

Evaluation of Funded Early Years Foundation Stage Offer in a London borough

Report to the borough Council

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Executive Summary

A London borough Council has decided to enhance the government's offer of 15 hours a week of free early education and childcare for all 3- and 4-year olds with an additional 10 hours a week in maintained settings. The aim of the extra hours is to allow parents (especially mothers) to find employment or education/training. The borough appointed the Thomas Coram Research Unit to conduct this evaluation of the impact of the enhanced offer on parental employment and education/training.

In July 2014 100 parents were interviewed from seven nursery classes and children's centres. Of these, 89 were mothers and 11 were fathers. Almost half of the mothers were lone parents, although none of the fathers were. Thirty-eight of the mothers were currently employed, 28 part-time and seven part-time (three were self-employed). Fourteen were in education or training. Of the 42 not in employment, education or training, half were looking for work whilst the other half were not looking for work or not able to work. Only one father was not in employment, and he was in education/training.

Parents were asked if they felt the enhanced childcare offer helped them to take up or continue in employment, education or training. Of those in employment almost all said it was helpful; of those in education or training three-quarters said it was helpful. Most of those who did not find the enhanced offer helpful were not currently in employment, education or training.

The main reason given for finding the additional hours helpful was that it gave time to go to work or training; the second reason was the reduction in childcare costs. Of those who did not find the offer helpful, the main reasons given were that the centre was not open long enough or they needed more hours, or that the parents had other children to look after. Some of those not currently in employment, education or training nevertheless did find the offer helpful in looking for employment, mainly because it gave time to apply and to attend interviews; reduced childcare costs was also important.

Almost all thought that continuing the enhanced offer would be helpful, although more than half of those who expressed an opinion also wanted the offer extended to two-year olds, longer hours and more flexible provision.

In conclusion, the enhanced childcare offer was acknowledged as being a significant support in taking up, keeping, or helping to look for, employment, education or training. Almost all the parents wanted the offer to continue and to be extended.

Background and context

Current policy

Childcare services are high on the political agenda, as evidenced by the government commitment to *More Great Childcare* (Department for Education, 2013b) and the creation of the Childcare Commission (Department for Education, 2013a). More widely, there have been many reports analysing, and advocating for, early education and childcare (e.g. Ben-Galim, 2014; Butler, Lugton and Rutter, 2014; Cory and Alakeson, 2014; Grauberg, 2014). There is a broad agreement across these reports that childcare allows mothers to work, reduces child poverty and benefits children's development.

Since September 2010 all 3- and 4-year-old children have been entitled to 570 hours of government funded early education per year (equating to 15 hours a week over 38 weeks). Additional support for childcare costs for working families is available through the Working Tax Credit system, currently being replaced by Universal Credit payments (Department for Education, 2014a).

A London borough Council is offering local people free 25-hour nursery places for 3- and 4-year-olds in its own children's centres and maintained primary schools until at least July 2015. This contribution is ten hours a week in addition to the Government's 15 hour provision. However, this offer is subject to local availability and individual centre and schools' admissions policies. The aim of this enhanced offer is to assist parents, and mothers in particular, to take up employment, education or training. The aim of this evaluation is to see if the enhanced offer is having the intended effect.

Current use of funded childcare places

In January 2014, across England 94% of 3-year-olds and 99% of 4-year-olds nationally were benefiting from funded places (Department for Education, 2014b). Take-up in London is slightly lower at 88% and 96% respectively (Inner London: 86% and 95%) and take up in the borough is low even for inner London (Department for Education, 2014b).

Parental employment and childcare

Parental employment rates vary by gender (Plantenga and Remery, 2009). While fathers tend to have higher rates of employment than men without children, the pattern is reversed for women, with the proportion of mothers in employment lower than women without children (Connolly *et al.*, 2013). This pattern is one of the primary reasons underlying childcare

subsidy schemes: recent research has shown a consistent relationship between childcare costs and employment, particularly for mothers (e.g. Plantenga and Remery, 2009). The available literature suggests that high quality, affordable early education and childcare can play a significant role in increasing social inclusion and mobility, improving outcomes for children and reducing child poverty through the mechanisms of increasing maternal employment and social and economic development (OECD, 2011a; OECD, 2012).

Maternal employment

Data from the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (Department for Education, 2014a) shows a trend of increasing maternal employment in recent years, a trend reflected in figures from the Labour Force Survey (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Overall, the proportion of women in work has increased from around 56% in the 1970's to almost 70% today (Cory and Alakeson, 2014) and women's earnings have become increasingly significant in household income. In 30% of families, working mothers are now equal or primary breadwinners (Ben-Galim and Thompson, 2013). However, the employment rate among mothers in inner London is lower than elsewhere in England (Office for National Statistics, 2013) and the borough's Equality Taskforce had already identified the low rates of maternal employment in London as a key factor in inequality for families.

