

# **Increasing childcare places in Brent**

Report of the overview task group

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Appendix A: Maps showing childcare provision alongside demographic information

# Executive Summary

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This task group was set up to examine why there are early education places available in Brent that are not being taken up, how childcare and early education places are planned and provided for and how Brent employers can play a larger part in providing childcare and pre-school education facilities for the children of their employees.

The task group undertook a range of work including discussions with parents, daycare providers, childminders and the Children's Services Advisory Partnership, and interviews with officers from Brent's Education, Arts and Libraries Service.

The key concerns for parents concerning childcare are affordability, flexibility, quality, location and type of provision. There are generally enough places available for those parents who can afford them. There are a large number of parents that cannot access childcare because it is too expensive, even with the financial support available.

Trust is vital to parents when choosing childcare, although many do not know a lot about the various options available to them. Parents tend to prefer provision in the maintained sector because they perceive it to be better. If parents are to be able to make good, informed choices, they need more information about the various options available to them.

Free early education places for three and four year old children (two and a half hours per day) is not enough to be a viable childcare option for working parents. Early education needs to be integrated with childcare and in convenient locations for it to be useful to parents. There is also a big demand for care outside normal working hours, during the weekends and respite care for short periods of time with limited notice.

There are not enough childcare places available for children aged zero to two years old. This is because it is not financially viable for day nurseries and childminders to offer many places to children in this age range. While most childminders do care for children aged two and under, it is less financially viable than looking after older children.

The biggest threat to the sustainability of private and voluntary sector daycare providers and childminders is competition with the maintained sector. Many parents falsely think that if they accept a place in a maintained nursery for their child while they are three or four, this will increase their chances of being offered a place at the same school when the child starts reception. This means that many parents remove their children from private and voluntary day nurseries when they are offered places in maintained nurseries. Private and voluntary day nurseries, however, are financially dependent on this group of children to make their business financially viable. There is scope for the voluntary, private and maintained sectors to work together to provide a comprehensive range of services to parents. Each is able to respond to parents needs to different ways – this should be capitalised upon.

The council should carefully plan where extra provision should go using information mapping demand and supply for childcare services. This will minimise the negative impacts of new childcare places on other providers in the area and will ensure services are provided where they are needed.

Other threats to daycare providers include the recruitment and retention of staff and the need for a more business-oriented approach.

Employers have a key role to play in the provision of childcare for their staff. While the council has some very successful family friendly policies which are widely promoted, more could be done to assist employees with their childcare needs. This is important as the council is one the largest employers in the borough and should be leading the way in terms developing and sharing good practice.

## **Recommendations**

That all services are designed around the needs of children and families, including their health, welfare, education and employment needs.

That the Early Years Service develops material to communicate fully to parents the childcare options available to them, carefully outlining the benefits of each type of provision. This information should be impartial, comprehensive and focused on the needs of children and families. It should include an explanation that accepting a place in a nursery class or school when a child is three or four will not guarantee that child a place in the reception class of that school.

That the information be accessible from various locations, with an aim of ultimately offering or sign-posting the service from a neighbourhood level via schools, children's centres and health visitors.

That the Children and Families Department, build an evidence-base, mapping the childcare market against need. This information should be used when making decisions about where childcare places should go and where resources should be targeted and prioritised. This will help the council carry out its strategic role to ensure good quality, flexible choices are available to all parents.

That when new childcare places are planned, particularly children's centres and including places for children with special educational needs, their location is chosen based on good evidence about supply and demand.

That the strategic planning of childcare places be overseen by the Children and Young People Strategic Partnership Board.

That Brent Council embraces the extended schools programme working in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors and childminders to ensure provision meets the needs of parents. That the extended schools programme is developed in partnership with the Early Years Service.

That Brent Council fully involves on an area basis childminders and private and voluntary nurseries in developing children's centres. These sectors should be used to extend the hours childcare is available and the ages of children the care is for.

That Brent's regeneration team work in partnership with the Children and Families Department to attract regeneration funding to support Brent's low-income parents with

their childcare needs. The impact of this funding should be monitored for its effectiveness. Regeneration funding should also be sought to fund summer camps for Brent's children.

That Brent Council considers linking training for childcare workers with the children's centres.

