

# **Childcare Information Seeking Behaviour of Parents**

A dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at

Goldsmiths, University of London

by

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## DECLARATION

I confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own and that the work of other persons are appropriately acknowledged.

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Esther Olawande

18th May 2016

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to my loving and wonderful parents.

Dad, I wish you were here to read this – you would have been very proud.

Thanks for teaching me that tough times never last but tough people do.

I commit this study to the ultimate father and source of all wisdom and inspiration,  
from who all families derive their names and existence.

Without you this would not have been possible.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Parents' ability to access good quality information is the lifeline to good family outcomes, just as access to good quality childcare offers a child the best start in life. Pioneering information seeking behaviour study in the field of childcare, this research identifies that family outcomes are determined by their information behaviour, demand on systems, social networks, information sources and other symptomatic influencing factors including trust, quality, cost, staff, time and values.

The research builds on existing theoretical approaches by integrating a multi-theoretical approach to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of parents' childcare information-seeking behaviour which reveals that the childcare information-seeking process is characterised by information behaviours such as sense making, information authentication, information berry-picking, and in some cases information avoidance based on parents' experience, system complexity, or family values.

Identifying patterns of childcare information-seeking behaviour, the research builds a model that reflects the four categories of information sources parents consult or engage with during the period. Recognising the major barriers to information seeking, the research accentuates the critical success factors required to improve parents' experience when looking for childcare to inform future policies, practice and development.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

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For most working parents, no other issue is fraught with worry as the choice of childcare. In a field plagued by overheated headlines, complicated political overtones as well as negative stereotyping of some types of childcare, it is imperative to understand that choosing childcare may attract different behaviour from parents. The assertions of previous studies in childcare have had their fair share of both negative and positive impacts on parents and in essence make the search for the right childcare to be more elusive rather than easily accessible.

Research carried out over the years across the sector could have also created further uncertainty about childcare due to conflicting reports about similar issues. A bolster study in Australia once reported that long hours in a group childcare is linked to better reading and the development of maths skills but also associated group childcare with worse behavioural problems and social skills (Crown, 2014; Gentleman, 2010). Belsky (1988, 1990a) concluded that children who experienced 20 hours or more per week of non-parental care in their first year of life are at elevated risk of developing insecure attachments to their mothers and of being more disobedient towards adults and aggressive towards peers than other children. However children in the care of grandparents had no behavioural issues (Melhuish, 2004). Another investigation asserts that children in group care (daycare) are safer than those being cared for in a domestic environment (i.e. parent or childminder), claiming that there were few differences in the observed quality of care by child-minders, grandparents and nannies, although grandparents had somewhat lower safety and health scores and offered children fewer activities (Leach et al. 2008). A recent study evaluating the impact of maternal time and income on child development also went on to suggest that informal childcare may have negative effects on the child's development (Sylva et al, 2011). Another report also claims that the use of informal childcare such as grandparents, siblings or non-relatives lead to significant reduction of test scores by 2.8 per cent and child development particularly if used after the child's first year; whereas formal care has no detrimental effect on children (Belsky, 1986; Hansen and Hawkes, 2009). Lewin (2005), however

purports that although cognitive skills are strongest if a child attended a group care, these children have higher likelihood of aggressive behaviour, poor work and social skills.

Aside from conflicting information, there has been the sensationalism of media reporting regarding childcare scares. Rarely is there a story about an outstanding setting or childminder on the news, and when eventually childcare hits headlines it is always to report child abuse or similar negative occurrences. According to Nelson (2009), these warnings intensify the guilt many mothers feel when they assume roles that interfere with a single-minded devotion to their children. However, more recently childcare has been highly politicised with key parties courting populace votes by targeting and recognising childcare as an important issue and a prerequisite to a thriving economy (Ball and Vincent, 2005). The recent 2015 government elections had the three major parties – Conservative Party, Labour Party and the Liberal Democratic Party including childcare provision for families in their manifestos (Berg, 2015). Even though parents are aware of media sensationalism, official childcare information was viewed as being insufficient to meet parents' needs in terms of the breadth and depth of the information available (Johnson & Joynes, 2001).

Many families around the world struggle to negotiate the competing demands of home and paid work. As more mothers return to paid work, a combination of mother substitution, increased use of unregulated and unregistered childcare, the positioning of mothers as individual consumers responsible for buying services and reliance on the expensive private market all created the cultural and material conditions surrounding the dissemination of information to parents regarding childcare and other related issues.

