

# Evaluation of the Childcare Taster Pilot and Extended Schools Childcare Pilots Programmes

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The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) developed two closely related Pilot programmes in eleven Local Authority (LA) areas in England to help lone parents to move into work. The Pilots were funded by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The Childcare Taster Pilot (CTP) and the Extended Schools Childcare Pilot (ESCP) were designed to explore the assertion that lack of childcare is a significant barrier to work for lone parents on Income Support (IS). The Pilots rolled out between April 2004 and January 2005, and ended in March 2006. A qualitative evaluation examined the setting up and running of the Pilots and the views of parents and stakeholders on how the Pilots had impacted on parents' views of formal childcare and returning to work.

## Key Findings

- ▶ Stakeholders thought that the Childcare Chats element of CTP had worked particularly well, benefiting parents by giving them information about childcare in their area and addressing questions and queries about formal childcare. Stakeholders valued the interagency working generated by the Pilots.
- ▶ Parents who participated in the Pilots were generally positive about them, and the Pilots appear to have had a beneficial effect on parents' views of formal childcare.
- ▶ The Pilots had mixed effects on parents' attitudes to returning to work. Some parents were encouraged by their experience of the Pilots to begin thinking about returning to work. However, there were other parents who realised as a result of their experience of the Pilots that returning to work might not be viable for them; in particular those who needed childcare outside of 'normal' working hours and those who realised that they would have to work more hours than they wanted to, in order to make working financially viable for them.
- ▶ Parents who did not participate in the Pilots generally did not express antipathy to the idea of working, however, parents of children below school age often said that they wished to wait until their children were older and at school before returning to work.
- ▶ Seven potential barriers to using formal childcare were identified:
  - Cost – this was the major barrier for parents who reported that they would have difficulty finding the deposits required for formal childcare and, on an ongoing basis, meeting the weekly payments.
  - Lack of information about childcare in local areas – the Pilots were advantageous in overcoming this barrier, whilst they lasted.

- Lack of availability of childcare – in some areas there was a perceived lack of childcare generally, however, proximity of childcare to parents’ homes or workplaces, unavailability outside of ‘normal’ working hours (for example for those working nightshifts or weekends), and lack of childcare places for children with special needs were also highlighted as problems.
  - Worries about safety and security of children in childcare settings – for parents who participated in the Pilots this anxiety was generally alleviated.
  - Worries about children not settling in formal childcare – where parents had been able to leave their children in childcare during the Pilots this anxiety was likely to be alleviated.
  - Worries about the quality of formal childcare – particularly about how children would be occupied during their time in childcare. Again, this anxiety was largely overcome for parents who tried out childcare during the Pilots.
  - Wanting to stay at home with children – this was particularly the case for parents whose children were under school age, with parents saying that they would start to think about work, and using childcare, when their children went to school.
- ▶ For some parents not being work ready appeared to be a more major barrier to returning to work than childcare.
- ▶ Overall, the evidence suggests that policy solutions need to address the barriers to parents using formal childcare by continuing to improve childcare supply, accessibility and affordability, whilst at the same time also addressing the continuing need to prepare parents for work.

## Background

The overall aim of the Pilots was to explore the assertion that a lack of childcare is a significant barrier to work for lone parents on Income Support (IS).

There were two aspects to the Pilots: the Extended Schools Childcare Pilot (ESCP) and the Childcare Taster Pilots (CTP).

**ESCP** aimed to develop a supply of affordable, accessible childcare within the Pilot areas to meet the needs of lone parents, with the objective of developing and managing existing childcare places and creating additional places in or through schools, where necessary. ESCP stakeholders also worked outside of the main remit of the Pilots by developing outreach work with parents.

**CTP** was designed to help parents to overcome concerns they had about formal childcare and to allow them, and their children, to sample different types of childcare to judge which would best suit their needs. There were three elements to CTP:

- Childcare Chats

These were undertaken by Childcare Advisors. These lasted approximately an hour and examined the childcare needs of parents, and gave information about the childcare available in their area.