That the support to childminders be extended to include practical business support, such as a handbook. The childminders forum and networks could act to unite the childminders together to give them a sense of professionalism and to lessen the feeling of being isolated.

That childminders continue to be given equal priority in the council's advertising and marketing material.

That Brent Council's Human Resources unit should work towards extending the work already begun around "family-friendly" initiatives for staff and investigate and implement a childcare vouchers scheme for the council's employees. The scheme should compliment and not duplicate resources already available from the Government to assist with childcare. This practice, as well as other family friendly policies, should be promoted with other employers in Brent.

That the Overview Committee receives an update on progress with these recommendations at their February 2006 meeting. The Overview Committee will decide at this time if they need a further update in another six months.

# 1. Introduction

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Local authorities are responsible for the strategic planning and co-ordination of the local delivery of the government's Sure Start agenda. The main aim of Sure Start is to provide integrated high quality services for all children, so they can grow up to contribute positively to their communities and society as a whole. It also aims to secure better outcomes for parents, allowing them whenever possible to return to work.

A key part of this agenda is to ensure good quality childcare is available for all children and families to meet their needs, regardless of income or employment status. There is a shortage of childcare provision in London to meet existing needs. In Brent, it appears there are enough early education and childcare places available for all children aged three and four<sup>1</sup>. However in 2002/03 only 71% of three year olds were accessing good quality free education places. This is compared to 83.3% for London.

In 2002/03, 69% of Brent's three and four year olds accessed early education from the maintained sector, compared to 62% for outer London and 65% for greater London. Also, the rates of children being looked after by childminders in Brent are among the lowest in London (4.3%).

The task group investigated why there are early education places available in Brent that are not being taken up, including factors such as type of provision, location and cost. It examined how childcare and early education places are planned and provided for in Brent in order to ensure a range of provision is available across the borough to suit the various needs of Brent's families and the different ages of children. It considered how Brent employers can play a larger part in providing childcare and pre-school education facilities for the children of their employees.

The task group carried out the following:

- *Parents' focus group* - 8 parents recruited from the Children's Information Service with varying numbers and ages of children and childcare needs met to discuss their childcare issues
- *Analysis of literature, research and performance information*
- *Mapping exercise* – all childcare provision in the borough has been shown on one map alongside demographic information
- *Camden Early Years Service Open Day* – Camden have recently received beacon status for their Early Years Service

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<sup>1</sup> Three and four year old children are entitled to early years education, comprising five two and half hour sessions per week for 11 weeks each term. Parents cannot be asked to contribute towards this minimum entitlement but may be charged fees for any services or childcare that is additional to the free place. The Government is proposing to extend this entitlement to 15 hours over 38 weeks.

- *Daycare providers forum* – members of the task group attended the forum to discuss issues around childcare sustainability
- *Childminders forum* – members of the task group attended the forum to discuss childminders issues
- *Brent Early Years Service* – the task group met with members from the team
- *Education, Art and Libraries* – the task group met with the Director of Education, Arts and Libraries, Assistant Director of Strategy and Partnerships, Head the Communications and Student Support (responsible for the Children’s Information Service)
- *Employers’ contributions* – the task group met with the Director of Brent’s Human Resources and Diversity team to discuss our family friendly policies
- *Children’s Services Advisory Partnership* – the task group consulted the members of the partnership over their findings

## **2. Why increase childcare places?**

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### **The Government’s agenda**

The Government has made a commitment to end child poverty within a generation. In 1998, the National Childcare Strategy was launched and has become fundamental to policies to end child poverty. The strategy aims to move parents from welfare to work and alleviate social exclusion by increasing the availability of affordable, quality childcare for all children. It is hoped this will both improve the health, education and emotional development for young children and support parents as parents and in their aspirations towards employment.

The Government is implementing a range of strategies and programmes to improve support for families with children. Current government initiatives and investment include:

- Sure Start, neighbourhood nurseries, children’s centres, universal part-time nursery education places for three and four year olds and Sure Start Maternity Grant
- Tax credits, Working Tax Credit (with a childcare element), Child Tax Credit which includes a baby element
- Statutory maternity pay for 26 weeks followed by 26 weeks of unpaid maternity leave
- Two weeks paid paternity leave and unpaid paternity leave
- 26 weeks paid adoption leave
- The right to request flexible working hours for parents

The primary mechanism for expanding childcare is through pump-priming funds to encourage private sector development, especially in disadvantaged areas. The lead responsibility for the development and implementation of childcare and early years services is with local authorities in partnership with a range of statutory, voluntary and

private sector bodies. Local authorities are responsible for strategic planning and coordinating local delivery.