The proportion of women with children who work remains lower than the proportion of women without children, although this gap has narrowed in recent years; mothers are also more likely to be in part-time employment (Office for National Statistics, 2011). The proportion of lone parents in employment, while it has increased, remains lower than for other industrialised countries – according to Gingerbread (2012), the proportion of lone parents in employment in 2012 was 59% in the UK as compared to 71% elsewhere.

Barriers to maternal employment

According to a recent survey of nearly 2,000 mothers with children aged under 10 years (Cory and Alakeson, 2014), two fifths of those not currently in employment would like to work. On average, these mothers reported wanting to work 23 hours a week. In addition, one fifth of mothers who were already in employment would like to increase their hours. The survey found earnings to be an important factor: mothers who reported wishing to increase working hours earned on average £13,000, much less than mothers who did not wish to increase their hours.

Mothers report that a significant factor influencing the decision to go to work is reliable, and affordable childcare provision (Department for Education, 2014a). While UK levels of maternal employment are similar to the OECD average, they are lower than countries such

as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands. The reason most commonly given for this is the comparatively high, and increasing, costs of childcare in this country (OECD, 2011b; Rutter and Stocker, 2014).

In 2006, Skinner (2006) argued that if (as was proposed at the time) 'free' places were extended to 20 hours per week, parents would be able to work at least 16 hours per week, enabling them to claim work based tax credits to supplement their income, but without having to pay childcare costs. More recently, it has been proposed that parents working at least 20 hours per week should be entitled to 25 hours funded early education (Stewart, 2014).

Analysis of Labour Force Survey data has estimated that increasing the maternal employment rate by just five percentage points would result in an additional 150,000 women entering the workplace, resulting in a positive net impact of £750 million on public finances (Thompson and Ben-Galim, 2014).

Design of the Study

Aims and objectives

As part of its early education and childcare provision, the borough Council currently offers local residents free 25-hour nursery places for 3- and 4-year-olds in maintained schools and children's centres with nursery provision. This is a top-up of ten hours compared to the current government offer. The Council is committed to support parents looking to access or sustain work and training and ultimately support families to move out of poverty.

The borough Council requested the Institute of Education (IOE) to evaluate the impact of the Council's childcare offer. The evaluation was carried out by a research team at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) within the IOE.

The overall aim of the work was:

- to evaluate to what extent the current offer is meeting the needs of parents;
- to explore what parents saw their early education and childcare needs to be; and
- to evaluate whether the current offer was having an impact on parental employment.

The evaluation had the following objectives:

- to conduct a survey of a representative sample of parents accessing the full- and part-time early education and childcare offer through children's centres and schools across the borough.
- to analyse and interpret the data gathered
- to write-up the findings into a report for the borough Council
- to present the data findings to the borough Council.

Ethics

Ethics approval for this project was obtained from the Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee.

Methodology

Sampling

The sample was drawn from five schools with nursery provision and two children's centres from across the borough. Settings were selected randomly.

Once settings were identified, the head at each of the schools and children's centres was contacted by the Local Authority to notify them of the study. The research team then contacted each setting in order to provide them with further information about the study and negotiate their participation.

The sample therefore was of parents who were using early education and childcare provision in maintained schools and children's centres.

Questionnaire

A short questionnaire for use in the study was developed by the research team in consultation with the Local Authority (Appendix I). The questionnaire was designed to seek parents' views on the usefulness of the enhanced childcare offer, in particular whether the offer had helped them to take up or maintain employment and/or education and training. Parents were also asked to consider potential alternative arrangements. In addition, parents were asked to provide information on their current employment and training status, family composition and socioeconomic status.

The questionnaire was designed for use as both a self-completion questionnaire and as a structured interview. While it was felt that an interview with parents would be the best method through which to obtain information, the limited availability of parents meant that achieving a reasonable sample through this approach alone would not be possible. It was therefore decided that a questionnaire combining quantitative and (optional) qualitative data would be best. Parents were given the choice to participate in one of three ways: self-completing a questionnaire (either at home or at the setting); speaking face-to-face with a researcher during the research visit; or providing a telephone number in order to conduct a telephone interview at another convenient time. By mixing data collection methods in this way, it was hoped to maximise the response rate and minimise the bias in the sample.

Procedure

Once the setting had agreed to take part, the research team negotiated a convenient day on which to visit the nursery. All parents of children aged 3- and 4-years attending nursery were sent an information sheet describing the purpose of the research and what would be involved, in advance of this visit (Appendix II). Settings were also supplied with a poster for display on notice boards briefly outlining the date, times and purpose of the visit (see Appendix III for an example). Copies of the questionnaire were also made available in advance of the research visit for any parents who wished to complete the survey. Researchers attended settings at two time points during the day; in the morning when parents / carers were dropping off their children, and again in the afternoon when children were collected. Data were collected over a four-week period in June and July of 2014.