- Visits to childcare providers

Childcare Advisors arranged for parents to visit childcare providers to see for themselves how the childcare was run. In some areas the Childcare Advisors had the capacity to accompany the parents. It was envisaged that parents might visit several childcare providers in this way, to compare different types of provision.

- Childcare Tasters

Parents could have up to ten half day sessions (effectively, one week of childcare) free, to try out childcare provision. Again, it was envisaged that parents could try out more than one childcare provider using this scheme.

Parents did not have to take up all three elements of the CTP but were free to choose elements in which to participate, within the eligibility criteria described below.

The overall aim of CTP was to help lone parents, and partners of benefits claimants, with childcare to build trust and confidence in using formal childcare. DWP and DCSF gave local authorities participating in CTP four objectives:

- To raise parents' awareness of the quality of formal childcare
- To address parents' concerns regarding using formal childcare, by providing information and giving a short experience of what such childcare would be like
- To help parents make choices about suitable childcare through clarifying the types available in the area, and the issues to be considered
- To help parents feel more comfortable with the thought of leaving their child(ren) with childcare providers and, where desired, to provide an opportunity for them to leave the child(ren) in the care of a provider for a short time.

## Methodology

BMRB Social Research were commissioned to evaluate the Pilots from the perspectives of the Stakeholders who were involved with them and parents. Two types of parents were asked their views: those who took part in the Pilots (participating parents) and those who were offered participation but declined it (non-participating parents).

A total of 256 interviews with stakeholders were undertaken across five waves, including revisiting participants up to three times in order to capture information about the different phases of the Pilots: setting up; running; and evaluating towards the end of the life of the Pilots. The research included staff from Local Authorities, Jobcentre Plus, Children's Information Services, schools and childcare providers. Both Face to Face and Telephone interviews were used. Telephone interviews were used for early and final interviews with stakeholders, where interviews were likely to be relatively short.

Face to Face interviews were used for longer and potentially more complex interviews in the middle phases of the Pilots, when they had been up and running for some time.

Sixty participating parents were interviewed in order to understand whether, and how, the Pilots had affected their views on using formal childcare and going back to work. Parents' experiences of participating in the Pilots were also explored.

Thirty six non-participating parents were interviewed to explore their views on formal childcare and returning to work. Interviews also explored parents' reasons for non-participation to identify factors, in addition to childcare, which represented significant barriers to work.

All fieldwork was qualitative, and took place between February 2005 and July 2006.

## Extended Schools Childcare Pilots

### *Scoping and outreach work*

Initial scoping exercises were carried out by ESCP stakeholders to enable them to develop childcare appropriate for their areas. In some areas the scoping work led to stakeholders developing outreach programmes to work directly with parents, as it was believed that:

- There were many parents who were not job ready, and that returning to work was a long term goal requiring sustained support and encouragement.
- Parents were worried about the costs of childcare, and that giving information, for example on Working Tax Credit, would help them to think about childcare and work more positively.
- Where ESCP started during the school summer holidays it was more productive to carry out consultations with lone parents.
- In one area there were existing vacancies in childcare provision, leading stakeholders to question whether there was sufficient demand for even the current number of places.

Two types of outreach work were undertaken:

- Identifying parents, giving them information and signposting them to other services, for example, referring them to Jobcentre Plus.
- Giving one-to-one support to parents and encouraging them to look for work by addressing the barriers they were facing, for example, spending time finding out what their worries were about skills deficits and helping to find courses to overcome them. Some of the outreach work continued for the duration of the Pilot, with one area running 'back to work surgeries' in schools, Children's Centres and with Community groups. During the 'surgeries' stakeholders gave parents information about child tax credits, provided them with 'better off' calculations and information about childcare provision in their area.

