Department
for Education

Childcare information for parents

Research report prepared by Ipsos MORI and the Family and Childcare Trust

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1.1 Background

This research was commissioned in August 2013 as a result of the government's commitment in More Affordable Childcare[1] to give parents the right information so that they can make informed choices about childcare.

The research adopted a three-stage approach:

- a rapid literature review which focused on what good quality information is and what information parents want on childcare;

- an assessment of existing information sources of childcare information against a framework developed as part of the literature review; and

- qualitative interviews with 33 parents to explore their experiences and views regarding information on childcare.

The research had a number of aims including:

- what does good quality information look like and what is the quality of existing data sources?

- how do parents access information on childcare, what information do they need and at what point?

- what role does information play in influencing and educating parents about key issues around childcare?

- how can existing information be improved and delivered so that parents have ready access to the key information they need to make decisions about childcare?

1.2 Key findings

Importance of good quality, timely information

- Individual circumstances and experiences influence parents' initial decision to use childcare. The availability of information about childcare is key in ensuring that parents have access to the right information to inform their subsequent decisions.

- While there is a lot of information out there for parents, the quality of this information is variable. Furthermore, the research found that the provision of information alone is often not enough to motivate action and care must be taken to

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[1] HM Government, More Affordable Childcare, 2013

ensure the right strategies are employed to ensure parents are encouraged to act on this information.

- Communicating at the right time is important. Parents identified common points in time when they were more likely to require information on planning childcare (pregnancy, prior to returning to work after parental leave and prior to the child becoming eligible for free early education). Information provided at these times would act as a useful prompt to inform thinking about childcare.

Choosing childcare

- Parents often do not take the full range of childcare options into consideration, finding themselves restricted by their lack of knowledge and understanding of the different childcare types or influenced by common misconceptions e.g. that not all early years providers (such as childminders) follow the same framework, the Early Years Foundation Stage[2].

- Parents of school-age children typically relied on their child's school as a key source of information regarding the availability of wrap-a-round care. When a school did not offer this information, parents were unclear where else to find details about local provision

- Information on provider type and affordability were the initial drivers behind decisions on childcare. Parents then typically drew up a 'short list' of potential providers that they could visit. Information sought to inform this shortlist included:

    - location;
    - cost;
    - opening hours and flexibility;
    - safety;
    - quality;
    - availability of places.

- Despite the wealth of information available to them, some parents felt they lacked information on a number of points including:

    - understanding when is the right time to use childcare (is my child ready?)
    - information about the different types of childcare available;
    - how to judge quality (knowing the right questions to ask providers);
    - information about flexible working;
    - prior warning about waiting lists;

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[2] [Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, Department for Education (March 2014)](#)

- information on the two year old free entitlement
- costs (including financial support available and 'hidden' costs such as providers charging for holidays or requiring a minimum number of sessions).
- information on the child's progress (what did age-appropriate developmental milestones look like?)

Reaching parents through a range of channels

- Parents generally valued and trusted 'word-of-mouth' sources to provide convenient, honest and up-to-date opinions and recommendations on providers. This included not only face-to-face recommendations by those known personally to parents, but also social networking sites which provided parental reviews on providers.

- The use of more informal sources was, however, more common amongst those on higher incomes and was often dependant on how strong social networks were. Therefore, parents who were new to an area, isolated from their community or who faced language barriers, may be less able to engage with informal sources of information.

- Some parents (typically those from more deprived backgrounds) mentioned accessing information about childcare through community based staff such as health visitors and children's centre staff. However, this kind of direct provision of information was not experienced by all.

- There were low levels of awareness of Family Information Services (FIS) amongst parents, although often this was underpinned by a lack of understanding that these services were provided by the local authority and that local authorities had a duty to provide parents with information about childcare.

- Some parents identified the need for a central site to help them sort through the vast array of digital information on childcare and help them to identify the key information they would need to make evidence based decisions about childcare. Parents suggested that this site should include information which would be helpful to parents nationally (such as financial help and support available and guidance on questions to ask providers) and also signpost to local sources of information (e.g provider details) so that parents could build a comprehensive understanding of provision in their area.

1.3 Recommendations

The research has identified a number of improvements which can help ensure that all parents have access to the necessary information they need when making decisions about childcare. The below recommendations are aimed at all organisations, both local and national, who have a role in engaging with and providing information to parents.

1. It is important that the quality of information provided by local and national organisations is high. Additionally, organisations who provide information for parents should carefully consider the most effective strategies to motivate parents to act on information, ensuring that the information they provide has maximum impact.

2. Improve information on childcare choices so that parents of both pre-school and school-age children are clear of the options available to them and understand the range of provider types. This should include steps locally and nationally to address common misconceptions (for example making it clear that all registered early years childcare providers follow the Early Years Foundation Stage) so that parents are able to make an informed choice about which type of childcare is best for them.

3. Improve signposting to sources of information about childcare (such as Family Information Services) through existing universal services (such as health visitors), including some targeted work with parents from more deprived areas who were generally less informed about childcare options.

4. Building on the importance parents place on word of mouth sources of information, explore the possibility of building on existing models of engaging informally with parents, such as the government funded Family and Childcare Parent Champion scheme which encourages parents to offer peer support to access high quality information advice in relation to childcare.

5. Explore the possibility of a central site which would bring together key information on childcare in an easily accessible digital format, allowing parents to access, or be clearly signposted to, the information they need to make decisions regarding childcare.

6. Carefully consider the channels of communication used and include both digital channels (e.g. websites, social media) and more traditional means of communication (e.g. advice from community professionals, printed advice in booklets distributed to parents), so as to ensure that opportunities to provide information about childcare are maximised and reach all groups of parents, including those who are more isolated, do not have access to the internet, or who have specific needs.

7. Explore the provision – including in digital format - of childcare information directly to parents at key points in time (pregnancy, post-birth, prior to returning to work after parental leave and prior to the child becoming eligible for free early education entitlement) to help inform parents decisions around childcare and prompt them to take action.