The final sample comprised 100 parents and carers from across the seven settings.

Analysis and findings

The Sample

Gender and age

The achieved sample of 100 consisted of 89 female respondents and 11 male. The age of respondents ranged from 17 to 55, with a median age of 34. The men were slightly older than the women (median age 39 and 33 respectively). Seven respondents did not indicate their age.

Family composition

Of the 100 respondents, 54 were in couple relationships (48 married and 6 cohabitating) and 44 were lone parents (8 divorced, 14 separated and 22 single): none of the 11 men were lone parents. Two people did not indicate their relationship status.

Fourteen families had one child, 33 had two children, 23 had three and 25 had four or more, including one family with seven children. (Five did not give the number of children.)

Employment and socioeconomic status

From the final sample (n = 100), 59 parents (59.0%) indicated that they were currently in work, education or training. Working patterns for the sample are shown in Table 1 below¹. This data shows that very few mothers (7) reported working full-time. Many more (28) were working part-time. Fourteen were in education or training. Of the 42 not in employment, education or training, 21 were looking for work, but 14 were not looking for work and seven were unable to work (seven did not say). The fathers had a very different pattern of employment: all of the 11 fathers who participated 10 indicated that they were currently in work, education or training: five were employed full-time and four part-time; two were self-employed, including one who also said they were working part-time. One man was in education or training.

¹ Please note that more than one type of working pattern could be reported – e.g. a respondent could be both in training and employed part time.

Table 1 Parents' reported working patterns

		Female	Female	Male	Male	Total	Total
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Employed: full time	Yes	7	7.9%	5	45.5%	12	12.0%
	No	78	87.6%	6	54.5%	84	84.0%
	missing	4	4.5%	0	0.0%	4	4.0%
Employed: part time	Yes	28	31.5%	4	36.4%	32	32.0%
	No	57	64.0%	7	63.6%	64	64.0%
	missing	4	4.5%	0	0.0%	4	4.0%
Employed: self-employed	Yes	3	3.4%	2	18.2%	5	5.0%
	No	82	92.1%	9	81.8%	91	91.0%
	missing	4	4.5%	0	0.0%	4	4.0%
Employed: night/shift work	Yes	1	1.1%	0	0.0%	1	1.0%
	No	84	94.4%	11	100%	95	95.0%
	missing	4	4.5%	0	0.0%	4	4.0%
Not employed: looking for work	Yes	21	23.6%	0	0.0%	21	21.0%
	No	64	71.9%	11	100%	75	75.0%
	missing	4	4.5%	0	0.0%	4	4.0%
Not employed: not looking for work	Yes	14	15.7%	0	0.0%	14	14.0%
	No	71	79.8%	11	100%	82	82.0%
	missing	4	4.5%	0	0.0%	4	4.0%
Student/in training	Yes	14	15.7%	1	9.1%	15	15.0%
	No	71	79.8%	10	90.9%	81	81.0%
	missing	4	4.5%	0	0.0%	4	4.0%
Not employed: unable to work	Yes	7	7.9%	0	0.0%	7	7.0%
	No	78	87.6%	11	100%	89	89.0%
	missing	4	4.5%	0	0.0%	4	4.0%

Family working arrangements

An attempt was also made to capture family working patterns, as, for mothers in particular, the ability to work depends on the presence of a partner in the household, and whether their partner is in employment. This categorisation was difficult as specific working patterns were reported less frequently than overall status, particularly for partners.

Using parental employment status and usual weekly hours worked, Table 2 shows the employment status patterns for the whole family. For couple households, 30.8% (n=12) were male sole breadwinner cases, where the man was working full-time and the mother not in employment; 12.8% (n=5) were traditional 1.5 earner cases where the man was working full-time and mother part-time; only 7.7% (n=3) were dual full-time households where both parents were employed full-time.

Non-standard parental employment arrangements were characteristic for the remaining couple households: in 20.1% (n=19) of cases fathers worked part-time while the mother was not in employment. In only 4 couple households were neither in employment.

Of the 42 lone mother households with employment data, 50.0% (n=21) were not working or in training, 40.5% (n=17) were working part-time and 9.5% (n=4) four were working full-time. (In 19 cases employment data were not returned for both partners.)