### *Developing childcare provision*

LAs were given the flexibility to implement the Pilots to best meet local needs and circumstances. The original remit of ESCP was to work with parents of school aged children (5-14, or 16 for children with special needs). However, the Pilot areas generally focused on developing childcare within primary schools, as this was felt to be the area of greatest need.

The childcare developed under ESCP took the form of breakfast clubs, after school clubs and holiday provision. Schools were consulted about whether they were able to set up provision on school grounds, or whether they would link with other schools and local childcare providers. Pilot staff reported that successful engagement with schools depended largely on the attitude of headteachers and the ethos of the schools, as well as the resources and facilities within schools.

The evaluation showed that where good relationships were built between ESCP staff and schools, a positive outcome could be had, with schools, other stakeholders and parents all benefiting.

### **Childcare Taster Pilots**

A wide variety of professionals were involved in

developing and running CTP, including LA staff, Jobcentre Plus staff (particularly Lone Parent Advisors and New Deal Advisors), Children's Information Service staff, childcare providers (such as childminders and nursery staff) and staff recruited to work specifically on the Pilots.

Pilot staff were keen to be able to offer parents a variety of different childcare experiences, so liaised with a range of childcare providers in their areas to engage them in CTP. Pilot areas decided that CTP would be most beneficial for children of pre-school age (0-5 years), and therefore concentrated on childcare provision for this age group.

Generally, childcare providers were happy to take part in CTP, and could see the advantages in participation, both in terms of giving them credibility by being associated with LAs and giving them publicity to enable them to fill vacancies when they occurred.

Parents were usually referred to CTP by Jobcentre Plus staff during Work Focused Interviews (WFIs). Outreach events, such as Discovery Weeks, also informed parents about CTP.

The original intent of CTP was that it should also be available to partners of people on certain benefits, in fact very few partners were approached by Jobcentre staff. In some cases this was because New Deal for Partners had not started, and in other cases stakeholders felt that the emphasis needed to be on lone parents, as they were seen to be in most need of the help that the Pilots offered.

The Childcare Chat was available to all parents eligible for New Deal for Lone Parents or New Deal for Partners, although they did not have to be participating, nor be 'job ready'. The Visits had the same eligibility criteria as the Childcare Chats, however, in practice, some areas offered Visits to all parents, regardless of whether or not they were eligible under the definitions of the Pilots. Childcare Tasters were available to participants in New Deal for Lone Parents and New Deal for Partners and to parents participating in Employment Zone provision for whom childcare had been identified as a barrier to work.

The three elements of CTP (Childcare Chats, Visits and Childcare Tasters) were designed to allow

parents to talk over their potential childcare needs with a Childcare Advisor, visit one or more childcare providers (sometimes in the company of a Childcare Advisor), to see different types of childcare at first hand, and then to try out one or more childcare providers for up to a week without having to pay.

Pilots which started in April and October 2004 operated both ESCP and CTP, and the two Pilots worked together in different ways in different areas.

In some areas the Pilots were seen as distinct from each other, having little in common, but working well as separate entities. In these areas stakeholders believed that the Pilots had different client groups, with ESCP focusing on parents of older children and CTP on parents of younger children. These areas tended to have different Pilot staff, which contributed to the feeling of separateness.

By contrast, there were areas which branded the two Pilots together under one name. Here stakeholders saw the Pilots as having complementary roles, with CTP stimulating demand for childcare provision and giving advice to parents, and ESCP developing childcare provision in response to this demand, and giving support to parents on a wider range of barriers to work.

It should be noted that the original intention of Visits and Childcare Tasters was that parents should see and try more than one childcare provider, however, although this did happen it was unusual, with parents generally visiting just one provider, and often wishing to try childcare with them for a full week. Furthermore, parents used the Childcare Tasters for a variety of reasons other than just trying out childcare, for example: using the free week instead of a deposit for childcare; having some time out from their children; and getting ready for work, for example shopping for work clothes.