More recently the Government has extended their commitment to parents and families. The new proposals are outlined in a draft ten year strategy for childcare<sup>2</sup> published in December 2004. Key changes include:

- a goal of twelve months paid maternity leave by the end of the next Parliament, with the right for the mother to transfer a proportion of her maternity pay and leave to the father. As a step on the way, expanding the entitlement of paid maternity leave to nine months from April 2007;
- a goal of 20 hours a week of free high quality care for 38 weeks for all 3 and 4 year olds. As a step on the way, ensuring all children receive 15 hours a week for 38 weeks a year reaching all children by 2010;
- ensuring there is a Children's Centre in every community by 2010; and
- making childcare for five to fourteen year olds available based in schools.

There will be an enhanced duty placed on local authorities to ensure there is sufficient provision to meet local childcare needs. There will be a £125 million fund a year from April 2005 to support investment by local authorities in childcare. There will be a strengthened expectation for local authorities to work with their partners in the planning, commissioning and delivery of services, increasingly working through children's trusts. It stresses the need for strong leadership to drive this agenda forward locally and emphasises the importance of robust local arrangements for consultation, planning and intervention in order to secure the delivery of sufficient quality childcare places.

These changes reflect the Government's move towards providing child centred services as outlined in the Green Paper, Every Child Matters, and the Children Act. The Act focuses on providing universal and integrated services for children delivered around the needs of each child. It prescribes an increased role for partnership working. Childcare is a key feature of how services will be delivered to children in the future.

### **Brent Council's agenda**

Supporting children and young people is a priority for Brent Council. The Corporate Strategy outlines our vision to ensure all have access to the best possible life chances. The council has made a commitment to increase the availability of affordable childcare, delivered by qualified, professional staff through our partners. It aims to provide safe pre-school play and educational opportunities for young children and enable parents wishing to enter employment to do so with confidence.

These goals are translated into actions via the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership strategy published in November 2003. This partnership has recently changed to Children's Services Advisory Partnership. While the partnership is no longer responsible for setting policy in this area, it still has a key role in developing strategy. A new Early Years Strategy is currently being developed in light of the recent Government changes.

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<sup>2</sup> HM Treasury, 2004: *Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare.*



Brent's regeneration action plan has a priority to reduce worklessness levels across the borough to below the London average. A key part of the strategy to achieve this is to overcome barriers to employment including the provision of affordable and accessible childcare.

### **Improved life chances**

There is significant evidence of the impact of early years experiences on later life chances. The recent findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project show that an early start to pre-school can have significant positive effects on children's cognitive and social development. It looks at evidence about child poverty and concludes that ensuring that parents with low earning power are able to access childcare and engage with the labour market is critical to helping families to break cycles of poverty and disadvantage. From an exploration of evidence about parents and the labour market it makes the case for reliable, quality and affordable childcare to help parents to achieve a work-family life balance.

US research shows every US\$1 spent before the age of five saves US\$7 in later life on crime, social security and mental health. Children with intensive early years family support and childcare are more likely to go on to higher education, own their own homes and never draw welfare<sup>3</sup>.

## **3. What do parents need?**

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Through discussions with parents, the task group discovered that affordability, flexibility, quality, location and type are the most important areas concerning parents when it comes of childcare.

### **Affordability**

Affordability is consistently the most important factor determining whether parents are able to use childcare. Research carried out by the Daycare Trust<sup>4</sup> shows that childcare costs in London are higher than any other part of the country and are prohibitive to the majority of low-income parents.

The focus group carried out by the task group reflects these findings. The parents were all struggling to find suitable childcare. They all reported that there is enough childcare available, but that it is too expensive to make it viable. This forced some parents to either stay at home to care for their children themselves, or to attempt to co-ordinate a number of providers throughout the day to make it affordable. Some parents were forced to not use their preferred type of childcare simply because it was more affordable.

The cost of childcare is rising every year. The table below shows the average costs of childcare nationally and in London.