Analysis revealed that employment status and economic conditions are important factors that influence parental decision making on the use of childcare. The effect of these factors differ by country and type of childcare arrangement (full or part time) and reflects cultural and institutional differences in childcare policies and regulation. France, Italy and Spain follow a similar pattern of women as the principal caregivers. Although In the UK, the dominant ideology is that a mother is personally responsible for caring for her children, the UK pattern is not straightforward. As family

circumstances are unique, navigating the various childcare options and the different funding streams and cumbersome application processes poses great challenges to parents. According to Brazy et al (2001), parents' desire for balanced information has been reported to be accompanied by stress, and conflicting information has made it harder to make decisions. The UK childcare market is quite complex with a range of different types of providers and contexts. The wide variety in terms of provision and different models of delivery are striking (DfE, 2015). With formal childcare prices outstripping inflation over the decade, affordability has always been in news headlines which then impacts on parental decisions to use registered or unregistered childcare.

The issue of market forces driving quality of childcare exposes the fact that parental demand or behaviour towards cost impact significantly on the childcare market. It also raises the concern that parents may not necessarily be accessing quality childcare due to affordability issues but also based on other factors that are of more importance to them. Both parents and providers would prioritise quality as a key driver in choosing a provider, however parental definition of quality seems to vary depending on family circumstances and the needs of the child. According to the DfE (2015), in a well-functioning market, parents should be aware of the choices available to them and have the ability to assess childcare quality based on information about services. However, this is often not the case because of unaffordability, including low parental income, as well as childcare costs. In addition, a significant number of parents of preschool children feel there is little information about childcare provision. This suggests that there is the need for a greater understanding of the information seeking behaviour of parents so that their information and childcare needs might be met more successfully in this complicated and fragmented market.

Previous studies in the area of childcare have concentrated mainly on government policies, quality of childcare, maternal employment and costs of childcare. However, very little research has focussed on the area of childcare information needs and seeking behaviours of parents, including issues of cost, even though this impacts significantly on the UK childcare market and despite this being one of the commonest information needs within this cohort.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

In the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emphasis in information behaviour was on channels, systems and how these were used rather than on the individual users, their needs, where users went for information and the impact of the results on the individuals and their experiences. Several studies and much research have been carried out on the information seeking behaviour of different client groups – doctors, students, caretakers, and youth. Specific studies have explored the information-seeking behaviour of cattle ranchers (Spink & Hicks, 1996), battered women (Harris, 1988/1989), intercity gatekeepers (Agada, 1999), students and library users (Kuhlthau, 1991), health workers (Lundeen, Tenopir, & Wermager, 1991), and university researchers (Ellis, Cox, & Hall, 1993). Studies have also been carried out on parents using health services (Khoo et al. 2008) and making school choices (Bianco et al, 2013). This study however pioneers research on the information seeking behaviour in the field of childcare.

Understanding parental use of childcare would involve the exploration of their information seeking behaviour. Therefore this study aims to investigate and explore factors contributing to, and influencing parents' information seeking behaviours when looking for childcare. My research aims to answer the following critical questions:

- What are the childcare information seeking behaviours of parents when looking for childcare?
- What are the key drivers for information seeking behaviour in childcare?
- How effective and responsive are current information delivery channels and what has been the impact of these services on family outcomes?
- What are the current gaps and improvements required to address parents' need?

The central aspect of my study focuses on parents, their circumstances and their childcare needs during the different stages of child rearing. In this study I aim to examine and evaluate the information action and behaviour during these stages.

The main objectives of the study would be:

- To identify and categorise childcare information seeking behaviour of parents with the view to predict outcomes from a behaviourist perspective.
- To investigate the links between behaviour, choice and the socioeconomic characteristics of parents.
- To develop a model for childcare information seeking behaviour to support the development of responsive services to meet childcare needs.

## **Scope of the study**

The UK is being faced with an ever increasing number of diverse groups and families, each unique and searching for relevant information in a way that makes sense to them personally and each expecting that their questions or problems when looking for childcare will be resolved. Meeting the challenge to provide for each family individually could be challenging, and this would require an understanding of their information seeking behaviour.

This research aims to analyse parents' information behaviour by assembling a unique dataset of parents socioeconomic characteristics, combined with a survey of parents' choices to give a holistic view of what actually contributes or impact the choice making process. It is intended that this research will contribute to existing debate on childcare choice by offering new evidence on factors contributing to the nature and heterogeneity of childcare preferences in terms of parental information seeking behaviour. Contextually, in the course of this work, the researcher will be reviewing the following:

- Government Policies on family and childcare
- Gender and childcare
- Time Allocation, work and childcare
- Ethnicity, disability and childcare
- Societal attitude and behavioural shifts in childcare



Chapter 1 introduces the research through an overview of the problematic nature of childcare and the contradictory nature of existing literature which exacerbates the issues faced by parents when looking for childcare. The chapter also sets out the aims, objectives and scope of the research work. A recent interest in childcare by political groups makes the field even more volatile to unrealistic political agendas which are further discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 explores literature reviews on the UK childcare market, Childcare and Family Policies; Gender and Childcare; Ethnicity, Culture and Childcare. The chapter also reviews societal shifts in attitude and behaviour to childcare.