Table 2 Family employment status

	Frequency	Percent H/hold Type	Percent of Total
Couple households	39	100	39.0
Male full-time, female not employed	12	30.8	12.0
Male full-time, female part-time	5	12.8	5.0
Dual full time earners	3	7.7	3.0
Female full-time, male part-time	2	5.1	2.0
Dual part time earners	1	2.6	1.0
Male part-time, female not employed	9	20.1	9.0
Female part-time, male not employed	3	7.7	3.0
Neither working	4	10.3	4.0
Lone mother households	42	100	42.0
Lone female: full-time	4	9.5	4.0
Lone female: part-time	17	40.5	17.0
Lone female: not working	21	50.0	21.0
Not answered	19	19.0	19.0
Total	100	100	100

The median annual family income was in the band £7,800-£13,000, although 12 people did not answer this question. There was a range of educational qualifications, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Highest educational qualification

	None	GCSE	A level	Degree	Other	Missing	Total
Count	16	26	14	15	25	4	100
Percent	16.0	26.0	14.0	15.0	25.0	4.0	100

Parents' perceptions of the childcare offer

Perceived helpfulness of the offer in seeking, taking up or continuing work, education or training

As can be seen from Table 4, two-thirds of all parents (68.6%) indicated that the current childcare offer had helped them to seek, take up or continue work, education or training. Of the 31 (31.2%), who reported that the offer had not been helpful, 20 were not currently working, in training or education. One parent (who reported that they were currently working) failed to indicate whether or not they had found the offer useful.

Table 4 Help seek, take up AND/OR continue work or training?

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Work/training but did <i>not</i> help to take up or continue work training	Count	1	11	12
	Percent	10.0	12.4	12.1
Work/training - helped to continue work/training	Count	4	10	14
	Percent	40.0	11.2	14.1
Work/training - helped to take up work/training	Count	1	12	13
	Percent	10.0	13.5	13.1
Work/training - helped both take up and continue work training	Count	4	17	21
	Percent	40.0	19.1	21.2
Not work/training, <i>not</i> helpful in seeking education, work or training	Count	0	19	19
	Percent	0.0	21.3	19.2
Not work/training, helpful in seeking education, work or training	Count	0	20	20
	Percent	0.0	22.5	20.2
Total	Count	10	89	99
	Percent	100	100	100

Of the 10 men who answered the question, nine said they found the hours helpful, both in taking up and continuing in work. The women were more varied: 59 (66.3%) of the 89 who

answered the question found the childcare hours helpful in taking up or keeping employment, education or training.

The helpfulness of the childcare hours was related to employment status, as shown in Table 5. Of the 96 parents who indicated their employment status, 46 were in employment, 15 were in education or training (including two who were both) and 37 were not in employment or education. Of those currently in work, the majority found that the hours of extra childcare either helped them continue to work or take up work or both (82.6%; n=38); a minority of seven (15.2%) did not find the hours of childcare helpful in taking up or continuing work.

Table 5 Parents' perceptions of helpfulness of childcare offer

Work Status		n	% In w/e/t	% all parents
Parents currently in work	Did not help to take up or continue work	7	15.2	7.0
	Helped to continue work	13	28.3	13.0
	Helped to take up work	8	17.4	8.0
	Helped both take up and continue work	17	37.0	17.0
	<i>Missing</i>	1	2.2	1.0
Total	46	100	46.0	
Parents currently in education or training	Did not help to take up or continue training	4	26.7	4.0
	Helped to continue training	1	6.7	1.0
	Helped to take up training	5	33.3	5.0
	Helped both take up and continue training	5	33.3	5.0
Total	15	100	15.0	
Parents not currently in work, education or training		n	% No w/e/t	% all parents
	Not helpful in seeking education, work or training	19	51.4	19.0
	Helpful in seeking education, work or training	18	48.6	18.0
Total	37	100	37.0	
	<i>Missing</i>	4	9.8	4.0
Total		100	100	100

Of the 59 women who found the childcare hours helpful in taking up or keeping employment, education or training, 56 also gave their employment status: 30 (53.6%) were in work or education. Twenty-nine women did not find the hours helpful; of those 29, 23 (79.3%) were

not in work or training, but six were. Of the 42 lone mothers who answered the question, 30 (71.4%) found the childcare hours useful in taking up or keeping employment, education or training, even though eight of those were not in work or education. Twelve lone mothers (28.6%) did not find the hours helpful; eight of those were not in work.

Of the 31 women with a partner, 20 (64.5%) found the offer helpful in finding or continuing work or education; 12 of these were not in work or education. Eleven women with a partner (35.5%) did not find the offer helpful in finding or continuing work or education; most of those (7) were not in work or education. Of the 11 women who did not find the hours helpful five (45.5%) had a partner in full-time work, whereas of the 20 women with a partner who did find the hours helpful, 12 (60.0%) had a partner in full-time work. So those women with a partner in full-time work seemed to benefit more than those with a partner employed part-time or not employed.

Of those parents currently in education (15), a large majority (n=11, 73.3%) did find the offer helpful, either to take up or to continue work or training but four (26.7%) did not find the offer helpful. Of the 37 parents not currently in work, 18 (48.6%) nevertheless found the childcare offer helpful in seeking work, education or training.

Ways in which parents currently in work, education or training found childcare offer helpful

Table 6 shows the patterns of responses for parents in work, education or training (n=48) for why they had found the offer helpful. The most common reason given (by 77.1% of parents who found the offer helpful) was that the offer afforded them the time to attend work, education or training.