2 Background and methodology

2.1 Background

Evidence is growing that high quality childcare has a positive impact on child development and later outcomes[3]. Consequently, it is vital that parents are able to access accurate and reliable information to enable them to choose high quality childcare that best suits their needs. This research was commissioned in August 2013 as a result of government's commitment made in 'More affordable childcare' to give parents the right information so they can make informed choices about childcare:

'Information is currently held in different places, which parents can find hard to navigate and understand. We will commission an independent organisation to look at how to improve the way information is presented, working directly with parents.' [4]

2.2 Objectives

The research aimed to provide evidence on what good information sources on childcare provision look like and what specific information about childcare parents need to make this important decision.

Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following key research questions:

- What does good quality information look like and what is the quality of existing data sources?

- How do parents access information about childcare, what information do they need and at what point?

- What role does information play in influencing and educating parents about key issues such as understanding their entitlement to government funded early education and other support with childcare costs?

- How can existing sources of information be improved and delivered so that parents have ready access to the key information they need to make decisions about childcare.

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[3] Evidence for this can be found in the Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) research programme. EPPSE is a large scale longitudinal programme of work being conducted by the Institute of Education. Further details about the programme of work, and the findings, can be found at IoE's website: http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/153.html

[4] More Affordable Childcare, Department for Education, July 2013
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/more-affordable-childcare

2.3 Methodology

To answer the objectives of this study, we adopted a three-stage approach:

- Firstly, we conducted a rapid literature review which focused primarily on what good quality information is but also covered what information parents want about childcare. In total, 50 articles, papers and websites were included as part of this review. The information helped to contextualise findings derived from the primary research but also underpinned the development of a framework against which existing sources of childcare information could be assessed;

- The next element of the research involved an assessment of existing information sources of childcare information against this same framework. Information provided by 16 organisations – covering government, voluntary organisations and private companies as well as a range of channels (online, telephone and written) – were included in this part of the research. The information was gathered over the telephone and by examining published information that was produced by the organisations both on their website and/or in pamphlets. To complement the findings, and to ensure that we covered a wide range of sources as part of this assessment, we also conducted six telephone depth interviews with stakeholders (such as those working for the Family Information Service, Children's Centres or in roles in which they have to engage regularly with parents) to help gain a broader overview as to the kinds of information their organisation provides to parents, and what they think is available more generally;

- Finally, we conducted primary qualitative research with a small sample of parents (33 in total) comprising 6 mini-group discussions and 16 in-depth interviews. Parents had previously taken part in the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents and had agreed to be re-contacted.

For the qualitative research, each of the six mini-groups comprised between three and six parents, with a total of 33 parents engaged overall. Mindful of the fact that group discussions tend to work most effectively when the participants have some shared views and experiences with the others present, the groups were divided on the basis of income:

Three of the mini-groups included participants on lower incomes (i.e. those earning under £25,000 per annum) while the remaining three included parents on mid to high incomes (i.e. those earning over £25,000 per annum). All of the parents in the mini-groups were using childcare and were either working or had a working partner within the household. The groups contained a mixture of parents of pre-school children (0- to 4-year-olds) and school age children (5- to 12-year-olds).

We also conducted in-depth interviews in order to capture the views of non-users of childcare and to enable us to engage with more vulnerable groups. Depth interviews were conducted in-home to help set the participant at ease and lasted up to an hour in length. The 16 interviews were conducted with a range of parents – full details are

included in Appendix 1. It should be noted that these groups are not representative of the general population and that findings are based on the perceptions of a small sample of parents.

Ipsos MORI partnered with the Families and Childcare Trust (FCT) who supported Ipsos MORI with the rapid literature review and led on the assessment of existing information sources.

2.4 Definition of childcare and information on childcare

For the purpose of this research, under the term childcare we include formal provision for pre-school children (for example day nurseries, pre-schools or childminders) as well as childcare for school-age children (breakfast clubs, after school clubs, childminders, holiday clubs or other out-of-school clubs or activities).

Information about childcare includes the information parents need to help with their childcare choice. This includes specific information about local childcare providers as well as information about childcare more generally, including themes such as advantages and disadvantages of childcare and different types of provision, help with childcare costs, government funded early education and flexible working for parents. Information also includes anything parents would need to know once they are using a provider, such as reassurance that their child is happy and is progressing.

2.5 Structure of the report

The report is primarily based on evidence from the qualitative research with parents but also includes findings from the literature review and the assessment of information sources.

- Chapter three explores the reasons why parents use childcare, contextual information which helps explain why information about childcare is so important.

- Chapter four maps the type of childcare information available to parents but also highlights how, in light of this, some parents still have unmet information needs.

- Chapter five examines the range of channels through which information is provided to parents. It also considers the times when this information is most needed.

2.6 Presentation and interpretation of the data

This report presents the qualitative findings from interviews with a small sample of parents. The findings provide a useful insight into parent's views and experiences in accessing childcare information. However, it is important to note that findings are not representative of the general population and are based on the perceptions of a small sample of parents.

Throughout the report, use is made of verbatim comments from participants. Where this is the case, it is important to remember that the views expressed do not always represent the views of the group as a whole, although in each case the verbatim is representative of, at least, a small number of participants.

3   Why parents use childcare

This chapter aims to provide an understanding of the context, exploring why parents use childcare which highlights the importance of high quality information about childcare options in helping families to decide which provision is right for them.

There are a multitude of reasons why parents decide to use formal childcare; many are intertwined. These reasons can broadly be divided into two categories: providing benefits to the parent or the wider family; and, providing benefits to the child. In addition there is evidence to suggest that government policy – in the form of the funded early education place for two-, three- and four-year olds – acts as both a prompt for parents to take up childcare (it is considered the norm to do so) and as a financial incentive (making childcare more affordable).

