

Parental Consultation: The introduction of the New Early Learning and Childcare Entitlements, for Two Year Olds, as a Provision within the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.

Introduction

The Scottish Government is committed to improving and increasing high quality, flexible early learning and childcare which is accessible and affordable for all children and families, and matches the best in Europe.

Their priorities are to:

- Improve outcomes for children, especially those who are more vulnerable or disadvantaged
- Support parents to work, train or study; or, provide opportunities for employment or family support.

(Scottish Government 2014)

The criteria required to be met to access this additional provision is as follows:

- 2 year olds from the point that they are looked after, under a kinship care order, or with a parent appointed guardian.
- 2 year olds, starting from the first term after their second birthday, (where their 2nd birthday falls on or after 1 March 2014) with a parent in receipt of qualifying benefits; or, the first term after their parent starts receiving qualifying benefits. Those benefits are:
 1. Income support
 2. Jobseekers allowance (income based)
 3. Employment and Support Allowance (income based)
 4. Incapacity or Severe Disablement Allowance
 5. State Pension Credit

As part of her activities on placement with the 101 Project, a University of Dundee MSc Social Work student, Meagan Curtis, wanted to consult with parents about the additional child care provision, within the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, being made available to particular groups of two year olds. The student felt it was important that parents were given the opportunity to voice their opinions on this new provision as well as the consultation process that led to the provision being included in the Act.

The student produced the following summary of findings to be made available to One Parent Families Scotland. She has also sought the agreement of the parents involved for the findings to be available for dissemination.

The findings have been incorporated into the 101 Project Service Plan for 2015–16.

Summary of Findings

Compiled by Meagan Curtis, MSc Social Work Student, March 2015

Many studies highlight the importance of childcare provision for early years. Indeed, many parents and professionals perceive this provision as a method of introducing new skills in the social and cognitive domains (Lamb & Ehnert, 2006). The introduction of free childcare places for children from two years of age (The Scottish Government, 2014) is a change in legislation and service provision which could impact families and individuals for years to come. Vandell et al (2010) suggest the quality childcare in the early years can have an impact as far as age fifteen, in terms of cognitive academic achievement and problem behaviours.

The information obtained has been gathered through a mixed methods design, specifically a brief questionnaire and a focus group. All seven participants could be identified as lone parents, namely mothers. The information gathered conveys a snapshot of their experiences, knowledge and views of childcare for preschool years and their opinions about changes recently implemented, specifically for two year old children. The data collated and subsequent findings also contains some ideas or recommendations they would like to see occur.

Questionnaire Findings (Quantitative Data)

Question 1: Five of the seven participants have children under the age of four years of age.

Question 2: Five of the seven participants were aware of the new childcare service provision for children from two years of age.

Question 3: Sources of this information about this initiative were listed as family, friends, television and hearsay.

Question 4: Six of the seven participants have not made use of this childcare provision.

Question 5: Four service users believed this initiative would help parents getting back to work or further education or training.

Question 6: Six service users did not agree that this provision should only be made available to parents who are in receipt of benefits. A seventh participant agreed and disagreed with this.

Question 7: Four service users felt that this increase in childcare provision would benefit children. Two participants felt this would not benefit children and one more felt it did and it didn't and ticked both boxes.

Question 8: Of those who believed it would benefit children , participants listed ways in which children would benefit from this initiative as ' for kids to socialise more at an early age', 'earlier they start the better', 'the earlier children socialise the better' and 'meet people'.

Question 9: Six participants were not involved in any discussions in regard to the changes to the childcare provision. One participant was involved in discussions previously.

Question 10: Four service users did not feel involved in policy decisions that affect their family and children. Two participants felt they were involved in these decisions.

Focus Group (Qualitative Data)

The group opened the discussion with dialogue about their experience of childcare in Dundee with their children. All of the participants felt that there could be much better communication between the nurseries and the parents. One parent communicated that she would like the opportunity to be more involved with what was going on at the nursery and their upcoming events so that she could play a part in her child's learning. Another parent felt that if she knew more about what the children would be doing in advance; she could try to reinforce that specific learning at home, for example, new focus words etc.