Table 6 Ways in which parents currently in work, education or training found childcare offer helpful

		Count	%
Time to apply, attend interviews	Yes	19	39.6%
	No	28	58.3%
	missing	1	2.1%
Time to go to work or training	Yes	37	77.1%
	No	9	18.8%
	missing	2	4.2%
Reduced childcare costs	Yes	20	41.7%
	No	26	54.2%
	missing	2	4.2%
Other reason helped	Yes	8	16.7%
	No	37	77.1%
	missing	3	6.3%

Reasons parents currently in work, education or training did not find childcare offer helpful

Parents who were currently in work, education or training (n=11) who indicated the offer had not been helpful were also asked why they thought this was the case: Table 7 shows the patterns of reasons given by these parents.

Table 7 Reasons parents currently in work, education or training did not find childcare offer helpful

		Count	%
Have other children	Yes	4	36.4%
	No	3	27.3%
	missing	4	36.4%
Childcare hours not enough	Yes	3	27.3%
	No	4	36.4%
	missing	3	27.3%
Not open early/late enough	Yes	4	36.4%
	No	3	27.3%
	missing	3	27.3%

Parents / carers who were in employment, training or education were also asked to specify any additional reasons why they felt the childcare offer had or had not been helpful in taking up or continuing this employment. Only five parents (8.5% of all parents in employment, training or education) offered reasons in addition to those already suggested on the questionnaire. One parent stated that the offer was not helpful in pursuing employment because childcare was still too expensive as the offer did not provide them with sufficient hours to work. In addition, they noted that the offer was not sufficiently flexible to meet their needs as they had to pay for additional hours by the term when they were only using a proportion of those hours. The remaining four parents had found the offer helpful. Of these, two parents commented that the free hours had enabled them to increase their working hours. Two parents noted explicitly that without the offer, they would not have been able to work at all. Another parent was currently on long term sick leave, but stated that the offer was invaluable in allowing her to attend treatment appointments.

Views of parents not currently in work, education or training

Thirty-seven parents (37.0%) of the initial sample were not currently in work, education or training. All of these were mothers. Of these, 21 had found the childcare offer helpful in trying to pursue employment or training opportunities.

Ways in which parents not currently in work, education or training found childcare offer helpful

Table 8 shows the patterns of responses for parents not currently in work, education or training who indicated why they had found the offer helpful. Similar to those parents who were already working or in training, the most common reasons given were that the offer afforded them the time to apply for work, education or training.

Table 8 Ways in which parents not currently in work, education or training found childcare offer helpful

		Count	%
Time to apply for work, attend interviews	Yes	13	61.9%
	No	6	28.6%
	missing	2	9.5%
Time to apply for training, education	Yes	12	57.1%
	No	7	33.3%
	missing	2	9.5%
Reduces childcare costs	Yes	10	47.6%
	No	9	42.9%
	missing	2	9.5%
Other reason helped	Yes	1	4.8%
	No	18	85.7%
	missing	2	9.5%

Reasons parents not currently in work, education or training did not find childcare offer helpful

Parents who were not currently in work, education or training who indicated the offer had not been helpful in securing work (n = 20) were also asked why they thought this was the case. Table 9 shows the patterns of reasons given by these parents. More than half (60%) said they did not wish to seek work or training.

Table 9 Reasons parents not currently in work, education or training did not find childcare offer helpful

		Count	%
Other children needing childcare	Yes	10	50.0%
	No	10	50.0%
Childcare hours not long enough	Yes	2	10.0%
	No	18	90.0%
Not open early/late enough	Yes	1	5.0%
	No	19	95.0%
Do not wish to seek work or training	Yes	12	60.0%
	No	8	40.0%

Additional comments were also sought from parents not currently in employment, training or education, although again, few parents (n=5, 12.2% of all parents not in employment, training or education) had comments in addition to the options provided in the questionnaire. One parent noted that a particular benefit of the offer in seeking work or training was that the setting their child attended facilitated connections to the training, employment and work experience team to help with skills such as CV writing, and identifying training and employment opportunities. The four remaining parents had not found the offer helpful, but in each case reasons were unrelated to the offer itself (two parents cited health related issues, one had given up work to become a carer for a family member, and the other referred to lack of qualifications as a barrier).

Other ways in which the childcare offer could help parents to access full time work

Parents were also asked for their views on other ways in which the childcare offer could help parents to access full time work. Responses from parents are shown in Table 10 below. These findings suggest that parents were overwhelmingly in favour of continuing the enhanced offer. The potential for extending the offer to younger children was also endorsed by many parents. This reflects the need for childcare for other children noted by a substantial proportion of parents who were not currently finding the offer helpful. Parents also indicated that longer opening hours would be useful, although many commented that the goal of this would be to be able to drop children off at childcare settings in sufficient time to accommodate work or course start times.