The full range of drivers for taking up childcare are explored in more detail below.

3.1 Benefits to the parent and the wider family

Parents interviewed as part of this research felt that wishing to return to or take-up employment was a key driver in parents' decisions to use formal childcare. For some, this was positioned as less of a choice; the financial imperative was such that they felt that they had little option but to work. Indeed, some parents mentioned that their return to work had been planned even before they went on maternity leave.

I can't afford not to go to work because I've got to pay the bills. One person in our house can't pay all our bills so I have no choice but to go out to work.

Leicester, mother, childcare user, working household, high income

A return to work was not viewed solely in terms of financial gain. Many of the parents we spoke to told us that they valued the social aspect of employment and being able to re-establish an identity outside of that of a parent. Others, especially those on higher incomes, also discussed not wishing to stall their career; a lengthy break in order to raise children was seen as incompatible with progressing swiftly at work. Similarly, some parents decided to use childcare as a means of enabling them to study – typically to facilitate a change in career which, in turn, would improve their employment prospects and chances of progression.

Using formal childcare was also seen as removing burdens on other family members. Participants told us that they felt guilty in relying on grandparents to provide care for their children; as they aged, they recognised that they were less able to keep up with the demands of looking after children (particularly younger ones) and so finding formal care was a means of circumventing this. Formal care was typically viewed as a more stable arrangement than relying on friends or family who could only help out when they were able rather than being able to provide set hours.

For some parents, formal childcare allowed them time to do other activities which, otherwise, they may struggle to do. For some, this amounted to getting the housework done while others spoke of using the time to provide care to their other, typically younger, children, or to study or look for work.

3.2 Benefits to the child

Parents also spoke at length about the benefits that using formal childcare brought their child. For younger children, the formal childcare environment (for example attending a nursery or childminder) was considered a helpful means of encouraging their children to socialise with others of a similar age in a way that they would not be able to do at home. Exploring this in more detail, parents also discussed that this kind of childcare helped their children to become more independent and enabled them to learn the importance of sharing and how to play with others.

I think they get another aspect of life really, just something different to what they are used to.

Leicester, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

You want your little one to develop social skills at a very young age

London, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

These social benefits were not, however, just restricted to younger children. Parents of school age children also mentioned that their children used formal childcare – typically breakfast or after-school clubs – as a means of ensuring that their child was able to spend more time with their friends. Indeed, in many cases their children had requested that they make use of such provision for this very reason.

In addition to the perceived social benefits, parents felt that childcare could bring a great number of educational benefits for the child. For parents of younger children, usually those aged around three years of age, nurseries in particular were seen as a helpful way of getting their children school-ready; children were taught how to hold a pencil, how to write their name, and the ability to recognise letters and numbers – all skills that parents thought would help ensure a smooth transition to the reception class at school.

Parents of older children also recognised the educational advantages of wraparound childcare, in providing a quiet space in which their children could get on with their homework. Further, the activities offered by after school clubs were seen as stimulating, and a chance for their child to try things that may not be a part of the core curriculum.

They have planned activities for everyone. That is one benefit and they also have arts stuff as well. They have games, which basically reinforces the social skills the children have. Makes them more sociable and more active as well because they run around and play games.

3.3 Free early education

A further influence on parents' decision to use formal childcare was the government's universal offer of free early education for all three and four year olds. Parents saw the universal free early education policy as a key opportunity for them to consider using childcare if they were not already doing so. This policy helped all parents – even those out of work – believe that formal childcare was affordable to them and, keen to capitalise on the benefits, parents interpreted their eligibility for this scheme as a prompt to find a place for their child.

It should be noted that parents eligible to claim for their two year old children did not associate the same motivational factors with the two year old targeted offer as they did with the universal offer for three and four year olds. Reasons given for this centred around the early education element of the offer – something which some parents did not consider appropriate for 2 year olds.   It should be noted, however, that this research was conducted prior to the extension of the two year old offer (in September 2014) and at a time when local areas were in the early stages of promoting the offer to parents. Therefore, details of the two year old offer, including fully understanding the benefits, purpose and age-appropriate care on offer, were unlikely to be common knowledge amongst parents at the time of interview.

4 Mapping the childcare information available for parents

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the variety of information that parents need in order to make their childcare choices. Drawing on evidence from the literature review and the assessment of information, the chapter begins by highlighting some key principles for communicating effectively before considering the range of information that is available for parents. As we explore later in the chapter, despite the variety of information on offer to parents, key messages are not being communicated effectively to some groups of parents meaning that certain aspects of their information needs regarding childcare remain unmet.

4.1 Exploring the quality and variety of information available to parents

When it comes to understanding what makes good information, the Behavioural Insights Team (2012) have put forward seven principles to help organisations understand how to communicate effectively and ensure that those messages have an impact on recipients[5] – all of which are worth bearing in mind when considering the kinds of childcare information that is available to parents.

The seven principles include:

- Make it easy. Make the information as straightforward as possible so that people are able to undertake the desired actions.

- Highlight key messages. Bring people's attention to important information or actions required of them.

- Use personal language. Personalise language so that people understand why a message or process is relevant to them.

- Prompt honesty at key moments. For example, when filling in forms or answering questions.

- Tell people what others are doing. Highlight the positive behaviour of others and reflect on ways of encouraging action.

- Reward desired behaviour. Actively incentivise or reward behaviour that saves time or money.

- Highlight the risk and impact of inertia. Be explicit about the consequences of inaction.

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[5] Behavioural Insights Team, Cabinet Office, *Behavioural Insights to reduce fraud, error and debt,* 2012

This research has shown that there is considerable material available for parents covering a range of topics and encompassing an array of different sources, all of which have different remits, cover different areas, exist in a range of mediums and possess their own strengths and weaknesses. In particular, childcare information varies according to:

- Its medium: printed information, online, social media, email, face-to-face, advertisements.

