reasons why parents are not likely to use provision in the next 12 months

5.8.1 Respondents who did not intend to use any formal childcare; respite care for children with SEN / disability or provision for older children in the next 12 months were asked to give reasons for this;

5.8.2 The main reasons given reflect the ones discussed earlier by those not currently using provision for all or some children, namely a preference for caring for children themselves; children being too old for provision and not needing provision.

5.9 Improvements

5.9.1 Respondents were asked whether they felt that any changes could be made to childcare / youth and special needs provision in their area to help them enhance their lifestyle / working patterns. A majority of respondents didn't think any of the options mentioned in the survey would help them (54.2%), indicating satisfaction with their present situations;

5.9.2 The most popular option was to have more holiday provision (23.3%). It is acknowledged that there are currently 31 holiday schemes operating in Sunderland and some clubs have had to close due to a lack of take-up therefore this could suggest that whilst there is a demand for such provision this is not necessarily being followed-through;

5.9.3 The second most cited improvement was to have new or more facilities in schools (22.9%). The third most popular option was to have more flexible childcare, so earlier and later opening hours (16.3%);

5.9.4 A further 15.0% would like to see more places in existing facilities (single parents were again more likely to suggest this) whilst 14.3% would like to see emergency childcare; 14.1% would like to be able to use the Nursery Education Grant more flexibly;

5.9.5 Supervised youth provision was felt to be important by 13.2% whilst 10.8% felt that having provision available on an evening would be helpful;

5.9.6 In total 13 out of the 42 parents of children with SEN / disabilities felt that more trained staff for working with these children would help them (31.0%).

5.10 Employment, study and training

5.10.1 A majority of respondents were employed full-time (35.2%) whilst 33.5% were working part-time. A further 14.5% said their main activity was being a housewife/husband whilst 8.8% were currently unemployed but not looking for work; 3.1% were unemployed but looking for work;

5.10.2 A small number of respondents said their main activity was studying or training (2.6%); 2.0% were self-employed;

5.10.3 Parents who weren't currently working were also asked whether they intend to enter employment in the next three years. In total 51.5% (68 people) said they did, of these 28 people (41.2%) said that this would mean they would require formal childcare, 14.7% were unsure whilst 44.1% said they wouldn't require formal childcare;

5.10.4 All respondents were then asked if issues surrounding childcare had affected their own or their partners (if applicable) employment status / prospects as well as their ability to undertake training. A large majority of respondents said they hadn't experienced any issues in relation to childcare (81.7%);

5.10.5 Just over one in ten parents said they had experienced problems with regards to work however (11.0%). In total 6.2% said childcare issues had prevented an increase in the number of hours worked whilst 4.4% said it had prevented the take up of training / study; 4.0% said it had prevented the take-up of employment. Data from Jobcentre Plus regarding purely those parents that are currently economically inactive suggests that the main perceived barrier to getting back to work would be not having early morning / evening / weekend childcare (e.g. 35% of parents said this in December 2006).

5.10.6 12 parents said issues had prevented them from continuing to train (2.6%); seven parents each said childcare issues had prevented them from continuing to work (1.5%).

5.11 Childcare Information and Tax Credits

5.11.1 In total 96.3% of respondents were aware of Child Tax Credits with 70.9% of these people benefiting from them;

5.11.2 A majority were also aware of the Working Tax Credit (92.7%), 40.4% of these respondents had qualified for the tax credit;

5.11.3 Fewer than half of respondents were aware of the Nursery Education Grant / Free Entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds (41.0%), 11.3% of these parents had qualified for this. In actual terms there is a 97% take-up of Free Entitlement in Sunderland which suggests that parents aren't aware of the terms NEG/Free Entitlement or aware this is what they are using;

- 5.11.4 Just over a third of all respondents were aware of the local Children's Information Service (35.5%), 6.8% (11 people) reported using this service. Many parents did express interest in hearing more about this service however (21.6%);
- 5.11.5 Just 13.0% were aware of the Care2Learn programme this totals 59 respondents, just 3 of these were in the youngest and relevant age category of 16-24 however;
- 5.11.6 Children's Centres were known to 77.8% of respondents. In total, 15.0% of those aware of these centres were using them;
- 5.11.7 Just over a third of respondents were aware of Attendance Allowance (35.0%) with just 3.1% of these parents accessing it;
- 5.11.8 In terms of the number of days Free Entitlement is provided, 24.3% would like to see it available over five days (for three hours a day) whilst 22.8% would prefer it to be spread over three days, for five hours a day. Over half of the parents didn't have a particular preference for three or five days (53.0%);
- 5.11.9 In terms of the hours parents would prefer to use their Free Entitlement, again a majority didn't have a particular preference (49.0%) whilst 37.6% would prefer to use it in what would be school hours between 9am and 3pm. Fewer people wanted it over a longer period of time, between 8am and 6pm (13.4%);
- 5.11.10 A majority of parents / carers use informal means of finding out about childcare, namely family, parents and friends and through general word of mouth (39.4%). Over a third of parents get their information through schools (34.4%) whilst 14.3% get it through Sure Start Children's Centres;
- 5.11.11 A further 13.7% mentioned local advertising; 13.7% get their information from the council / Children's Information Service (25.8%) whilst 8.1% get their information through health visitors / clinics.

10. Conclusions

Current use of provision

In total, 57.5% of survey respondents were using some kind of provision for their children. Just over a third were using formal childcare (35.5% - equivalent to 161 parents) whilst 28.4% were using informal care; a further 15.6% use other provision for their children.