Table 10 Other ways in which the childcare offer could help parents to access full time work

		Count	%
Continuing enhanced offer	Very helpful	67	67.0%
	Somewhat helpful	13	13.0%
	Not at all helpful	1	1.0%
	missing	19	19.0%
Longer opening hours	Very helpful	47	47.0%
	Somewhat helpful	16	16.0%
	Not at all helpful	18	18.0%
	missing	19	19.0%
Extend offer to 2 year-olds	Very helpful	54	54.0%
	Somewhat helpful	11	11.0%
	Not at all helpful	12	12.0%
	missing	23	23.0%
Flexible patterns	Very helpful	29	29.0%
	Somewhat helpful	17	17.0%
	Not at all helpful	16	16.0%
	missing	38	38.0%

Twenty-two parents (22%) had additional comments to make relating to other ways in which a childcare offer could be helpful to them in seeking or continuing employment, training or education. The vast majority of suggestions related to strategies for making extra hours available so that parents could increase their work hours. Suggestions included after school clubs for nursery-aged children (n=5), earlier drop off times to enable parents to take children to nursery and start work at 9am (n=4), holiday schemes and extensions to term times to facilitate parents who struggled to pay for childcare during holiday periods (n=3), greater flexibility to enable parents to attend courses which extended beyond nursery opening times (n=2), pick up / drop-off services to bridge gaps between nursery and alternative forms of childcare (n=2), schemes for younger children which emphasized play rather than more formal early education (n=2), partially or fully subsidized childcare outside nursery settings (n=2), providing 'wraparound' childcare hours which parents could pay to access (n=1), emergency / ad hoc extensions (n=1), increasing the number of places available (n=1), free meals (n=1) and weekend hours for parents working atypical hours (n=1).

Finally, parents were asked if there were any other views they would like to express. Fourteen parents (14%) had additional comments. Four parents felt it was important to note that while longer hours could be very useful for working parents, and could be suitable for school-aged children, extending hours would be 'too much' for younger children. Another

four parents commented on how helpful they had found the offer, and the difference it had made to families. Two parents described how some of the practicalities of the offer, such as availability of places and length of waiting lists, had been problematic for them. Finally, two parents felt that more effort should be put into giving precedence to the childcare needs of parents who worked, either by prioritising working parents in the allocation of free or subsidised places or by removing eligibility criteria which penalized working parents.

Discussion

The borough Council currently offers local residents funded 25 hour nursery places for 3- and 4-year-olds in maintained schools and children's centres. This is a top-up of ten hours compared to the government offer. Poverty risks are highest in jobless families and the Council is committed to support parents looking to access or sustain work and training and ultimately support families to move out of poverty.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the extent to which parents accessing this offer found it helpful in seeking or continuing employment, training or education opportunities.

The findings of the current study

The proportion of mothers not in work in the current sample (41%) was broadly similar to the proportion of non working mothers (36%) found in the DfE Childcare and early years survey of parents 2012-2013 (Department for Education, 2014a). However, parental, particularly maternal, employment is influenced by household composition (whether couple or lone parent) and for couple households partner employment status. In the current sample the proportion of lone mothers not in work was 50%, higher than the 36.2% for lone mothers of a child under five in 2011 reported by ONS (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

For mothers in couple households, the majority (63.7%) had 'standard' arrangements (dual full-time, traditional 1.5 earner, male sole breadwinner) in line with national trends (82% of couple households in 2011 Connolly *et al.*, 2013). However, more were in non-standard arrangements than the national position.

Overall, parents had a very positive view of the impact of the childcare offer on their ability to pursue employment, training or education. This was particularly true for parents who were in employment. The vast majority of working mothers said they found the childcare offer helpful in taking up or keeping employment, education or training. This was particularly true for lone mothers. For mothers in couple relationships, women with a partner working full-

time seemed to benefit more than those whose partner worked only part-time or not at all. The views of parents not currently in work, training or employment were more mixed, suggesting that additional barriers to employment not addressed by the current offer may be in force for these parents.

The majority of parents reported that the time afforded to them by the offer was most helpful to them in pursuing work, training or employment. Nonetheless, many parents still reported that this time was insufficient for their needs as the number of hours available and the flexibility of those hours conflicted with the needs of their families and the patterns of work and study they wished to take up.

Parents also offered a number of suggestions for ways in which childcare provision could aid them further in taking up of continuing work, training or employment.

Themes emerging from the findings

A particular theme emerging from this study was that funded places were very helpful, particularly in terms of reducing childcare costs and affording parents the time to work, to pursue education or training courses or to seek new opportunities. However, their usefulness was limited as the settings were often only open between 9am and 3pm.

Parents reported that nursery opening hours commonly overlapped with traditional workplace and course start times, and dropping off or collecting children made it difficult for them to attend employment or training. This finding reflects issues reported in the latest DfE parent survey of childcare and early years education, in which a third of mothers reported that working times caused problems in the arrangement of childcare (Department for Education, 2014a).