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<sup>3</sup> Toynebee, P. 2003: *The childcare trap: why London needs affordable childcare for all its children*.

<sup>4</sup> Daycare Trust, 2004: *Childcare needs of London families: research into low income families outside the 20% most disadvantaged wards*.

**Typical weekly childcare costs (£) for full-time nursery or childminding place and 15 hours a week at an after school club 2004<sup>5</sup>**

	Nursery (under 2)	Nursery (over 2)	Highest nursery cost	Childminder (under 2)	Childminder (over 2)	After school club	Holiday costs
<b>National Average</b>	134	123	-	121	120	35	73.71
<b>Inner London</b>	168	149	338	137	132	31	70.83
<b>Outer London</b>	169	147	284	135	134	29	77.48

These high costs impact disproportionately upon lone parents. Discussions with Job Centre Plus and Reed Recruitment reiterated the importance of childcare in getting parents into work. Both stressed the importance of affordable childcare in helping their clients to achieve their goals.

As well as affordability, the task group discovered that a key issue for parents is the way funding is often allocated on an area basis. Those in disadvantaged areas have access to greater resources than those in less disadvantaged areas through programmes such as Sure Start. The parents felt this is unfair on those living in less disadvantaged areas but have an equal need for support to those living in more disadvantaged areas. Research carried out by the Daycare Trust<sup>6</sup> found that many families in most need in London are missing out on the help they need because funding is often targeted to the 20% most disadvantaged wards. Nationally, however, only 54% of poor children live in these areas.

The following help is available to parents to assist with childcare costs:

- **Free early education places for 3 and 4 year olds**  
All three and four year old children are entitled to a part-time early education place, comprising five two and a half hour sessions per week for 11 weeks each term amounting to around £1,200 a year per child.
- **The childcare element of the working tax credit**  
Working Tax Credit is an in-work tax credit for people on lower incomes which replaced the Working Families' Tax Credit in April 2003. It includes an element to support the costs of registered childcare or approved home carers for working parents. The childcare element will pay up to 70% of eligible childcare costs up to a maximum of £94.50 (70% of £135) per week for one child, and £140 (70% of £200) per week for two or more children.

<sup>5</sup> Daycare Trust, 2004: *A new era for universal childcare? Childcare and early years services in 2004.*

<sup>6</sup> Daycare Trust, 2004: *Childcare needs of London families: research into low income families living outside the 20% most disadvantaged wards.*

- ***New Deal – childcare support***  
New Deal is a Government strategy for getting people back into work. A lone parent whose youngest child is under 16 and is either not working or is working under 16 hours per week, can get help under the New Deal for Lone Parents scheme. There is access to a personal adviser, who will advise what funding is available towards course fees, travel and childcare.
- ***Employers’ support towards childcare costs***  
From 2005 changes in the existing tax and National Insurance exemptions will focus on employer-supported childcare to create a better incentive for employers to support the provision of childcare for their employees (see section 5 of this report).

The task group has found that these measures have failed to impact sufficiently on the ability for many parents to return to training or employment in Brent. Low pay and high rents means that many parents are often better off financially receiving benefits than they are if they return to work. Two and a half hour free places for three and four year olds create more problems than they solve for many parents. Two and a half hours is not long enough on its own for a parent to use this time to take up employment or training and can be particularly unworkable if there is no childcare available either side of the two and a half hours. The childcare element of the working tax credit is valuable, but it simply not enough for many parents to make returning to work viable.

Camden Council has used regeneration funding to develop a project called EQUAL BetterCUP (better childcare for unemployed parents). Its aim is to improve access to employment and training and has a focus on childcare. Some of the funding is used to directly fund childcare for parents attending work or training. The funds are given to the parents so they can choose their own care to best meet their needs. The task group were impressed with this scheme and would like to see regeneration funding used in a similar way in Brent to support parents into employment. Brent Council has managed to attract a large amount of regeneration funding. This funding has been used to deliver a number of projects, many of which relate to increasing employment opportunities for residents in some of the most deprived parts of the borough. While some of this resource has been used to fund childcare, it is unclear specifically how much and what the benefits were.

## **Quality**

The task group found that trust is vital to parents when choosing childcare. Many of the parents that attended the focus group were worried about the quality of the care their children were receiving. Recent research indicates that group care for children aged between zero and two years old may not be as beneficial as individual care, such as that provided by childminders. This highlighted to the task group the importance of having a range of good quality options available to parents to meet their needs.

