

**Somerset County Council**

# **Childcare Sufficiency Assessment Executive Summary**

**Refreshed March 2010**



## **Purpose**

The Childcare Sufficiency Assessment meets a Local Authority Duty under the Childcare Act 2006, Section 11. Local Authorities must assess the sufficiency of childcare within their area, particularly with regards to the needs of working parents and parents accessing training. The first version of Somerset's Childcare Sufficiency Assessment was published on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008. This report must be updated at least annually and replaced completely every three years.

The Government's Ten Year Childcare Strategy, published in 2004, placed a greater emphasis on increasing take-up of childcare among low income families, as supporting parents into work is the most sustainable way to reduce child poverty. Early access to quality childcare is also recognised as improving the long-term outcomes and social skills of a child.

The Sufficiency report sets the scene for Somerset, assesses the supply of, and demand for childcare, compares the two, and outlines issues to be addressed.

A broad definition of childcare is used. Childcare is any form of care for a child or young person that is delivered by someone other than the parent or person with parental responsibility (for example, a foster carer). This includes informal childcare, such as care given by grandparents. Childcare does not include education or other supervised activities provided by a school during school hours or care given to a child by hospitals, children's homes, care homes, or young offenders' institutions. It also excludes care delivered in the family's residential home. It does include before and after school care, and holiday clubs.

## **Methodology**

A number of geographical measures have been used for data comparison, depending on what is available:

UK; England; Government Office South West region; Somerset Local Authority / County; 5 District / Borough Council areas; 8 Somerset County Council Local Service Areas; 71 Middle Super Output Areas (MSOA) and 327 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA).

The most up-to-date information available has been used wherever possible. Appendix 1 shows the Somerset 'spreadsheet of life' outlining childcare statistics by MSOA.

A telephone survey of 1000 parents (Appendix 2) was carried out in 2007, which has been supplemented by a number of focus groups with parents in 2008 and 2009 for a qualitative look at the views of parents (Appendices 5-7).

GIS mapping has been used to show the number of provisions of each type in Somerset using postcodes of each childcare setting provided by Somerset County Council's Family Information Service (SFIS).

## **Demography and economic profile**

Somerset has a population of 525,800 (Source: 'Key figures for People and Society: Population and Migration' [www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk) June 2008), of which approximately 87,000 (16.5%) are children aged 0-14.

The birth count declined for 6 years, but has levelled out over the past 8.

The key factor affecting take up of formal childcare is affordability. Somerset has a higher than average percentage of the workforce involved in semi-skilled work, and has a lower than regional and national average level of earnings. Somerset has a higher level of employment than the national or regional average, although more females are in part time employment than regionally or nationally. This will impact on demand and affordability of childcare in Somerset.

Residents working outside of Somerset typically earned considerably more than residents working within Somerset.

Males in full time employment earned on average 20% more than females in full time employment. This means female lone parents particularly are likely to find affordability of childcare challenging.

The uptake of the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit is lower in Somerset than the national average, but has increased in line with the national average year on year. Although awareness of tax credits is high, the uptake is very low (16.27% of eligible families). Work is ongoing to increase the uptake of the childcare element of the working tax credit through employers, schools, Children's Centres and childcare providers.

## **Nursery Education Funded (NEF) Places**

Somerset offers 15 hours per week of free, flexible nursery education for 38 weeks per year or the equivalent to all 3 and 4 year olds from the start of term following the child's third birthday until the child starts school.

The entitlement was extended from 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hours to 15 in 2007 as part of the Government's extended entitlement pilot.

Somerset also offers greater flexibility in access to the entitlement than most other Local Authorities. Parents can access NEF in 1-hour blocks for between 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> and 6 hours per day to better meet their needs.

The uptake of NEF, both in terms of the number of children claiming each year and the number of hours accessed NEF is very high. Approximately 98% of eligible children access NEF.

From September 2009, all Local Authorities offered 10 hours of NEF to 15% of the most financially disadvantaged 2-year olds. A customised support package was also offered to their families to help them find employment or access training. It is hoped that the scheme will be extended in future.

## **Childcare Demand**

The most common reason for using childcare was to enable parents to access work. The most frequently used form of childcare was grandparents, followed by sports / leisure activities (particularly for older children), followed by other relatives. After school clubs was the fourth most commonly used form of childcare, though the first that could always be categorised as formal childcare.

Informal childcare was used much more frequently than formal childcare. The survey found that usage of formal childcare in Somerset was lower than the national average. Lone parents are on average more dependent on informal care than couples. The difference in income, and therefore affordability, is the main factor.