- Its level of engagement with the parent: information, an answer to a specific query or whether it involves a more active process of brokerage or advocacy.

- The extent of its local data: information on childcare providers, for instance, requires local content.

The chart below is taken from the assessment of existing information sources that was carried out as part of this research. It provides an insight into the different types of information on childcare that is available to parents[6].

Table 1: Type of information on childcare

Type of information on childcare	Examples
Word-of-mouth, face-to-face professional advise	Advice from a health visitor or from a Family Information Service worker at an event
Formalised peer-to-peer support	Parent champion schemes
Telephone or face-to-face advice	Tax credit helpline
	Telephone advice from the Family Information Service
	Jobcentre Plus
Word-of-mouth advocacy	Childcare brokerage from the Family Information Service
	Advocacy from a Citizens Advice Bureau
Email advice	Daycare Trust information line
	Family Information service email enquiry
Social media advice from an official source	Facebook or Twitter enquiry directed at the Family Information Service

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[6] The assessment of information was carried out in late 2013, therefore some of the examples given in the table may now be out of date – for example direct.gov has now been superseded by Gov.uk.

Type of information on childcare	Examples
Message board advice	Netmums or Mumsnet message boards
	Childcare.co.uk
Printed advice – local	Leaflets from the Family Information Service
Printed advice – provider generated	Enrolment packs from nurseries and after-school clubs
Printed advice – national	NHS Birth to Five Book
	Family and Childcare Trust leaflets
	Money Advice Service
Online – official central government sources	Direct.Gov
	Ofsted
	HMRC
	Money Advice Service
Online – official local government and other local sources	Family Information Service webpages
	Family Information Service apps
	School websites in relation to wraparound and holiday childcare provision
Online – third sector	Gingerbread
	Family and Childcare Trust
	Families in Foundation Years
	Contact a Family
Online – providers	Childcare.co.uk
	Provider advertisements or advice
	School and provider websites

The assessment of information found that there is, indeed, a vast array of information about childcare on offer to parents, available through a variety of mediums. It also found that existing information varies in both quality and in its ability to target and reach the right people. Such a wealth of information sources highlights the difficulty parents face when seeking information to inform their initial decision to use childcare and if so, which provider they should select. The following section outlines the key information parents

need when making these important decisions. The findings draw heavily on the qualitative interviews with parents.

4.2   Making the decision to use childcare; what information do parents need and when

When making an initial decision about whether to use childcare, parents needed to know two key things: what kind of childcare provision was available in their local area; and, could they afford it?

In the first instance, parents wanted to know the range of provision available so they could pick the type that best suited their needs and other commitments. Parents often expressed a strong preference for a particular type of childcare and this was often influenced by their understanding and perceptions of quality and suitability. Nurseries, for example, were highlighted by some parents as providing both educational and social benefits for the child; other parents felt that childminders would offer greater flexibility, enabling them to combine work and childcare more easily. However, the overriding message from parents was that they wanted to be aware of the full range of provision in their area prior to making a choice.

Secondly, when deciding whether or not to use childcare, having ready access to financial information was key. Parents' ability to afford the childcare they wanted was often described as being the deal-breaker in the decision to use childcare. Indeed, while parents knew that there were other important factors to consider in addition to cost – such as the quality of available childcare places – few would explore these factors in more detail until they were certain it was an affordable option for them.

You shouldn't always bring in the cost involved in childcare but it has to be taken into account when you're deciding whether you're going to go back to work and is it worth you going back to work…what's the point in going and looking and loving it if it's just not in your budget?

Leicester, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

Once these initial questions about type and affordability of childcare had been explored then parents were able to move onto the more difficult decision of choosing which specific provider they should select for their child. The key information required to carry out this process is highlighted below.

4.3   Choosing a provider

In deciding which childcare provider is right for their child, parents considered several key pieces of information: costs; opening hours (and whether there was any flexibility around these); safety; quality; and availability of places. Information on each of these areas was

typically gleaned online – from providers' own websites for instance, but local authority websites and other formal sources of information (like Ofsted reports) were all important, alongside word-of-mouth recommendations.

Location

Location was a factor that could rule a childcare place in or out of the running for parents – something that was endorsed by the stakeholders we engaged with. They needed places that were convenient to both their home and their place of work and, ideally, situated away from busy main road for reasons of safety and in the hope of securing a relatively congestion-free journey.

Location is a massive one…we discounted nurseries and there wasn't anything wrong with them but the journey would've been horrific.

Leicester, mother, childcare user, working household, high income

Costs

In making the initial decision to use childcare, parents needed to know roughly how much childcare would cost and if any support is available to reduce this cost. However, when it came to choosing a specific provider, parents needed accurate information to allow them to budget. This was particularly true for those on a low income, who had limited slack in their household finances.

Opening hours and flexibility

Clarity regarding the opening hours of a provider and the times allocated for drop-offs and pick-ups (and how much flexibility there was around these times) was important for parents, particularly those in work. Stakeholders also suggested that this information was essential for parents of school age children as they often have multiple locations they need to pick-up from and drop-off to and, further, may be in need of wraparound care for the hours not covered by the school day.

Hours they're open. Yes, that's most important, the hours, and if they're open 52 weeks in the year.

London, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

Safety

When considering whether or not a certain provider would assure the safety of their child, parents took two main things into consideration. Firstly, whether or not the setting is physically safe for the child (i.e. not on a main road, with well-maintained play equipment) and, secondly, broader safeguarding issues (i.e. who is able to access the building, are

staff DBS-checked[7]). Stakeholders commented that, in recent years, safeguarding has assumed more importance for parents as their level of awareness as to what they should be looking for here has increased.

Things like safety come up there as number one...Interestingly, we've seen more references to when [parents] say 'safe' it isn't about a child falling off a climbing frame, running out of the front door across the M4 motorway, it's actually more focused these days...it's been about sexual abuse and exploitation.