Chapter 3 provides the theoretical framework for the research and conceptualises the various theories applied in the research work. These include the Theories of Demand for Information, Role Theory in relation to gender and childcare, Rational Choice Theories and Information Seeking Theories.

Chapter 4 lays out the research methodology, including the research designs and how the quality is established. It also looks at ethical implications and the limitations of the methodology itself.

Chapter 5 describes the field research and data analysis in detail. It also highlights the findings of this research, policy implications, and emerging systemic risks.

Chapter 6 presents the theoretical underpinnings of the findings, corroborates these with existing work in the field, reviews policy implications of parents information seeking behaviour and highlights potential policy interventions.

Chapter 7 encapsulates the overall significance of the parents' childcare information seeking behaviour research, showcases contributions to knowledge and suggests future investigation directions in this area of study.

### **SUMMARY: INTRODUCTION**

This chapter introduces the absence of access to childcare as a key barrier to work. For families to be able to participate fully and effectively in the labour market, adequate childcare is needed. However, over the years childcare has attracted different viewpoints, stereotypical headlines, political overtones and conflicting reports – all of which has not made the task of choosing childcare less difficult for parents. For most parents, the real issue is finding good quality childcare at a cost that is affordable for the family. In lieu of these issues, this research aims to answer the following critical questions:

- What are the childcare information seeking behaviours of parents when looking for childcare?
- What are the key drivers for information seeking behaviour in childcare?
- How effective and responsive are current information delivery channels and what has been the impact of these services on family outcomes?
- What are the current gaps and improvements required to address parents' need?

Reviewing the following - Government Policies on family and childcare; Gender and childcare; Time Allocation, work and childcare; Ethnicity, disability and childcare; and Societal attitude and behavioural shifts in childcare - the main objectives underpinning this study would be:

- To identify and categorise childcare information seeking behaviour of parents with the view to predict outcomes from a behaviourist perspective.
- To investigate the links between behaviour, choice and the socioeconomic characteristics of parents.
- To develop a model for childcare information seeking behaviour to support the development of responsive services to meet childcare needs.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

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This chapter reviews relevant literature on societal attitude and behavioural shifts in Families and Childcare, Work and Childcare; and Government policies on Family and Childcare over the years.

#### **Trends and Changes in Families**

Significant changes and developments in families have taken place since the mid-1960s as European societies transformed from the first to the second demographic transition and these changes have impacted on the use of and development of childcare over the years. Four basic features of the second transition pointed out by Van de Kaa (1987) were - Shift from the golden age of marriage to the dawn of cohabitation; Shift from the era of the king-child with parents to the era of king-pair with a child; Shift from the preventive contraception to self-fulfilling conception and finally the Shift from uniform families to pluralistic families and households. These second transition features are discussed in detail below.

#### **The shift from the golden age of marriage to the dawn of cohabitation**

The number of unmarried couples living together has increased significantly since 1960. According to Xie (2003), formation of unions by young men and women has undergone significant change in recent decades, which has been characterised by a rise in the age of first marriage and a prevalence of cohabitation. Cohabitation although similar to marriage in many respects including sexual intimacy, expressed commitment, shared household, and childbearing is not the same as marriage. It constitutes a separate state of union to marriage in terms of how the couples interact and their characteristics (Gemici & Laufer, 2009).

In comparison to marriage, cohabitation is characterised by a lower degree of household specialisation, higher relationship instability and a greater degree of

positive assortative mating. Essentially, Gemici & Laufer (2009) portrayed cohabitation as a union without much commitment to each other. Couples seem to be free to come and go as they like. For example, it is legally more difficult for married couples to separate than cohabiting partners. These lower cost of separation makes cohabitation more attractive for couples as it gives the opportunity to hedge against future bad shocks to the relationship quality but also giving the couples the benefits of living together such as joint consumption of a public good, returns to specialization i.e. benefit of leveraging their professional expertise increases) and children (Brian, Liliard & Stern, 2006). However, Gemici & Laufer (2009) highlighted the main disadvantage in cohabitation as the lack of commitment, which makes the risk of dissolution higher, and this may also prevent the couples from fully utilising the benefits.

The authors in their research outlined a model that when a single individual meets a potential partner with an exogenous probability, they decide whether they would remain single, cohabit with the new partner or get married. In addition to their relationship, they choose how to divide their time between housework, labour market and leisure, and whether to have children or not. Although the authors acknowledged the presence of children as a potential increase in the productivity of housework and relationship surplus, not much was said or discussed about the impact of cohabitation on childcare.