The most widely used registered provision was after-school clubs (24.5%) followed by day nurseries (16.1%); sports groups (14.9%) and breakfast clubs (11.9%).

The survey revealed that parents of children with disabilities or SEN were very unlikely to be using formal childcare provision. The focus group findings show that there is reliance upon informal care with family or friends who understand the individual needs of the child.

The survey findings show that the least used provision includes youth clubs and holiday clubs. The focus group findings show that there is reliance upon informal care with family or friends who understand the individual needs of the child.

There is a good match between parental demand and density of places. There is sufficient supply to meet the demand of parents.

Satisfaction

The survey data shows overall high levels of satisfaction with childcare provision, particularly with the quality and reliability of provision. Areas for improvement are mainly in relation to cost, location, premises and opening hours / times.

The findings from the focus groups support this in that although parents felt that provision was costly, they felt that the standard of care was high. Parents in the focus groups also expressed a preference for leaving their children with 'older' childcare workers.

It is evident from the survey and focus groups shows that parents of disabled / SEN children are less satisfied with the provision available. In particular, some parents were dissatisfied with the support workers provided and others had experienced problems accessing Sure Start provision.

The focus group discussions also highlighted some issues concerning waiting lists for Sure Start nursery provision and out of school care.

Although the survey data shows that demand is low for holiday and weekend provision, a lack of this type of provision seemed to be an issue for parents in the focus groups, especially parents with disabled / SEN children. The findings from the interviews with stakeholders also suggest that the uptake of holiday provision is erratic. This contradiction could suggest that there is some issue with the appropriateness of the provision or a lack of publicity.

Parents in the focus groups also referred to a lack of supervised play/leisure opportunities for children aged 5-11; this was also acknowledged by stakeholders.

The focus groups and stakeholder interviews also point towards some issues in relation to transport and pockets of sparse provision. Young people participating in the focus groups also experienced transport problems in relation to accessing clubs and activities. Some stakeholders were also conscious of a disparity of provision in certain areas, e.g. North Sunderland and Doxford Business Park (it is acknowledged that there is a 100 place nursery at Doxford Business Park). On the other hand, there was also some concern about 'saturation' in some areas, arising in part from a lack of partnership working between the public and private sectors and the prohibitive conditions of some funding streams.

Reasons for not using childcare

It is evident from the survey that the main reason for non-use of childcare was parents' preference for looking after their children themselves, especially those aged 0-4.

High cost was also a barrier to accessing provision (particularly for children aged 0-4). The high cost of private day nursery care was also acknowledged by stakeholders. The specific difficulties faced by lone parents and working parents of under 3's were highlighted. An expansion of free nursery provision was seen as the solution to the latter issue.

Data suggests that in some cases parental perceptions of childcare, rather than the reality of what's on offer could act as a barrier to using childcare. As such there is a need for Sunderland Extended Services and Attendance Group to consider how these perceptions, for example regarding poor quality of care, could be changed.

Black and minority ethnic parents that participated in the focus groups were satisfied with the way in which their cultural needs were taken into account by the providers that they had used and did not perceive unmet cultural needs to be a barrier to accessing childcare. They felt that lack of information was a more pressing need although it was clear that there was a general tendency for BME parents to prefer not to use any formal childcare provision.

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Several of the parents in the focus groups expressed concern around combining childcare and work, particularly in terms of finding employment with flexible working hours. It is evident that some parents may not be aware of the right to request flexible working hours. Furthermore, some stakeholders interviewed felt that there was a lack of provision for shift workers.

Tax credits and childcare information

The survey findings showed high levels of awareness of Tax Credits; however awareness was lower for the Nursery Education Grant. Just over a third of respondents were aware of the CIS, however only 7% had used it. The focus group findings suggest that there may be a lack of understanding of the exact nature of the information / help available via the CIS. It was clear from the survey and focus groups that word of mouth and schools were the most popular information sources on childcare.

Over 70% of survey respondents were aware of children's centres; although awareness tended to be higher in the coalfields cluster than in the south east. No clear pattern emerged in terms of parental preference for use of the NEG, although a number of stakeholders noted the insufficiency of this as a tool for supporting working parents as only children 3 and over are eligible, so it seemed that most parents tended to use the NEG as an opportunity for their child's social development and respite rather than a support mechanism for returning to work.

The findings from the stakeholder interviews suggest that there may be a lack of understanding about childcare vouchers amongst employers, particularly in relation to the benefits to the employer.

Further Recommendations

As set out in the initial invitation to tender the Sunderland Extended Services and Attendance Group requested that QA recommends processes by which the audit could be undertaken annually in-house. The separate audit report makes clear recommendations for how data can be gathered and presented in a user-friendly format which is easily updatable whilst the points below refer to the parental demand element of the work.

The Sunderland Extended Services and Attendance Group could:

- Involve those parents and carers that requested further information as a result of the survey in future work. For example these people could be sent a short self-completion survey with key questions taken from this year's survey on an annual basis. This will enable key questions to be compared over time.
- Consider undertaking an annual telephone survey on a smaller scale than for this research, whilst not being as statistically robust it would enable key comparisons of data to be made to assess trends over time.
- An alternative or addition to this could be liaising with Children's Centre Co-ordinators to distribute a self-completion survey to families which would ask about current use and demand for childcare again on an annual basis.
- Consider offering staff training on how to run focus group discussions (QA could provide training) similar to what Cumbria Children's Services have recently undertaken. This would enable staff to gather information themselves.