Another topic discussed was the benefit of this provision for the children who availed of it. Four parents agreed that the biggest benefit was developing social skills, specifically with other children but also with other adults. They also emphasised the benefit of learning how to share and the activities completed. Two others communicated feeling that two years old was possibly too early to have children looked after by people other than family, out with the home. One parent questioned the additional training childcare workers had received in order to provide due care and attention to children at this young age- in terms of age appropriate activities and also more practical issues, such as toileting. The remainder of the group agreed with this observation.

The group discussed the implications this service provision may have on the parents of those who avail of it. Two participants mentioned that this may offer some parents some respite to focus sometime on themselves and working to improve their well-being. The others in the group agreed with this perspective, reflecting on the difficulties of caring for children, especially if they have other children or are a lone parent. One participant believed it might be a good way to build relationships with other parents in the community or to socialise more and develop networks of support. Another participant felt that the time allocated within this initiative for two year olds was quite short if a parent wanted to use this time for further training or job applications.

When asked if they felt every parent is treated equally within this initiative, all seven disagreed. To begin with all of the participants stated that they felt it was unfair that only parents who were in receipt of benefits could be considered for this initiative. They all felt that it was morally wrong that those who work are not offered the same package. All seven were in agreement that every child should be afforded the same opportunities from early years. One parent felt that this policy discriminated against working parents and their children who could also benefit from this change. While the group agreed with this stand point, one parent did note that she did not feel that 'really rich types' should be able to avail of this change, stating that they should have to make some contribution if they wanted to make use of this service. This changed the groups' original opinion as they all agreed that those with high family income, should make some contribution and therefore the eligibility should be based on actual income in the family, rather being in receipt of certain benefits. Two parents highlighted that it may in fact discourage parents from getting back into work, training or education as this experience may highlight for them additional support and benefits in favour of remaining unemployed, whilst still being able to spend time with their children. All seven respondents were happy to see that looked after children and children under kinship care orders were included in the Bill. Half of the participants have some connection to children in these scenarios.

The consensus from all the parents in attendance was that although this is a good idea on the surface, there are some aspects which need to be ironed out. One such detail raised was that only specific nurseries within Dundee actually provide the service. In effect, there is a likelihood that a place may be offered from a nursery quite a distance away. Many of those in attendance mentioned friends who had been in this predicament and decided not to avail of this new initiative. One parent identified that there were only a certain number of places and the times and details were all fixed which didn't offer much choice or control to the family who may benefit from the initiative. She felt the

local authority should do more to involve parents in making decisions. None of the parents were aware of what a consultation was or where to find information about one. When this was explained, all six parents felt strongly about being involved in forums which would allow them to communicate their opinions. They questioned why nobody has spoken to them about this from the local authority.

Recommendations for the future

In terms of the policy introduced, I would agree with the views expressed by the group. I feel there should be more places available in order to boost early year's education. I also feel that family choice should also play a larger part, providing a service which meets their needs, specifically the times of provision. Generally, I would recommend the service provision point of delivery is reviewed to include an option to split the service provided over two nurseries or even different types of service to included private and independent nurseries.

I also feel that the local authority should be doing more to involve the parents that this change directly impacts in order to gain their views and ideas. I would recommend that the local authority listen to the parent's reviews of the service in order to work together to improve it. It is clear from this consultation that these parents do have an opinion and are keen to work collaboratively with nurseries and others to achieve the best for their children.

With regard to The 101 Project specifically, I feel this consultation may have highlighted the experience and wisdom that our service user can offer both to themselves and the organisation. The focus group used emphasised our service users desire to be involved and have their opinion heard. The entire group revelled in the opportunity to express their views. They were passionate and direct about their opinions. I would recommend that The 101 Project play a more active role in encouraging these lone parents to take part in decisions that affect them. This could include keeping them updated on upcoming consultations, gathering views from focus groups and feeding this back to the local authority, even making use of the space provided to encourage consultations to occur on the premises, in the heart of the community. These parents attend a weekly group which aims to improve levels of confidence, provide support and advice and lead to a peer mentoring programme. Incorporating this recommendation within this group would work to promote independence and active participation in decision making. This may facilitate the voice of lone parents, regularly under acknowledged to be heard in decision making forums.

References

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