Nonetheless, some parents observed that while extending available hours would be very useful for parents hoping to access employment, and some early education and childcare providers commented that increased hours provided greater scope for delivery of early education activities and preparation for school, there is a need for a balance to be struck between the working needs of parents and the 'burden of childcare' on (particularly young) children.

Parents indicated that there is an issue around parents' knowledge of the options available: some parents did not realise that the funded hours available in the borough were more than generally available, and others were unclear about which offer they were accessing. This lack of awareness was linked with a perceived inequity of eligibility criteria: some parents felt that they are being punished financially for going to work. It might be useful, particularly with

the introduction of another layer of provision being introduced for two-year-olds in September 2014, to look at ways to help parents understand the options available to them.

Recommendations

Our main recommendation, on the basis of the positive evaluation by parents, is that the borough should continue with the current offer of 25 hours of free childcare for 3- and 4-year-olds. This recommendation aligns with other recent evidence based guidance, for instance, CentreForum recommended that all parents in paid work for at least 20 hours a week should be entitled to 25 hours free early education and childcare (Stewart, 2014).

In addition, the comments made by parents during the interviews suggest a number of other ways in which childcare provision offers could be adapted to meet the needs of parents wishing to work. These included:

- Increasing support for parents to seek employment and training opportunities by linking childcare places with services such as interview training, CV writing and assistance identifying potential opportunities, in order to encourage and facilitate parents to access employment, training or education.
- Thinking of ways to meet the need for flexibility, particularly in terms of centre or nursery opening times, in order to support the schedules of parents going to work or training.
- Improving the parents' knowledge of the provision available to them by providing simply, accessible and readily available information outlining what provision is available and the nature and rationale of any exclusion criteria.

It is noted that the borough's policies are influenced by the EU work-family reconciliation framework (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2011), in particular parental leave policies and flexible employment to support mothers (&/or fathers) of young children to take up employment and care for their young children.. The maximum period of paid post-natal leave available in the UK is 20 months (combining maternity, paternity, and parental leave) but most of this is unpaid or low paid; leave paid at a high rate is only available for six weeks of maternity leave. There is an entitlement to early education and childcare from three years of age though only for part-time nursery education (15 hours a week for 38 weeks per year). So there is a 16-month gap between the end of leave and an early education and childcare entitlement, and a gap of nearly three years between the end of well-paid leave and an early

education and childcare entitlement. Levels of attendance at formal services for children under and over three years are above the average for OECD countries (O'Brien *et al.*, 2014).

It is also important to emphasise the need to access for a national quality childcare workforce. While the proportion is increasing, in January 2014 only 48% of three- and four-year-olds in receipt of early education from private, voluntary and independent providers were benefiting from staff with Qualified Teacher Status or Early Years Professional Status (Department for Education, 2014b).

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Appendix I: Questionnaire

The borough Council currently offers local residents free 25-hour childcare places for 3 and 4 year olds in schools and children’s centres. This is a top-up of ten hours compared to the government offer. The borough has asked the Institute of Education (IOE) to evaluate the impact of this offer in supporting the employment and/or training needs of parents.

We are asking parents to help us by telling us about their experiences.

Section A: Your experience

1 Could you tell us which offer you are currently accessing at this children’s centre/ nursery/ school? (Please tick)

Standard offer (15 hours per week) Enhanced offer (25 hours per week)

2 How many children do you have using this children’s centre/ nursery/ school?

3 IF YOU ARE CURRENTLY WORKING OR IN TRAINING / EDUCATION:

Did the current childcare offer help you to take up this work or training? Yes No

OR

Did the current childcare offer help you to continue work or training you were already doing? Yes No

3a If YES, how did it help? (please tick ALL that apply)

- i. It gave me time to apply for work or attend interviews
- ii. It gave me time to go to work or attend education / training
- iii. It reduced my childcare costs so that I could afford to take up work / training

Other (please give details): _____

3b If NO, why not? (please tick ALL that apply)

- i. I have other children for whom I needed to find childcare
- ii. The childcare hours were not enough
- iii. The childcare setting was not open early / late enough

Other (please give details): _____

4 IF YOU ARE NOT CURRENTLY WORKING OR IN TRAINING / EDUCATION, have you found the current childcare offer helpful in trying to find work or training?

Yes No

4a If **YES**, how did it help? (please tick ALL that apply)

- i. It gives me time to apply for work or attend interviews
- ii. It gives me time to apply for training and education opportunities
- iii. It reduces my childcare costs so that, if the opportunity arises, I can afford to take up work or training

Other (please give details):

4b If **NO**, why not? (please tick ALL that apply)

- i. I have other children for whom I need to find childcare
- ii. The childcare hours are not long enough
- iii. The childcare setting is not open early / late enough
- iv. I do not wish to / cannot seek work or training at the moment

Other (please give details):

5 We are also interested in finding out other ways in which the childcare offer could help parents to access full time work. Could you please rate each of the following options based on how much you think it would help you and your family?