## Issues and problems identified by stakeholders

During the early days stakeholders identified several issues and problems arising from setting up the Pilots. It should be noted, however, that stakeholders found solutions to some of these issues and problems as the Pilots continued. The major concerns identified were:

- The timescale of the Pilots caused some problems in recruiting staff, and, for ESCP, with fitting in to the school year.
- Stakeholders would have liked more guidance in the early stage of the Pilots, particularly from DCSF on the goals of the Pilots and definitions of success. More information would also have been welcomed on the monitoring systems required and issues around data sharing between stakeholders.
- Workloads of Jobcentre Plus staff, who were advising on the Pilots in addition to their day-to-day work.
- Some childcare providers had committed to the Pilots but had not had parents referred to them, whilst others had withdrawn from the Pilots after some participation, having had problems with some parents referred to them.

The issues which were resolved by stakeholders were those around guidance, with stakeholders contacting staff in other Pilot areas, particularly those geographically close to them, to share experiences. As the Pilots progressed the perceived need for direction and guidance from DCSF diminished, with stakeholders having a clearer understanding of the Pilot aims.

## Aspects of the Pilots which stakeholders thought worked particularly well

Two aspects were generally mentioned by stakeholders as having worked particularly well: Childcare Chats and interagency working.

Stakeholders felt that the Childcare Chats had been beneficial for parents, giving them information about childcare in their area, and addressing parents' questions and queries about formal childcare. It was thought that Childcare Chats were the easiest element of the Pilots to take forward in Stakeholders' work, after funding ended, and a number reported that this was their intention.

Stakeholders welcomed the chance to work with other agencies during the course of the Pilots, and these contacts were seen to be very beneficial in

their ongoing work. The benefits included simple things such as being able to put a face to a name, and having more complete contact lists for other people working in children's services.

## Participating parents' views

Generally, parents were positive about their experiences of the Pilots and overall participation in the Pilots appears to have had a beneficial effect on parents' views of formal childcare.

There were mixed effects on parents' attitudes to returning to work as a result of the Pilots. Some parents had already taken the decision to return to work prior to being offered the Pilots, and used the childcare made available through the Childcare Tasters to test out childcare or get a week's free childcare for their first week of work.

Other parents were encouraged by their experience of the Pilots to begin thinking about returning to work. However, there were other parents for whom the experience of the Pilots had led to them realising that returning to work might not be viable, especially those who worked during atypical hours, and those who realised that they would have to work more hours than they wanted to, to make working and paying for childcare financially viable.

## Non-participating parents' views

Generally, there was no antipathy to the idea of work amongst non-participating parents. Parents of younger children were likely to say that they wished to wait until their child was at school before returning to work.

It was usual for non-participating parents to have experience of childcare in the past, with some parents having had negative experiences, for example: inflexibility over timings of childcare, and payment for it; the time needed to travel to and from childcare provision; some children not enjoying being left in childcare; and the high costs and unavailability of childcare. Some parents preferred informal childcare, usually with family or friends.

Two main reasons were given for not participating in the Pilots:

- Not being work ready, for example, not having worked for a long time, or lacking qualifications.
- Already having childcare in place, so not needing help from the Pilots.

## Barriers to using formal childcare

Seven potential barriers to using formal childcare were identified by both participating and non-participating parents:

- The cost of formal childcare – both the deposit required and the ongoing weekly costs, even taking into account the help available through benefits. CTP had helped with this only in the short term, with up to a week's free childcare being available through the Childcare Tasters, but in the longer term this was a major barrier to using childcare for many parents. ESCP was appreciated by parents for providing a cheaper alternative to other forms of childcare.
- Lack of information about childcare in local areas. For parents who did not know how to access information the Pilots were extremely advantageous, with the information provided in the Childcare Chats and ESCP outreach being particularly helpful.
- Lack of availability of childcare:
  - A general lack of childcare places.
  - Proximity to home or work. Where child care was too far from either home or work, time was added to daily routine and there were cost implications as extra journeys would have to be made.
  - Childcare not being available at the right time. This was particularly a problem for parents who worked outside of 'normal' working hours, for example on nightshifts or at weekends. Not only was this type of childcare provision rare, where it was available it was expensive.
  - Lack of childcare for children with special needs. Both parents and stakeholders reported that this was a consistent problem, and that when places did become available they were often at some distance from the families' homes.