Demand for childcare is highest for children aged 3-4 and drops as children get older. However, sport / leisure activities have a high demand, and are not always recognised as a form of childcare.

Affordability was the most commonly expressed barrier to accessing childcare. Awareness of tax credits was high, but take-up of the childcare element of the working tax credit in particular was low. Increasing the take-up of the childcare element of the working tax credit is critical, particular in the most disadvantaged areas of Somerset if formal childcare is to be affordable.

There is some demand for more care outside of 8-6pm in some areas, although in most cases, parents have arranged working patterns to minimise the need for childcare.

Children's Centres were complimented on the services offered and the support offered to parents in the 2009 focus groups of parents' views (Appendices 5 & 7). Parents felt that the services offered by Children's Centres should be better promoted. This will be addressed in the coming year with a high profile campaign.

## **Childcare Supply vs. Demand**

Somerset has sufficient childcare to meet demand across the county and each Local Service Area (currently). There are some localised shortages of childcare (childminders, full day care, NEF places), but in many of our more rural areas only childminders would be sustainable.

Where significant shortages have been identified, work has been planned to address the local need, whether by offering start-up grants for childminders in each area or a new building planned to deliver full day care. In all cases, the sustainability of any new provision has been considered.

The Regional Spatial Strategy allocations for all District areas dictate how many new houses are to be built by 2026. Somerset's allocation is 62,500 new dwellings, of which less than 5% have been built. If all of these dwellings are built and occupied, the population of Somerset will significantly increase and new childcare facilities will be required to meet demand. We are looking to secure developer contributions to fund these and sustainably meet future requirements.

For more information on local childcare or any other enquiries regarding childcare in Somerset, contact the Somerset Family information Service (SFIS) on 0845 345 9122 or email [sfis@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:sfis@somerset.gov.uk)

## **Key Findings**

**Sure Start Grants** – The Government's Sure Start programme has variety of programmes including Phase 3 Children's Centres, Extending and Developing early years provisions, Short Breaks for children with disabilities, the 0-7 Pilot to improve

transitions between pre-school and school, Every Child a Talker to improve communication skills, the Graduate Leader Fund and Buddying programmes which in different ways aim to improve the practice

**Location / Rurality** – Somerset is a rural county, and while much of the population is centred around market towns, there are some very sparsely populated areas. In rural areas, the catchment area for a pre-school may be very large and the child population is small. Groups are reliant on the majority of children in the area regularly accessing childcare. Childminders are more sustainable in rural area as their overheads are lower.

The other issue regarding location is where there is financial deprivation. In disadvantaged areas with relatively high levels of unemployment, families will neither need nor be able to afford childcare. Yet often children from disadvantaged areas would benefit most from accessing quality childcare. Addressing both these issues is an ongoing challenge, with Children's Centres and the extended NEF programme for the most disadvantaged 2-year olds and their families helping families achieve more.

**Affordability** – Childcare is recognised as good value by most people who use it. While childcare costs less than the majority of people interviewed thought, costs are a barrier for families on lower incomes, and lone parents particularly. For families on lower incomes, without the support of the childcare element of the working tax credit, childcare is unaffordable.

Promoting the childcare element of the working tax credit through a variety of routes to increase take-up is an ongoing target for Somerset County Council.

**Sustainability** – Effective market management means only quality providers and only sustainable provisions that do not adversely affect existing providers are able to access start-up funding. Business and Committee Support Officers are working with providers to improve business practises and to develop innovative solutions regarding long-term sustainability.

To manage the market, we must strike a balance between theoretical levels of childcare sufficiency and the real situation on the ground. There is no point in creating more childcare places where groups would not be sustainable. Successfully delivery of this strategy can only be achieved though closer links with the local communities and a better 'real world' understanding to provide local context. Regular meetings with the local service teams, including all Children's Centre managers have been established to feed back local knowledge.

**Quality** – A higher number of settings achieved 'Good' or 'Outstanding' Ofsted outcomes in Somerset than the national average. However, there were slightly more 'Inadequate' outcomes. Over the same period, the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) showed another improvement in both the percentage of children achieving over 78 across the FSP and a narrowing of the gap between the lowest achieving 20% and the median score.

Quality of provision is critical to improving outcomes for children and remains an ongoing priority. To help all providers improve the quality of their settings, a number of initiatives have been adopted, including buddying 'outstanding' providers with other settings to give practical advice on raising quality, the quality improvement framework which prioritises officer time to those settings that need most help, and directed in the right areas.

**Information from Schools** – Schools delivering childcare to children aged 3 and over, or before school, after school or holiday activities under the authority of the school governors do not need to register separately with Ofsted. The provision is inspected as part of the whole-school inspection. This has meant that Local Authorities are reliant on schools providing information on what care is being delivered by each school and to how many children in order to meet the sufficiency duty.

