



CHANGE Community Engagement Summary

Introduction

Meaningful engagement with the community is at the heart of the CHANGE project and is considered the key to developing a model which is suited to the profile and needs of the project area. A full-time member of staff is based in the area, working closely with the Thriving Places North East team to listen to parents and carers, children and young people, providers and stakeholders about their views on current services, gaps and aspirations for changes to services and support.

January - April 2017

This paper briefly summarises the key findings to date from CHANGE community engagement work between January and April 2017. To date, the project team has spoken to 43 parents about their views on childcare, either through short, semi-structured discussions and one focus group session (Appendix A). The majority of parents spoken to so far have younger children and so discussions have largely focused on nursery places. There are plans in the community engagement strategy to work with schools and older children to ensure that the views of families with primary school aged children are captured as the work progresses.

Summary

The overall message so far from parents is that there is a fundamental need for more childcare places, and for these to be flexible and affordable. Parents and carers have consistently said that when looking for childcare, they wanted their children to be safe, happy and have opportunities to play with other children, and many have expressed that accessing work and study opportunities was another driver.

The key themes which have emerged so far include flexibility; affordability; relationships; care; education; quality, and; accessibility.

Relationships have been consistently valued by both practitioners and families alike, with practitioners going above and beyond the childcare role to look at whole family support and nurture.



Relationships

The value of relationships has emerged as a priority for families and practitioners. As summed up by one parent:

"I love coming here [to nursery] because it's like one big family...you support each other... you trust them to look after your kids as if they were their own."

Parents have readily stated that it can be hard to leave their children when they first start going to nursery, and that these positive, trusting relationships are important to ease these feelings. The value of these relationships also translates into wider family support, as families feel more comfortable in discussing more difficult situations.

One nursery headteacher described a family she works with telling her they had no money over the weekend and so had run out of food. *"I could have given her a voucher for the foodbank, but I wanted to go with her for support. There are real feelings of shame and guilt – she kept blaming herself...it was important for her to have someone to go there with her. It's all about people and relationships."*

The emotional bonds of trusted, non-judgemental support and advice on things that are happening in families' lives are what builds a sense of community and provides a safe space for families to access support they otherwise may not have known about or felt comfortable accessing. The impact of these relationships in the short and long term appears to be invaluable, and is something parents look for, too. When asked what their hopes for the future and going to a new nursery, one parent said *"I want it to be my second home"*.

Flexibility

Flexible childcare that responds to the changing needs of family life was a priority for parents who are currently accessing childcare and those who are not but wish to. Parents and carers spoken to so far want flexibility in a number of senses, including the number of hours they use, the times they use them and being able to use childcare over the school holidays.

One parent who works shifts described that the childcare option she had been offered was for a fixed pattern, but her shifts changed week to week. Having responsive childcare that could change to suit shift work would therefore be welcomed. The need for this type of fluidity was echoed by parents who discussed emergency scenarios if their family member who cared for their children got ill or was on holiday, and indeed by a family who currently do not use childcare but would like the option to be able to use it occasionally, and to know it was there if needed.

Pick up and drop off times were also an issue for parents and carers in work or study, and was raised by around a third of parents as an area they would like changed. Having nurseries open from before 8.30am and until after 6pm was requested as it allowed families to be more independent:

"I'd like to not have to rely on anyone to pick them up".

"I am taking a class to improve my English. It starts at 9am so it is hard to get there on time"

Similarly, having the option to get additional hours to top up the 3 hour blocks currently available was raised by around 15% of parents to support access to work or study.

The impact of holidays was raised by one parent which was echoed by many at the focus group. *"It's really hard if you're a working parent – 6 weeks is a long time"*. Childcare provision over the holiday sessions with the option of spreading entitlement hours throughout the year was something several parents (10%) felt strongly would help them.

Affordability

Access to affordable childcare is crucial for families, and the costs associated with private provision can be prohibitive. This came up particularly within the context of working or studying, as at times the flexibility they required could only be provided by private providers, but the fees made this unsustainable.