- Worries about safety and security in childcare settings. These worries were often ameliorated during Visits to childcare providers.
- Worries about children not settling in formal childcare. Generally, when parents used the Childcare Tasters, leaving children with childcare providers, children settled, and parents changed their views on this.
- Worries about the quality of formal childcare. Usually these worries were about how children would be occupied in formal childcare. Parents who participated in the Pilots generally had their fears on this allayed.
- Wanting to stay at home with children. This was a particular barrier for parents whose children were under school age, who wished to remain at home with their children until they were at least a little older.

For some parents not being work ready appeared to be a more major barrier to returning to work than childcare.

## Meeting the aims and objectives of the Pilots

### ESCP

ESCP aimed to provide enough affordable formal childcare for lone parents with school aged children, particularly those on Income Support, to enable them to enter employment. Stakeholders investigated the supply of childcare in their areas at the outset of the Pilots, and some found that vacancies existed. Childcare available from the ESCP elements of the Pilots was well liked by parents, who felt it was more affordable and convenient than other types of formal childcare. However, there were some parents who still found the cost of childcare provided through ESCP prohibitive, and this limitation somewhat hindered the success of the Pilots.

### CTP

CTP had four broad aims:

- To raise parents' awareness of the quality of formal childcare

CTP was largely successful in this respect, with parents' worries about formal childcare usually being ameliorated as a result of their participation.

- Addressing parents' concerns

It appears that there was some success in addressing parents' concerns, for those parents who had them. For parents who were ready to work the Tasters gave useful assistance in facilitating the move into work, for example by providing a week's free childcare to help them prepare for work or go for interviews.

- Helping parents to make choices about childcare

Childcare Chats were successful in identifying issues of importance for parents, and identifying the types of childcare in their area. Accompanied Visits and Tasters helped parents to identify childcare they might be willing to use. The evidence suggests that this aim was met with parents who were not already clear about the sort of childcare provision they would prefer.

- Helping parents feel more comfortable about using formal childcare

For those parents who had worries about formal childcare the chance to try out provision in Tasters helped to alleviate many of their concerns. CTP was particularly successful for parents who had worried about whether their child would settle into formal childcare, or who had had concerns about how their children would be occupied during the day.

### *The overall aim of the Pilot*

The overall aim of the Pilots was to explore the assertion that a lack of childcare is a significant barrier to work for lone parents on Income Support. Whilst the evaluations suggests that there can be little doubt that childcare is a barrier to work for such parents, that it is only one aspect, and that other barriers (both childcare and non-childcare related) which are potentially of equal or prime importance.

The cost of childcare was the greatest childcare related barrier remaining for parents, others being

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lack of childcare close to home or work, and lack of childcare for parents who worked outside of 'normal' hours.

Other barriers for parents related to not being work ready, either because they lacked confidence or because they needed training. There were also parents, particularly those with children under the age of five, who wished to remain at home with their children until they went to school. These types of barriers could supersede the childcare related barriers, as they had to be addressed before parents were ready to consider the available childcare.

## Implications for future policy

Overall, the evidence suggests that policy solutions need to address the dual aspects of the obstacles outlined above by continuing to improve childcare supply, accessibility and affordability, whilst at the same time also addressing the continuing need to prepare parents for work. Availability of childcare could be addressed, for example, for parents who work atypical hours by ensuring that childcare is in place during the night and at weekends.

## Further Information

Further copies of this summary are available from:

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Quote reference: SSU/2007/SF/027

The final report is available from the same address.

Quote reference SSU/2007/FR/027

ISBN 978 1 84775 026 6

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