In Somerset, this information is being captured and updated by officers who work with schools. The programme is currently in its infancy, but will be used to inform the next refresh. Other methods of capturing information on childcare delivered by schools are also being investigated.

**The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)** – The EYFS was introduced on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 2008, and became a statutory requirement for all Ofsted-registered childcare provisions. The EYFS framework brought together standards for education, development and care for all providers caring for children up to the 31<sup>st</sup> August following the child's 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. For the first time, all childcare settings are assessed on the same criteria, whether they are schools, childminders or pre-schools.

**Childminders** – Childminders form a crucial part of the sufficiency of childcare in Somerset as they provide care not available elsewhere, such as evenings and overnight, and are more sustainable in rural areas than group provisions. In Somerset and nationally, the number of childminders has been in steady decline for the past 4 years. Targeted recruitment campaigns will be held in areas where there are shortages of childminders, and start up grants made available.

**Staff Qualifications** – The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) are introducing the Qualification Credit Framework (QCF) as a new way of recognising through the award of credit for units and qualifications. The QCF changes the way people can earn qualifications, and replaces existing qualifications. Under the QCF, learners can earn credits towards recognised qualifications at their own pace, anywhere in the country. The aim is to make a standardised flexible, inclusive system that meets the needs of employers and makes the qualification relevant to the learner's role. Old qualifications will still be valid, but new qualifications undertaken will use the QCF. The QCF will replace the existing NVQ system.

There is a large body of evidence that qualified staff = quality childcare. Practically, it is also more costly as more qualified staff expect to be paid more or move on. This leads to a catch-22 situation where more costly childcare means it is less widely affordable. Fewer parents able to pay for childcare means groups are less sustainable, which in turn leads to groups closing, resulting in insufficient childcare. If childcare becomes overly expensive the lack of affordable childcare will become a barrier to parents accessing work and thereby lifting children out of poverty.

**Promotion of Children's Centres** – The 2009 focus groups (Appendix 5) found that parents were very pleased with the services on offer in Children's Centres, but felt that Children's Centres and the activities on offer should be better promoted.

An extensive campaign has been planned to raise the profile of Children's Centres at a local level, and raise awareness of the Children's Centre brand countywide.

## **Progress from 2009/10**

**Sure Start Funding and Capital Asset Planning** – Since 2008/09, 224 childcare settings, including schools have benefited from capital funding by improving the outdoor environment, extending the size of the provision, improving the ICT available to children and a range of other ways. Another 17 provisions have had either sizeable refurbishments, extensions or new buildings installed to meet local need. This capital has been invested in line with the sufficiency duty (Section 6 of the Childcare Act 2006) using the Early Years Capital Asset Management Plan.

**Early Education Funded Places for 2-year olds** – Somerset rolled out the extended 2-year old funding for the 15% of the most disadvantaged children in Somerset from September 2009. As this is the first phase of the pilot, the number of eligible children was small – only 123 across Somerset. The eligibility criteria solely concerned financial disadvantage, where parents had to be in receipt of certain benefits and live in certain areas identified by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). All 123 places have been filled.

**Voice of the Child** – A training package and assessment framework has been developed to assess how well settings are listening to the views of children in all aspects of the delivery of childcare. Officers have been engaging with settings to introduce them to the principles involved. The Early Years Listen Strategy, called 'Listening to Children' is based on one operated in Bath and North East Somerset unitary authority, adapted for use in Somerset. The first assessments of settings will occur in April 2010.

**Replacement Database** – In September 2009, the ICHIS database provided by Opportunity Links since 2000 was replaced by the Capita One database in Somerset. The data stored on ICHIS was migrated onto One, and all providers were contacted to determine what information (if any) they wanted the public to be able to access through the internet or through a telephone enquiry to SFIS. The new database uploads content to the [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk) website so parents can search for childcare across Local Authority borders.

**Further Consultations** – Parents are best placed to assess whether the services being delivered meet their needs, and often have practical suggestion on how to improve service delivery. It is recognised that further and more in-depth consultation is required with children, young people and employers. This will be a significant thread in the new Childcare Sufficiency Assessment.

**Recruitment in the Childcare Sector** – In addition to maintaining our recruitment partnership with Job Centre Plus the recruitment team will continue with the production and circulation of the job vacancies bulletin. We will continue to review our on line presence, specifically the use of SCC web pages and Direct.gov (now hosting vacancies previously published by Job Centre Plus). We will also review the success of using the social networking site 'Twitter' to promote local vacancies.

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