

## **2. Agencies and Providers**

### **2.1 Job Centre Plus**

A memorandum of understanding is in place between Job Centre Plus and Swindon Sure Start Partnership, focussing on recruitment to the childcare workforce.

As part of the work Job Centre Plus carries out with parents returning to work, consideration is given to whether childcare is a barrier. The number of children living in workless households drives this agenda.

Availability of childcare in Swindon is not reported to be a barrier in general terms. The exceptions to this are the need for atypical care, and care to support shift work, for example parents returning to work in the retail or manufacturing sectors.

Changes to lone parent benefits are under review. Currently a lone parent whose youngest child has not yet reached their sixteenth birthday is eligible for income support. From October 2008 when the youngest child of a lone parent reaches their twelfth birthday, the parent will have to undertake job focussed activities and no longer be eligible for income support solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. The impact of this development on the childcare market for this age group in the short term is not yet known. In addition, there is a proposal at the green paper stage planning for this age threshold to be lowered further to age ten in 2009, and to age seven in 2010.

#### **2.1.1 Recommendations**

- Revise the memorandum of understanding between Job Centre Plus and Swindon Sure Start Partnership to take account of childcare sufficiency and to reflect the requirements of the Childcare Act 2006.

### **2.2 Employers**

A questionnaire was sent to the major employers in Swindon employing more than one hundred people. Employers were asked about the impact on their business of employees who are parents needing additional flexibility during their child's transition to primary school and during school holidays.

Eleven employers responded. In nearly all cases, availability of childcare was not cited as having a significant impact on their operations. In two cases the time when a child starts school was reported to have a significant impact on normal business practices.

### **2.3 Growth**

There is extensive new housing development planned in Swindon. The need for provision of childcare is being assessed in conjunction with new school development.

## **2.4 Schools**

All schools in Swindon were sent a questionnaire to ask about the provision of childcare for the families in their communities. Twenty eight schools responded.

- We asked whether schools had a preference for type of care that was available for children. All schools responded that there is a need for both group and childminder services or that it is a matter of parental choice.
- We asked if there are any significant priority and excluded groups in their school community. No single group was identified in large numbers, but a level of need was identified across a range of complex issues affecting families.
- We asked if there are any local barriers to accessing childcare. Care to support shift work and atypical work patterns were reported as the most significant barriers.
- We asked infant and primary schools about their induction arrangements when a child first starts school. Schools have a range of strategies to support induction, with an impact on parents need for childcare at this time of between one and three weeks for either part or full days.

## **2.5 Childcare Providers**

### **2.5.1 Providers of group childcare**

All group childcare settings in the private, voluntary and maintained sectors were sent a questionnaire to ask about the affordability, availability and flexibility of the childcare they offer. Fifty six settings responded.

- Thirty one providers implement an annual fee increase.
- Preferred methods to promote tax credits are through the display of posters and distributing leaflets. Knowledge of the tax credit system on the part of providers is very fragmented.
- Parents using daycare nurseries are using employer vouchers more than in any other type of setting.
- Parents have requested more flexibility to be able to pay for the hours that they need rather than full sessions.
- Parents have requested earlier start times and care that supports shift work.

### **2.5.2 Agencies Supporting Group Childcare**

There are a number of dedicated support agencies for providers of childcare, offering a range of services to their members. The Pre school Learning Alliance (PsLA) supports pre schools and 4Children the out of school sector. The National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) is the trade body that supports daycare nurseries. Four of Swindon's nurseries are members.

### 2.5.3 Childminders

During the period 2001 – 2003 there was a decline in the number of registered childminders in England. In Swindon, however, numbers of childminders were maintained. This has led to a situation where on average nationally there is one childminder place for every two daycare places but in Swindon the ratio is one to one. This means that in Swindon there are twice as many childminder places as the national average.

Consultation with parents has shown that 28% of parents would prefer to be able to access a combination of childminding and group care for their children. This suggests that although childminders are offering a valuable and appreciated standalone service to many parents, there is scope to meet additional market need through consolidation of services by offering parents packages of care within Children's Centre or Extended Services areas.

To consult with childminders a sample of one hundred was selected by Trio Childcare Connections as the agency that offers local childminder support, and sent a questionnaire. The selection was made with a view to ensuring that all geographic areas of Swindon were covered and that the childminders selected were active in their work. Childminders were asked to comment on the services they offer with regard to availability, affordability, flexibility and any other comments they wished to make. Twenty five childminders responded to the consultation.

- Availability.

Childminders report that in many areas take up of their places is patchy. This is the case even in areas where there is high demand. They say that current information provided in the form of lists about unfilled vacancies is not always an effective way to recruit new parents and that parents have told them that they prefer to use recommendations by friends.

- Affordability.

Concerns around affordability fall into two categories. Firstly, that pricing by childminders is inconsistent and that group settings are more cost effective choices for parents. Secondly, that affordability is less of an issue for parents in cases where there is knowledge of the tax credit and childcare voucher systems.

- Flexibility.

Childminders report that they are aware that they have the potential to offer very flexible childcare to support atypical working patterns. However, many are also concerned about the impact this could have on their own work life balance.

- Other Comments.

Established childminders reported that while they have no vacancies and there is unmet demand, some new childminders have vacancies which they are slow to fill. There is a perception that funding is offered to new childminders who then give up the profession due to lack of progress, whereas established childminders receive less direct reward.

#### **2.5.4 Agencies Supporting Childminders**

The National Childminding Association (NCMA) is the trade body that supports childminders. Two hundred and eighty three childminders in Swindon are members and benefit from a wide range of services to support them in their work.