Stakeholder

Are the staff CRB checked? I want to know who is looking after my child, because some of them do slip through the net.

London, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

Quality

When choosing a specific provider parents also wanted to be convinced that it would offer the quality of care that they expected. Of course, quality meant different things to different parents and so they made an assessment about this in a range of ways. Some parents turned to Ofsted ratings, suggesting that these provided an at-a-glance indication as to which providers would provide a good standard of care and education.

I look up the Ofsted report. If it's good, it's an immediate cross. If it's outstanding, it goes onto my shortlist.

London, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

For other parents, particularly those whose children had special educational needs, other considerations had to be made before they could conclude whether or not the provider was of the standard they expected. For instance, some looked for staff ratios (particularly those parents whose children required medicine being administered) while others wanted details as to the extent to which the staff were medically trained. Over and above this, parents also considered: staff qualifications; the kind of food provided at mealtimes; the balance between indoor and outdoor space (and what this space was like); the types and range of activities on offer; the level of cleanliness; how the staff interacted with children; how much time was spent on educational activities; and, how (and how often) the provider communicated with the parents.

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[7] The DBS refers to the Disclosure and Barring Service

Making the final decision

On considering all of these factors, participants tended to compile a shortlist of places that met their criteria – only making a final decision on which one to select after visiting them personally. This enabled them to corroborate the information they had found online or been given via word-of-mouth sources and, crucially, meant they could make a final subjective assessment of what the provider was like and whether they thought it would suit their child. Parents admitted that, during this visit, the evidence they had gathered assumed secondary importance when set against their gut feeling and it was on this basis that they made their decision about which provider to use.

If you're leaving your most precious thing are you going to be guided by a list that you've printed off the internet or your real gut feeling when you go in there?

Stockport, mother, childcare user, working household, high income

4.4   Unmet information needs

As the previous section highlights, there is a vast array of information that parents need to help them with make decisions regarding childcare including cost, availability of places, financial assistance with fees and information on quality.

However, one of the overriding themes from the qualitative research we conducted with parents was that, in spite of the amount of information available, they still have unmet needs with regard to accessing the right information on childcare. This was endorsed by the literature review which suggested that, in the context of public services, while people generally welcome choice, there are a minority of people who – for a variety of reasons – are excluded from the benefits this can bring often because they lack the confidence, the information, or the advice they need to make the most of them. What is more, the factors on which people make choices tend to go beyond those originally imagined by policy makers. For example, in relation to childcare, while educational standards matter to parents, so too does behaviour, atmosphere and other key factors. The information offered to parents, however, does not recognise all of these concerns.[8]

In light of this, it is useful to refer to data from the 2012/13 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents[9] which shows us how they feel about the level of information about childcare in their local area. As shown in the table below, two in five (39%) of parents think there is too little information on childcare available in their local area, with a further

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[8] Boyle, The barriers to choice review: How are people using choice in public services? Cabinet Office, 2013

[9] Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents: 2012-2013, Department for Education, January 2014, SFR 06/2014

one in seven (16%) stating that they are not sure. Only 2% of parents thought there was too much information.

Table 2 Parents views on the level of information about childcare in their local area

Level of information	2004 %	2007 %	2008 %	2009 %	2010 %	2011 %	2012 %
Base: all families	(7,797)	(7,136)	(7,074)	(6,708)	(6,722)	(6,359)	(6,393)
About right	38	43	43	45	45	44	43
Too much	1	1	2	1	1	2	2
Too little	38	35	37	38	38	38	39
Not sure or don't know	23	21	19	16	16	16	16

Source: Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (2012/13)

This shows that, regardless of the extensive information available, it is not necessarily getting to all parents or providing them with the information they need. These issues are unpicked throughout the remainder of this chapter.

When parents spoke about their unmet needs they usually spoke about them in terms of content that was lacking, rather than there being issues with the way in which it was provided to them. However, the literature suggests that there are also certain groups of parents that are less likely to be able to access childcare information; both issues are explored below.

Issues with content

While most parents were clear on whether or not they planned to use childcare (for whatever reason, as outlined in chapter 3) there were those who wanted reassurance that using childcare was right for both them and their child. This concern tended to be limited to parents of children under two years' of age, who were unsure as to whether childcare was appropriate for those so young. The ramifications of this were that parents – often those on low incomes – delayed their decision to return to work in spite of the financial difficulties this caused.

You're thinking of it [childcare] but it is not something you want to do because you feel guilty leaving them so you keep thinking 'I'll do that next week'.

Stockport, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

Building on this, parents also felt that there was a lack of accessible information about the age at which a child should go into childcare. Questions here focused on the developmental stages that a child goes through and at what point early education should

start. Having this information, parents felt, would help them decide both whether to take up childcare and, if so, what sort.

Your kids are your life and you constantly worry about them and you constantly want the best for them and you don't know if going to nursery or not is the best.

Newcastle, mother, non-user of childcare, non-working household

Parents' need for information about their child's development didn't stop at the point they selected a childcare provider. Once in childcare, parents also spoke about their desire to be able to access information that endorsed their decision. This is provided for by the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (EYFS) which states that "…parents and/or carers should be kept up-to-date with their child's progress and development...". Nonetheless, some parents, perhaps unaware of the requirements in the EYFS, felt it would be useful to have access to information on how their child is progressing and whether their child met with expected developmental milestones.

I could do with something like 'this is what your child should be doing at this stage….what would put parents' minds at ease because they can see that their child is doing everything on the list.

Newcastle, mother, childcare user, non-working household

There were also key pieces of information that parents thought they had investigated, only to discover when taking up a childcare place that they did not have all the necessary information. This was particularly the case when it came to costs; while parents had information about rates, the 'true' cost of childcare remained hidden to them until they were using it. For instance, some parents noted that they were unaware of provider imposed conditions such as: placing their child in half day time blocks; covering bank holidays as well as their own family holidays; and paying penalties for dropping-off or picking-up late.