The task group discovered that most of the parents preferred care in the maintained sector over the private and voluntary sectors. When primary and nursery schools offer places to children, their parents are inclined to accept the places regardless of the

impact or disruption to their children. This is reflected in an assessment of where the vacancies tend to occur. Last year nursery schools only experienced about a 6% vacancy rate, while out of school provision experienced a 13% vacancy rate, daycare settings experienced a 17% vacancy rate and childminders experienced a 37% vacancy rate<sup>7</sup>. The task group feel that the various options available need to be clearly outlined to parents so that they can make informed and good choices. Members of the Children's Services Advisory Partnership described how parents are confused about where to get information. Information about schools admissions, early education and childcare should be available from the same place.

### **Integrated and convenient**

Many parents use a range of different types of childcare. This often occurs if a parent has a child aged three or four and wishes to access their free early education place which consists of five two and a half hour sessions per week. These early education places are often within nursery or primary schools which have no childcare available before or after the two and a half hours. Parents using this childcare either need to be available to drop off and collect their children, or have a childminder carry out this function. If a parent is working, this is almost impossible. Childminders often prefer to care for children full-time or are not always willing to undertake this type of work in addition to caring for other children. Parents with more than one child accessing childcare and education also have logistical problems when drop-off and pick-up times coincide for the various children at different locations. The task group encountered one parent who was forced to give up her work because she could not co-ordinate the logistics of her two children attending nursery and primary school as well as daycare for the rest of the day.

Through discussions with parents, the task group found that the location of childcare is a critical factor for parents. Most preferred their childcare to be close to work or home. Research funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>8</sup> found that families rely on a network of informal and formal support to transport children to and from different care settings. The coordination of childcare/education packages with work commitments often result in very complex and difficult to manage arrangements.

### **Flexibility**

The task group learned from the parents' focus group that the childcare currently available is very inflexible. The hours offered are generally 8am to 6pm. Those parents that require care outside of these hours and in the weekend have to rely on informal care and childminders, although most childminders do not work outside of these hours either. The childminders told the task group that there is a huge demand for childcare outside of normal working hours, but that it is difficult for them to get the necessary registration from OfSTED.

Many parents who do not work, and potentially would like to, need short periods of time away from their children to attend interviews. Even parents that are not looking for work need this type of respite care occasionally, particularly those with children with

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<sup>7</sup> These percentages are estimates based on vacancy rates registered at Brent's Children's Information Service.

<sup>8</sup> Skinner, C. 2003: *Running around in circles: coordinating childcare, education and work*. Published for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by the Policy Press.

disabilities. Reed Recruitment work with many lone parents helping them find employment. They found that this type of respite care was crucial for the parents they dealt with. They complained that nurseries do not keep places open for very long. This inconvenienced parents that needed to find care quickly to either attend interviews or to start work if they were able to find employment. They described this as an extremely stressful time for parents, many of whom decide not to proceed.

### **Two years and under**

The task group found that there is a huge demand in Brent for childcare for children aged two years and under. Day nurseries can only offer a limited number of places for children in this age range because they require a higher ratio of carers to children. This is more expensive. While fees for these children tend to be higher, there is still a shortfall in revenue to cover costs. Without a certain number of older children (three and four year olds) nurseries become more financially unviable. Likewise, childminders tend to prefer older children for the same reasons, although childminders are more likely to look after babies. Of the childminders consulted by the task group, 50% of them cared for babies compared to only 25% of other daycare providers.

## **4. What are the barriers to creating more childcare places?**

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The task group consulted with a group of daycare providers, childminders and the Children's Services Advisory Partnership. They found that, while Brent is meeting its targets in creating new childcare places, it is more difficult to sustain those that already exist.