As evidenced by one parent who described that *"I would be earning less than childcare would cost"* but he valued having the time with his child. He went on to say that Universal Credit has been very confusing for them, and

that while they were initially told they would have £400+ per month, this dropped to £64, then to nothing. *“I worked part time and she’s on mat leave – how could we not be entitled to anything?”* Affordable childcare, along with access to reliable advice would greatly increase families knowledge of their options, and allow them to plan accordingly.

Care, Education and Quality

When asked what they want for their children from nursery, by far the most common responses from parents and carers were: happy (75%); safe (75%); socialisation (60%). Around a third of parents stated that the reputation of the nursery was very important to them, and made their assessment by looking at reviews online and speaking to other parents. A third of families valued the opportunity for their child to play outside, and 14% valued having a varied programme of activities.

Accessibility

As highlighted at the beginning of the paper, accessibility has been the biggest barrier for parents in accessing childcare. Around a third of parents spoken to have been or are currently on waiting lists for nursery places and have had limited or no support with childcare in this time. Due to prohibitive costs of private providers, local authority nurseries are over-subscribed and parents have reported being on a waiting list for up to 12 months. This has led to many parents feeling they are putting their life on hold:

“I want to study and have found a course at college but I can’t get childcare. It’s just me on my own. I found a course and spoke to the college to see if I could do it part time but I couldn’t get childcare for that either. It’s frustrating because I can’t plan my life.”

Another parent stated *“Status updates from the nursery would be very helpful, and with information on how to appeal if you don’t get a place”*.

There are also issues around physically accessing a childcare place when they live further away from the nursery and have to rely on public transport. This can create additional barriers financially, and places greater time restrictions for parents to undertake other opportunities while their children are being cared for. There is also concern amongst parents about crossing busy roads with small children, and ideas around practical aspects of planning which impact on overall accessibility.

Overall, families were keen to stress that they are grateful for support they have received, and very much value the relationships they have built up with practitioners and fellow parents.

The National Picture

The national picture of what parents and carers want from childcare centres around 4 main themes, namely: flexibility; quality; affordability and; accessibility. As explored above, engagement with families in the project area has shown that these are indeed areas which are important to them, and have consistently been raised as priorities for parents and carers.

Unpicking the terms more, there is learning around flexibility for example, that would not just relate to a nursery's opening hours, but also the way in which provision is offered e.g. changing hours to suit unpredictable shift patterns. In this instance, flexibility would encompass a more responsive childcare model which can adapt to support families in a range of circumstances.

The key difference to date appears to be the value of relationships with practitioners. Having trusting, meaningful relationships where professionals adopt a more holistic approach, looking at families' lives and supporting them in ways that make sense for each family rather than a 'one size fits all' approach has been highlighted as very valuable. In the example cited above of a practitioner accompanying a parent to a foodbank, shows both the depth of these relationships and the value of them at the same time. Having practitioners who support families not just in their normal day to day duties, but who support families to deal with adversity, build resilience and confidence, make a real difference to families' lives. Parents have indicated that this is something they very much value, such as the parent who stated the nursery was like 'one big family' where you 'support each other'. Likewise, recognising and valuing parent's contributions deepens this sense of mutual respect, and nurtures families as assets to their community.

Appendix A – Engagement

The majority of engagement has been through semi-structured conversations in which parents and carers are asked a series of key questions, and conversations stem from these.

Key questions for families include:

1. What matters to you? How can or could childcare support you to do more of this?
2. Are you happy with your childcare arrangements? What works well?
3. What would you change? What do you need from childcare?
4. Do you use any childcare services at the moment? If yes, what?
5. How do you find out what childcare is available in your area?
6. Do you know what financial support is available to pay for childcare?
7. Where would you go (or like to go) to find out more?
8. What do you want for your children from childcare?

The focus group session was a larger group discussion in which families were asked a series of similar questions, again used as discussion points. They were asked and captured by the project officer, with the nursery head teacher there as a trusted person who was able to provide more information on issues as they arose (e.g. queries about parking, drop off times etc.) to provide context and support.

Questions here included:

1. What do you like about nursery?
2. What would you change?
3. How do you find out about childcare?
4. Do you know where to find out about financial support with childcare?
Where would you like to find out?
5. What do you want for your child when they are here?
6. What are your hopes for the future? How can childcare help to support this?
7. Do you have any ideas about what could be done differently?