I think it is always quite a shock when you send your kids when they're tiny to childcare, that actually if you go on holiday you still pay…you pay for that place whether you're there or not.

London, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

More generally, parents found it difficult to find out information about the government funded early education for two year olds. On the one hand, this is perhaps not surprising given that the policy was still fairly new at the time of interview and is not universally available. However, some parents did report approaching trusted and what they considered to be formal sources of information for details of this scheme – including approaching their local authority – only to be turned away.

I rang the Civic Centre and asked them 'how do I apply or the two year old funding' and they didn't have a clue, they were like 'ok I think you've just got to ring your nursery' so I rang the nursery and I eventually got to the bottom of it.

Mother, non-user of childcare, non-working household

Our literature review showed that the main gap in consumer education relates to financial sources of support for childcare. Research by the Daycare Trust[10] found that parents did not know how to complain if nurseries requested top-up fees or what to do if the offer of a free place was made contingent on the purchase of additional hours. Furthermore, it also reported that the main reason for not taking up the government funded early education place was lack of awareness – cited by a third (33%) of non-users[11].

The literature also suggested that parents were short of information regarding wraparound and holiday care; something that was certainly endorsed by the parents of school age children that we engaged with as part of this research. Research by the Family and Parenting Institute/Daycare Trust[12] found that cultural, sporting and educational activities can serve as de facto childcare – particularly during the summer holidays when parents' needs for care are at their most acute.

Parents also wanted information that would help empower them – particularly if they were choosing a childcare provider for the first time. In short, what they wanted was advice about what questions to ask providers, or what to look out for when making a visit, in order that they could better assess quality.

There's nothing out there at the moment that helps you with what questions to ask when you go and visit somewhere. This would be helpful and would alleviate your nerves about leaving your child somewhere.

Leicester, mother, childcare user, working household, high income

It was all new – I didn't know what I was looking for or what to ask.

Stockport, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

This was endorsed by stakeholders who suggested that, for less confident parents or those who are more vulnerable or from deprived backgrounds, this kind of advice could help them make better childcare choices.

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[10] Daycare Trust for Which? Magazine (draft, unpublished) *Parents as consumer citizens in the childcare market*, 2013

[11] Ipsos MORI for DfE, *Exploring the flexibility of the free entitlement to early education – research among parents, RR217, 2012*

[12] Daycare Trust and the Family and Parenting Institute, *Commission on Childcare: Joint response from the Daycare Trust and the Family and Parenting Institute,* 2012

Finally, the literature review highlighted that some parents have specific requirements which they can find difficult to investigate[13]. For instance, some parents need a provider who can accommodate shift work, or those which have a particular cultural ethos such as, for Muslim parents, providing halal food. Parents of disabled children also have specific and tailored requirements, for instance, the need for medically trained staff and lower staff:child ratios. Indeed, other research showed that parents of disabled children felt that finding childcare information was difficult for them and reported that, even in the setting of a support group, parents were reluctant to provide information about childcare as they felt a need to remain neutral and wished to avoid making recommendations.[14]

Other barriers faced by parents

We also wanted to investigate whether BME parents, and particularly those who had English as a second language, might face specific issues when it came to accessing the information they needed to find a childcare provider. Based on the interviews we conducted it should be pointed out that while this was not raised explicitly, in a couple of instances we spoke to the father of the child instead of the mother, as they were not able to speak English thus raising the possibility that, without information being provided in community languages, some families will be reliant on gate-keepers through which they receive their information.

This is held up by analysis of the childcare and early years survey[15] which highlights clear demographic patterns to childcare receipt. To highlight, Black African, Pakistani and BME parents are less likely to know about sources of financial support for childcare. This may be a consequence of lower rates of female labour market participation or less fluency in English. Similarly, children's ethnic backgrounds were associated with the likelihood of them receiving childcare, with children from white British backgrounds being more likely to receive childcare than children from Asian backgrounds.

Further, analysis of the data shows that there is less penetration of, and use of, childcare information among poorer families. For example, families with an annual income of over £45,000 per year were most likely to access information about childcare through word-of-mouth sources. However, this liklihoood decreased as the family's income reduced.

A final issue here that emerged from the qualitative research was that lone parents were more likely to be without strong social networks, often having moved once their relationship had broken down. Given the importance of word-of-mouth information (as highlighted in the following chapter) this could leave this group cut off from useful sources of trusted information.

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[13] Ipsos MORI for PA Consulting, Scoping Research for a Childcare Information Centre, 2009
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents: 2012-2013, Department for Education, January 2014, SFR 06/2014

Therefore, as this chapter has demonstrated, while there is a wealth of information about childcare available, some parents still report that they have unmet needs, with certain groups of parents – typically those that are more vulnerable – being more likely to experience these.

5 Providing childcare information to parents

While the previous chapters have focused on information content, exploring what parents need to know in order to make the decision about whether to take up childcare or not and, if so, what type of provider to select, this section of the report explores the various channels through which parents receive or seek out this information, and their views on each.

5.1 Social networking sites

Parents, typically those on a higher income, spoke at length about the importance of social networking sites, like Mumsnet or Netmums, when it came to finding out information about childcare. As discussed in section 5.4 below, these sites helped parents to gather recommendations as well as negative reviews on local provision from parents in a similar situation to them. Indeed, parents tended to take more notice of the negative reviews on these sites, enabling them to rule out certain providers, thereby concentrating their focus on a select few providers. While this information came from parents who were not personally known to them that does not mean that it was any less trusted; parents did not imagine that people would have a reason to falsify information on these sites and so took it at face value.

I actually find Mumsnet is really good because you get a broad range of opinions and you can kind of filter out what information you need. I mean, to me, in a way it's a bit like having a very large network and asking everyone in your network what they think. You're not going to agree with all of them but you will get a good idea and if there are negatives you'll probably listen a little bit better and take things on balance.