### **Competition and sustainability**

The task group's discussion with a range of day care providers<sup>9</sup> and childminders found that the biggest threat to their business is increased competition for their services. Many experienced difficulties when maintained nursery schools and classes offer places to three and four year olds. Most said that they are finding it more difficult to find children to fill their places now than a year ago. They explained that parents are inclined to accept these places regardless of the impact on their children because there is a perception that maintained provision is better. Also, many parents falsely think that if they accept a place for their child while they are three or four, this will increase their chances of being offered a place at the same school when the child starts reception. The daycare providers and childminders unanimously felt the council has a strategic role in ensuring that there are not too many providers in each area for the number of children available. If the daycare providers and childminders are unable to attract enough three and four year olds, their business can become unsustainable because the setting is too reliant on revenue from children aged two years and under. Children in this age range require more staff and resources than are collected in fees. Also, they do not attract any Government subsidies.

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<sup>9</sup> 14 daycare providers attended the focus group – 8 from the private sector, 5 from the voluntary sector and 1 from the maintained sector.

While the task group recognised this difficulty, they also understand the importance of parental choice. If parents choose to send their children to a particular type of provision, they should be able to. However, there could be a role for the local authority in ensuring parents are fully aware of all of the options available to them. Also, the local authority has a role in ensuring that the provision available meets parents' needs regardless of which sector it is provided in. In any case, with the introduction of children's centres and the extended schools programme, the relationship between the various sectors and settings and the daycare providers in their areas should be taken into account. The task group felt that the maintained sector should work in closer partnership with the voluntary and private sectors. Each is able to respond to parents' needs in different ways – this should be capitalised upon. For example, the private and voluntary sector could extend the offer at children's centres to provide care for babies and children under two years old. Linking voluntary and private sector services in with those provided at children's centres will result in a more comprehensive range of services available than if services are competing with each other.

Leeds Council, a beacon authority for early years and childcare, has successfully developed a model of using the private, voluntary and maintained sectors together to provide fully inclusive, flexible early education and childcare. They discovered that many of their nursery classes in the maintained sector had empty places. They saw this extra space as an opportunity to offer parents what they need. They now deliver early education and childcare within their schools, using the voluntary, private and maintained sectors within the same setting. Co-locating services and providers like this has resulted in raised achievement and means they are able to help more families. They have also been able to reduce the turnover and sickness levels of staff in the education, health and social care sectors.

The task group commissioned a series of maps showing the location of all the settings (excluding childminders) in Brent against other demographic information. The task group believe it is this type of information that will help Brent plan strategically, using evidence, to decide where extra childcare places should go. With maps like these, Brent can see whether planned nursery classes are in the right place to meet demand and to ensure they do not contribute to over-supply in certain areas. When new children's centres are planned in the future, the task group believes their location should be chosen using an evidence based approach to maximise their impact and sustainability. The Children's Services Advisory Partnership members are very keen that the council take on this more strategic leadership role. It is crucial that the Early Years Service have an understanding of how the market is operating so that it knows where and how to intervene. A good evidence base will allow Brent to target and prioritise our resources where needs are not being met.

The daycare providers felt the council has a role in ensuring the schools give more notice to parents about whether their children have a place in their nursery class. At the moment some providers are able to fill their places in September, and may even have to turn some children away or put them onto a waiting list. The maintained nurseries start up in October and offer places right up until they open. This often means that parents are removing their children from the original setting in favour of the maintained with very little notice. One of the private nurseries consulted explained that they ask parents to agree to give one month notice before removing their child from the setting. This has worked well for the nursery enabling them to plan better.

## **Staff recruitment**

The daycare providers all commented that recruiting and retaining staff is a major threat to their business. The childcare sector has long suffered from a perceived low professional status, partly due to low rates of pay, but also due to there being a long history of the work being seen as 'women's work'. Brent has run a recruitment campaign locally in conjunction with a national campaign. Nationally, numbers working in the childcare sector have increased, but not enough to meet demand. This issue is experienced universally all over the country.

The task group recognise this issue is complex and on-going. Consultation with the Children's Services Advisory Partnership highlighted the potential role of children's centres in raising the profile of working in the sector. Parents visiting children's centres are a captive audience and training options could be attached to the centre or even provided on-site. Children's centres will become hubs for local communities. They will be non-threatening and highly accessible.

## **Business planning knowledge**

The childminders consulted as part of this exercise were extremely concerned about the status of their profession. Many felt isolated and unprotected by the law particularly concerning minimum wages and job security. Not many of the childminders took a business-like approach to their work and said they needed help with setting fees, preparing and agreeing contracts, meeting registration requirements and finding children. They felt they were given a lower priority in the council's marketing and advertising information than other types of provision such as the day nurseries. Also, they were very concerned about the development of new children's centres which are due to bring a lot more childcare places onto the market, thus taking business away from childminders.