#### **2.5.5 Recommendations**

- Discontinue the universal childminder start up grant and replace it with a new package of incentives for childminders to meet market needs.
- Promote the flexible offer for childminding, encouraging the availability of childcare at atypical times.
- Start to develop comprehensive childminder and group based services to meet the needs of parents wishing to use a combination of services
- Actively promote the Children's Information Function and the availability of the childcare element of the working tax credit through Children's Centres, childcare providers and Extended Services.
- Raise awareness of employer vouchers with childcare providers to enable parents to use them more easily.
- Develop childcare brokerage services for parents to support them during their child's transition to primary school.

#### **2.6 Consultation with Children**

Two questionnaires focussed on children's activities were created, one to ask pre school children and a second to ask primary school children about their experience of childcare. All children were invited to choose their three favourite activities with the option to contribute their own ideas.

The questionnaires were distributed via existing pre school, out of school and childminder settings. Four hundred and thirty pre school children and two hundred and fifteen out of school children took part in the consultation.

Outcomes:

There was no difference in the outcomes dependent on the location of the setting. Also, there was no difference in children's preferences dependent on whether they accessed their care with a childminder or at a group setting.

Pre school outcomes:

- The girls' favourite activity is painting
- The boys' favourite activity is playing on bikes and scooters.
- There is a marked discrepancy between boys' and girls' enjoyment of books which has an impact on early learning objectives.

Out of school outcomes (5 – 10 years):

- The girls' favourite activity is Art and Craft
- The boys' favourite activity is TV and Computer Games
- Playing outside is the activity enjoyed most by both boys and girls

The overall outcomes from the consultation for out of school children show a situation where the majority of children prefer a setting where they have:

- An opportunity to play outside
- An opportunity to watch television and play computer games
- An opportunity to engage in purposeful activities like cooking, swimming, art and sport.

### **2.6.1 Recommendations:**

- Work with the library service on the 'Book Ahead' Scheme to support pre schools in accessing books of interest to both boys and girls.
- Ensure the learning from consultation with children is considered by applicants for grant funding for new childcare provision and is shared with existing providers.
- Support a package of training for the out of school workforce in the delivery of outside play.

## **2.7 Childcare Support for Students in Higher and Further Education**

### **2.7.1 The Learning and Skills Council**

The Learning and Skills Council plays a pivotal role in the funding of adult education in Swindon. Their directive with regard to supporting childcare is to recruit into the childcare workforce.

The Learning Support Fund (often called the Access Fund) is channelled to colleges via the Learning and Skills Council. This funding is used to remove barriers to learning including childcare and its use is at the discretion of the colleges.

Funding to support equality and diversity is also directed through the Learning and Engagement Team at Swindon Borough Council to support adult and family learning activities in the neighbourhood renewal areas and other disadvantaged communities in Swindon. This means that where there is demand, funded crèche or registered childminder provision is made available for all their activities.

### **2.7.2 Childcare Support for Further and Higher Education**

Support for students who need childcare is offered by both Swindon College and New College from the Learning Support Fund. Each college operates its own means tested criteria to support registered childcare costs.

### **2.7.3 Care 2 Learn**

Care 2 Learn funding is available to support the childcare costs of teenage parents who stay in education. In the region of thirty parents benefit from this funding at any one time, accessing education at Swindon College, New College and the Hillside Study Unit for teenage parents. Availability of childcare is not reported to be an issue with flexibility of care options to support parents having improved.

### **2.7.4 Availability of Childcare for Students**

Swindon College has an on site daycare facility and New College is located very close to the Imagine Co operative Childcare Nursery. Parents are able to use registered care in any location (including neighbouring authorities).

Availability of registered care has not been reported as a barrier to study except where there is a mismatch between funding not being available to cover the summer holiday period and daycare nurseries who operate on all year round contracts only.

### **2.7.5 Recommendations.**

- Continue to promote Care 2 Learn funding through the One Stop Shop and Contact Centre.

## **2.8 Consultation with Neighbouring Authorities**

Neighbouring authorities were consulted to consider the childcare needs of parents who live in one authority but may work and use childcare in another.

Swindon's neighbouring authorities are Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Two different steps were taken in this consultation:

1. Postcode analysis was carried out using the returns from the parent consultation to consider the extent to which parents from neighbouring authorities work and use childcare in Swindon.
2. Contact was made with each neighbouring authority to establish a channel of communication, both for the purpose of this report and also for any future correspondence regarding sufficiency.

As Swindon is a net importer of employees it was anticipated that there would be considerable cross border activity especially in the under fives full daycare market, both with childminders and nursery settings.

However, of the returns received, there were no identified instances of cross border activity in pre school, out of school or childminder settings. There were limited numbers of parents travelling into Swindon to work and using nursery services, the majority from Wiltshire.

<b>Neighbouring Authority</b>	<b>Number of parents using childcare in Swindon</b>
Gloucestershire	5
Oxfordshire	6
Reading	1
West Berks	1
Wiltshire	20

The distance parents are able or willing to travel into Swindon to access both childcare and employment is also limited.

<b>Distance travelled</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>As a % all full daycare returns</b>
0 - 10 miles:	11	5%
11 - 20 miles:	18	7%
21 - 30 miles:	1	0%
31 - 40 miles:	3	1%

Parents from neighbouring authorities accessing childcare in Swindon have expressed particular concern about transition to school as aligning Swindon based childcare with primary school induction procedures in neighbouring authorities can cause logistical problems. While the numbers of parents experiencing this is very low, the potential impact on each of these families is very high.

### **2.8.1 Recommendations**

- To establish protocols between Swindon and Wiltshire regarding the provision of information to parents using childcare in one authority and school services in the other particularly to support access to childcare during a child's transition to school.