London, mother, childcare user, working household, high income

That these sources were used mainly by those on a higher income corroborates findings from the literature review which suggests that, while the gap is narrowing, a digital divide remains with an important minority of parents who struggle to access and use the internet[16]. Indeed, survey research shows that while internet access is now available to 84% of the adult population – and among young people it is much higher (97% of 15-34 year olds can access the internet somewhere) – only seven in ten (68%) of those in social grade DE can do so[17]. Digital exclusion, while lessening, is still an issue for some parents.

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[16] Ipsos MORI for PA Consulting, Scoping Research for a Childcare Information Centre, 2009

[17] Ipsos MORI tech tracker Q4 2013 – full results can be found here: https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/publications/1630/Ipsos-MediaCT-Tech-Tracker-Q4-2013.aspx

5.2 Information from childcare providers

Children's Centres

Parents of younger children spoke of receiving information about childcare from staff working at Children's Centres that they used; the 2012/13 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents found that this source was listed by one in ten (10%) parents[18.] From the qualitative research this source of information was most commonly mentioned by parents in receipt of a low household income and who used their local Children's Centre more regularly. What they appreciated about this source of information was that it was convenient for them and enabled them to access other information over and above that pertaining to childcare (for instance, they also used Children's Centres to get healthcare information).

Schools

Parents of school aged children mentioned that the school their child attended was typically proactive in providing them with information about childcare. This is endorsed by the 202/13 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents which found that, after word-of-mouth, a third (32%) of all parents have accessed information through this source[19].

For parents, one of the main advantages of receiving information about childcare through schools was its convenience; their daily contact with schools meant that finding out about wider provision, such as breakfast and after school clubs, was easy. Indeed, parents mentioned that often this information was provided, with the child acting as a messenger, without them even needing to ask for it and at times when it was most relevant, for example, coming up to holidays.

I find that, coming up to half terms, we'll often get in the book bags little flyers for independent clubs elsewhere.

London, mother, childcare user, working household, high income

From the school you will get a letter through the book bag saying this after school club is happening or we've started up a breakfast club.

Leicester, mother, childcare user, working household, low income.

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[18] Childcare and Early years Survey of Parents: 2012-2013, Department for Education, January 2014, SFR 06/2014

[19] *Ibid.*

The Family Information Service

Results from the 2012/13 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents show that, in total, one in twenty (5%) parents have used their local Family Information Service or local authority in the past year to obtain information on childcare[20]. The qualitative research showed that this low level of use was, in part, due to the perceived limits placed on the information received in this way; while parents mentioned that it was helpful to be able to access a list of local childcare providers online, that it did not also provide information as to their availability could be a source of frustration to them.

They had a very long list but as soon as you called them up none of them were taking children….around where I am a lot of the childminders will have the same children until they go to school and so they won't have spaces for three years so it's kind of useless to have them on the list. There should be an active list of people who are accepting other children.

London, mother, childcare user, working household, high income

Further, there was very low awareness of the Family Information Service by name; the parents we spoke to did not talk of getting their information from this source, rather they simply spoke about how they accessed such lists from the Council. This is in line with the findings from the 2012/13 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents which highlights that just three in ten (31%) parents are aware of this service[21].

Underpinning this was a lack of understanding as to why a local authority would provide this information; most parents did not see a role for them in this regard.

I wouldn't even think to ring my local council and say 'what sort of after school clubs?' I'm more likely to ring the local after school clubs and playgroups and say 'have you got anything on through the summer holiday?' I wouldn't think to ring the council.

Leicester, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

5.3   Information from health visitors and health professionals

One in 12 parents (8%) have received information about childcare from a health visitor or their doctor's surgery in the past year[22] and we know from the qualitative work conducted that this tends to be concentrated among parents of younger children. Indeed, parents

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[20] Childcare and Early Years Survey of parents: 2012-2013, Department for Education, January 2014, SFR 06/2014
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*

mentioned how very often it was the health visitor who first prompted them to think about childcare.

We'd have the baby and then the health visitor came round and gave my wife some information and said there's a baby club over the local school. And so she went down to that and that was one of the best things she ever did. That came from the health visitor – we wouldn't have known about that.

Leicester, father, childcare user, working household, high income

However, parents who used health visitors as a source of information did also discuss the disadvantages with this, for example the constraints placed on the health visitor's time means that issues pertaining to their child's health and wellbeing are typically the priority discussion areas, rather than childcare . Subsequently, the amount of information on childcare that parents received from this source was usually limited.

5.4 Word-of-mouth sources

Word-of-mouth was a key source of information and, very often, was the starting point for parents as they considered which provider would meet their needs. Parents would ask others – those they met at playgroups, or knew from antenatal classes – which providers they would recommend and their feedback would form the start of a rudimentary shortlist which the parent would investigate themselves further.

You go to a playgroup, for instance, and you're talking to other mothers and they will tell you or give you their opinion on which nurseries they recommend and which ones they don't, and so it's through word-of-mouth and then you hear, okay, this nursery sounds like a good one and then you go beyond that and do your own research.

London, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

The importance of face-to-face information is highlighted in the 2012/13 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents[23] which found that parents are most likely to receive information about childcare through word-of-mouth sources (40%). Similarly, friends or relatives (61%) or other parents (43%) were the most commonly used sources when it came to finding out about learning and play activities. Furthermore, face-to-face information sources are not only a prevalent sources of information, they are also considered to be useful – with nine in ten (90%) parents reporting they find this source helpful.

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[23] Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents: 2012-2013, Department for Education, January 2014, SFR 06/2014

The main benefits of this type of this information were that it was easily accessible and, crucially, trusted; it came from people in a similar situation to them and with no agenda to push therefore parents could not see any reason why they should not take it at face value.

I think if you speak to your friends as well before you make any decisions…that's an advantage because they will know more about it than you do, and you are going to trust your friends more than the government.