The task group are keen that childminders are supported to succeed. Their services are extremely valuable, particularly for providing services outside of the usual hours and for younger children. Many parents choose to use childminders because they offer a personalised individual approach which they prefer to group care. They also plug the gaps between, before and after other provision. Brent has development workers who support childminders with their business needs. This support is highly valued by the childminders. The task group feel the network of childminders could be strengthened to include professional and business support and to share good practice. This could include providing practical help or seminars, as well as a general sense of belonging to a group of professionals. Camden have developed a handbook for their childminders called 'making childminding my business'. It outlines practically how to write a business plan, write policies and set fees. Brent's Childminding Network is keen to support their childminders' business need by using assured networks and a Support Childminding Scheme. Also, they want to incorporate business awareness information into pre-registration information so that prospective childminders start to see themselves as businesses from the outset. For example, information could include templates for business plans and specimen policies.

## **Play schemes**

Brent's play service provides a number of after school and holiday schemes. The main barriers they face are funding the schemes and finding premises, although there are only

six schools in the borough without a club of some sort and only four have no access to a club at all. Like other forms of childcare, the main issue for parents is cost. Many parents are not able to afford the schemes, particularly those that are not working. There are enough spaces currently being provided for all those that can afford one and want one. In fact, many are competing for the same children. None of the schemes cover their costs all of the time, therefore sustainability is often an issue for their continued viability.

The task group recognise the important role play schemes play in supporting parents as well as providing valuable experiences to Brent's young people. Research with young people shows they want access to facilities such as sports centres, adventure playgrounds, animals and boats. Brent's play service strives to provide these services. They believe that Brent's parks are an underused resource which families and children could be benefiting more from.

### **Special educational needs support**

This task group has not spent much time examining the demand or supply of childcare for children with special educational needs. The daycare providers interviewed highlighted this as an area they needed extra support in and members of the Children's Services Advisory Panel are concerned about the lack of provision available for children with special educational needs. The task group believe this is an issue that will need examining further.

## **5. What role can employers play?**

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The task group believe that employers have a key role to play in the provision of childcare. The council itself, as one of the largest employers in the borough, offers some family friendly policies to its staff. However, the task group feel that the council should provide a better example to other employers. It is difficult for Brent Council to encourage other employers to support their employees with their childcare needs if the council itself is not supporting its staff.

Brent currently offers the following flexible working:

- Job sharing
- The right to apply for flexible working
- Part-time working
- Flexi time
- Occasional working from home
- Working compressed hours
- Term-time working
- Voluntary reduced hours

In the last couple of years, these policies have been promoted more widely across the council. The success of this added support is reflected in the increase of women in senior management positions from 33% to 48% during this period (senior management is defined as grade PO9 and above). Brent has also gained high praise nationally for this achievement, having been short listed for an Opportunity Now award in May 2004,



receiving a special commendation from Working Families at their awards in December 2004, and receiving an Employee Benefits award for having the most innovative work-life balance strategy.

Brent Council, however, does not take advantage of the childcare vouchers scheme. Childcare vouchers can be offered to employees as a benefit-in-kind on top of existing pay, as part of a flexible benefits package or most commonly as part of a salary sacrifice scheme. The vouchers are exempt from National Insurance Contributions for both employers and employees – employers then reduce some of their business costs and employees make savings on their childcare costs. Employees that receive childcare vouchers can use them to pay their childcare provider. The provider will then redeem the value of the voucher directly, usually from a separate company.

Employers that have offered this scheme have found that the savings more than cover the costs. From 6 April 2005 onwards, this scheme will be extended and will become even more financially viable for employers. The childcare vouchers, up to a limit of £50 per week, will be free from income tax as well as national insurance. This could give the employee an additional £858 per year to spend at 22% tax and 11% National Insurance, whilst at 40% tax rate the savings could go up to £1,066 per year for no more outlay by the employer.

The task group believe that Brent Council should investigate the introduction of childcare vouchers for employees. The Director of Human Resources and Diversity indicated their intention to undertake these investigations and seek the necessary professional legal and financial advice.

# **Appendix A**

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## **Maps of provision**