	Please tick	Not at all helpful	Somewhat helpful	Very helpful
i. Continuing the current enhanced offer (25 hours)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ii. Longer hours (e.g. open 8am-6pm)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iii. Extend the free childcare offer to 2 year-olds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iv. Flexible patterns (e.g. 2.5 full days instead of 5 mornings)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

v. What else would be helpful? (please give details):

6 Do you have any other comments?

Section B: About you

1 Are you: Male Female

2 Year of birth: _____

3 What is your postcode? _____

4 How many children do you have? _____ What age(s) are they? _____

5 What is your current relationship status? Married
Cohabiting
Divorced
Separated
Single, never married

6 What is your highest educational qualification? None
GCSE
A level
Degree
Other Qualification (please specify)

7 Are you currently (please tick ALL that apply):

Employed: full time
part time
self-employed
night / shift work

Not employed:
looking for work
not currently looking for work
student / in training
retired
unable to work

If not currently working, when did you last work? _____

If applicable, is your partner currently (please tick ALL that apply):

Employed: full time
part time
self-employed
night / shift work

Not employed:
looking for work
not currently looking for work
student / in training
retired
unable to work

If not currently working, when did they last work? _____

8 If you work, how many hours a week do you usually work?

15 hours or less 16 – 30 hours 31 – 48 hours 49 or more hours

9 What is your family income? (weekly OR Annual)

Weekly Income

£100 or less
£101 - £150
£151 - £250
£251 - £480
£481 - £750
£751 - £1400
More than £1400

Annual Income

£5,200 or less
£5,200 - £7,800
£7,800 - £13,000
£13,000 – £25,000
£25,000 - £39,000
£39,000-£73,000
More than £73,000

Thank you very much for your help!

Please return completed surveys to the childcare setting in the envelope provided, **OR** to

Thomas Coram Research Unit
27-28 Woburn Square
London WC1H 0AA

**If you have any further questions, or you would like to contact the research team,
please contact:**

Dr Katie Quy
Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London
27/28 Woburn Square London WC1H 0AA

Tel: 020 7612 6967

Email: k.quy@ioe.ac.uk

Web: www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru

Appendix II: Information sheet

Evaluation of free Childcare in the borough: Information Sheet

The borough Council currently offers local residents free 25-hour childcare places for 3 and 4 year olds in schools and children's centres. This is a top-up of ten hours compared to the government offer. The borough Council has asked the Institute of Education (IOE) to evaluate the impact of this offer on employment and training.

What does this mean for you?

We are asking parents of 3 and 4 year old children to help us evaluate the impact of this offer. Whether you decide to take part or not is entirely up to you. If you do take part, you can have your name entered into a prize draw for a £25 gift voucher.

We would like to ask you about:

- Your use of the childcare setting;
- Whether you feel it has supported you to find or stay in employment, or to access training

Researchers will be visiting to ask you to take part. If you agree, we will ask you to complete a short survey. You can choose to do this either face-to-face, over the telephone at a convenient time, or by completing a short paper survey.

Can I change my mind about taking part?

Yes, you can change your mind about taking part at any time, without giving any reason.

Will the research be confidential?

Yes. Any information you provide will be in the strictest confidence. We won't use your name and no one outside the research team will see any of the information you give us. Any information we collect will be treated in accordance with the Data Protection Act and will be used only for research.

What will happen to the results from the study?

We will provide a report to the borough Council, and possibly for wider circulation, but it won't include any names.

How can I contact the research team?

You can telephone us at Thomas Coram Research Unit on 020 7612 6967 (there is an answer phone outside working hours), or you can email us at k.quy@ioe.ac.uk, or write to us at Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London, 27/28 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0AA. We will always be happy to answer any questions.

Appendix III: Consent form

Consent form

Evaluation of free Early Childhood Education and Care in the borough

Parent's Name

I agree to take part in this research study, the aims of which have been explained to me.

- I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- I know that I can refuse to answer any or all of the questions and that I can stop the interview at any point.
- I note that all responses will be treated as strictly confidential, and in no case will I (or my child[ren]) be identified in any report.
- I understand that information will be used for research purposes only.
- I have read the information sheet about the study and have had my questions about the study answered.

Signed:

Date:

Name of researcher:

Date:

----- ✂
As a thank you for your help, we would like to enter you into a prize draw for the chance to win a £25 voucher. If you would like to be entered, please print and sign your name below and return the slip with your survey

Yes, I would like to be entered into the prize draw

Name: _____

Signature: _____

The Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) is a multi-disciplinary research unit within the Institute of Education, University of London. Founded in 1973 by Professor Jack Tizard, its principal function is to carry out research of relevance to the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families.

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