Leicester, mother, childcare user, working household, low income

It should be noted that word-of-mouth recommendations, themselves were not enough for a parent to make a decision on childcare. They did, however, help them to focus their search.

Even if parents did give me a recommendation I would still like to check the documents that the provider had.

London, father, BME, non-user of childcare

Furthermore, it is important to understand that, word-of-mouth information sources are not limited to face-to-face sources; as highlighted previously, social networking sites also have an important role to play in passing on views and opinions of parents to other parents, either directly via online conversations or indirectly in the form of online reviews/feedback.

5.5 Ofsted

None of the parents we engaged with as part of this research were aware that Ofsted's website provides a search tool for local Ofsted registered providers. However, awareness of Ofsted as a more general source of childcare information was high among parents, particularly those in receipt of a higher household income. In particular, Ofsted inspection reports were seen as a useful and quick means of deciding which providers to investigate further, or to corroborate recommendations provided by parents. A few parents, however, were sceptical of the extent to which they could trust the outcome of the inspections, given that providers were given advance warning of the inspection date.

I'm not really sure…how unbiased and thorough the inspection is. I think it's because they don't make surprise visits, they have to make an appointment and so whichever place they go to inspect they know they are inspected so everything is rosy. I'm not entirely convinced by it.

London, Mother, BME, childcare user

In addition, our review of the information sources found that some of the content used on Ofsted's website was jargon-heavy, with no clear pathway for finding out the definitions of these terms[24].

5.6 Employers

While a small number of, typically public sector, workers spoke about how their employer was a useful source of information about childcare – specifically about how the costs of childcare could be covered through Employer Supported Childcare (ESC) vouchers and how their working hours could be changed– for the most part, the parents we engaged with tended to see their employer as either an untapped source of information or, at worst, withholding helpful details from them.

Parents spoke about how, on the whole, their employers were not proactive in providing them with useful information once they had told them that they would require parental leave. Instead, participants mentioned that they had to ask questions of their employers about what they were entitled to which some found difficult simply because they did not know necessarily know what questions to ask.

Her company didn't give her much help. You have to do the leg work.

Leicester, father, childcare user, working household, high income

This was felt particularly acutely by those in low paid shift-work who believed that their employers had not been forthcoming with the kind of information – either about their right to request flexible working or about voucher schemes to help with the cost of childcare – that would've enabled them to stay in work. Indeed, because of this lack of information, a couple of the participants we spoke to had had to give up their work in order to concentrate on raising their child; a course of action which they had not planned on taking.

There isn't enough out there, especially when you are a first time mum and you don't know anything. Some people told me there was something you could claim if you went back to work but there was nothing at work to advertise it.

Manchester, mother, childcare user, non-working household

For those in this situation there was a sense that, due to the amount of competition that there is for jobs, then employers were not necessarily motivated to keep their employees as they knew that they could be easily replaced.

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[24] Since the review of information was carried out, Ofsted's webpages have been re-located to Gov.uk and can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted

5.7   When do parents need information?

The qualitative research conducted revealed that, alongside the channel and the content of the information, when it was provided to parents often had a significant bearing in their childcare decisions. From the primary research with parents, a number of key moments were identified when parents' need for information is heightened. These are highlighted below.

Pregnancy

Many working parents started planning if they would use childcare or not from a very early stage – including while the mother was still pregnant. Considerations at this stage included: length of parental leave; affordability; and, how they could combine work and childcare (and the degree of flexibility needed to do this). The role of the employer in providing details around parental leave and flexible working was felt to be key. However, as noted above, these details were not always forthcoming.

Prior to returning to work after parental leave

Not all parents plan ahead as much as those outlined above. For some, their imminent return to work (signalled by the end of their period of parental leave) prompted them to begin investigating childcare choices. Around this time, parents tended to have contact with health visitors about their child's development and so these sources were typically approached first for information. However, as highlighted in section 5.3, childcare discussions were rarely a priority for these meetings, given the limited appointment time, although there may well be a role for signposting parents to further information.

In the months prior to becoming entitled to free early education

For those parents who chose not to return to work (or had not been in work) then eligibility for the 15 hours of funded early education was a useful prompt for them to think about combining work and childcare. Many also took their eligibility as a signal that this was the right time for them to use childcare, interpreting the provision of funding as endorsement from the government that this was the right age for children to be in childcare. Therefore, parents felt that information on the offer (how it works, who is covered and what criteria parents must meet) in the months before they become eligible to claim was very important. Parents felt the right information on the offer (and at the right time) would help to maximise take-up and help to ensure that parents have sufficient time to plan and make decisions on providers.

Once their child is in childcare

Parents pointed out that once they had placed their child with a provider, their need for information did not stop but the kind of information they required changed. Parents spoke

about how access to details about their child (e.g. what their child has been doing in the day, what they have eaten and who they have played with) would be helpful – both as a check that their child was developing as should be expected and also as reassurance for the parent that they had made the right choice of childcare provider. Some parents felt that their childcare provider already provided this level of information, however, this was not the case for all parents.

You get a book from the nursery, it says what they have done during the week, how they played with their friends and so on which is really good.

Newcastle, mother, childcare user, non-working household

This chapter and the previous one have shown that a great deal of information about childcare exists, available through a range of channels. However, it has also suggested that some parents still struggle to access the information they need about childcare. The recommendations outlined in Chapter 1 suggest ways to improve the range and quality of information on childcare and how this is communicated to parents.

Appendix 1

As mentioned in section 2.3, we conducted 16 in-depth interviews with a range of parents as outlined below:

- Three interviews with non-working / users / pre-school age child;Two interviews – non-working / users / school-age child;

- Three interviews – non-working / non-users / pre-school age child;

- Three interviews – non-working / non-users / school-age child;

- Two interviews – child aged 0-2;

- Two interviews – child with a disability;

- One interview – parent with a disability; and,

Further, of these interviews, three were conducted with parents from BME backgrounds.

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