According to Office of National Statistics (ONS) data, getting married is still popular in Britain with most people marrying at some point in their lives even though the social meaning of marriage has changed. The ONS (2014) report claims there was one marriage every two minutes in 2012; and there was an increase in marriage by 5.3% from 2011. On the other hand, the number of couples cohabiting in the UK has doubled since 1996 illustrating that cohabitation is now more common, both as a precursor and an alternative to marriage. Evidence on British Social Attitudes also suggests that all age groups have changed their views about marriage and rather than attitudes changing markedly with age, people's views are largely shaped by the influences of the social climate within which they have grown. This suggests that age has no relevance with how people view marriage, but their views largely depend on

their upbringing and social networks. Gemici and Laufer (2011) further argue that traditional

....views are more likely to be held by religious and married people hence inferring that views are based on values and beliefs. They also suggest that educational qualifications have a correlation with people's outlook on marriage, and those without qualifications holding more traditional views than those with qualifications. However, those with higher educational qualifications are more traditional than those with lower qualifications thereby suggesting that those with higher educational qualifications are more likely to be married than those with lower educational qualifications.

A similar study on a cohort of Americans reveals that among respondents with at least some college education, 75% were married at some point and 13.4% cohabiting compared with just 55.4% married and 10.4% cohabiting for those with less education (Gemici & Laufer, 2009). Research has been done extensively to assess the influence of economic resources on marital behaviour. Clarkberg (1999) however claims that the ambiguity in the meaning of cohabitation makes it difficult to determine if economic resources positively affect entry into cohabitation. Those with lower educational qualifications may well be on lower income compared to those with higher educational qualifications. As suggested by Oppenheimer (1988), one of the reasons why couples cohabit before marriage may be due to lack of sufficient economic resources for marriage, which could be the reason for differences in how people view marriage even though this view may well change if there are changes to their economic situation.

Generational divisions reveal specifically that tolerance to cohabitation decreases as age increases, with more older people in agreement with the proposition on "People who want children ought to get married" (Hunt, 2009). Emerging patterns suggest that 73% of people aged under 35 are now living in cohabiting unions expect to marry each other, whilst about one in eight actually never expect to marry at all. Analysis of marriage expectations suggest that cohabiting couples are less likely to marry their present partner once they have had a baby suggesting that the

challenges of childcare or childbearing may well be one of the reasons why marriage expectations change (Hunt, 2009).

Differences in housework (including childcare) patterns for married and cohabiting couples reveal that the female partner puts in 17.1 hours of housework on average per week, compared to the male partner who puts in 9.4 hours. For married couples, the wife performs on average 23.9 hours of housework and the husbands 7.2 hours. Gemici and Laufer (2009) claim that this suggests that cohabiting couples engage in less traditional gender role specialization than married couples. If childcare is classified as housework in this report it also suggests how marriage and cohabitation would influence childcare. Essentially, this implies that cohabiting men would be more involved in childcare than the traditional married men who may actually view childcare as the woman's role. This notion was buttressed by Onjario & Mengiolario (2014) who researched into the involvement of cohabiting fathers in childcare. They concluded that unmarried couples of early 2000 have less egalitarian gender behaviors than those grown-up a decade later. Liefbroer and Dourleijn (2006) are of the same view that cohabiters are less likely than married ones to adhere to traditional gender roles, assigning more value to individualism and to personal autonomy, therefore tend to have more egalitarian gender behaviours, sharing more equally than married men daily domestic and childcare activities. Anderson, Kaplan and Lancaster (2007) on the other hand, claim that married fathers would be characterized by higher investment (both in material resources and childcare) in their children than unmarried fathers. However, some studies found no evidence that cohabiting and married fathers allocated different amounts of time to childcare (Kalenkoski et al., 2007; Gibson-Davis, 2008).

Over the past forty years, marriage and divorce rates have decreased and increased respectively. Becoming a mother has always been a profound moment of personal change, but attitudes to childbearing have changed significantly due to the changing role of women in the society (Gemici & Laufer, 2009; Hunt, 2009). Apparently, cohabiting women are less likely to become mothers, and in comparison to mothers, childless women were significantly more likely to be qualified to a degree level or

above. This could be indicative of a new trend of women who prioritise their career over combining a career with being a mother. Mother's employment has tripled significantly since 1951, with many more mothers having higher educational qualifications and those with higher qualifications working more than those with lower qualifications. Although grandparents were cited as the most common source of informal childcare by a third of working mothers in 2006, 54% actually chose formal childcare, and the higher the educational qualification of the parents, the more likely the children were to attend formal childcare settings (Hunt, 2009).

Fulfilling the role of breadwinner and homemaker was considered the most important requirement of a successful marriage in the 1950s; but by 1970, it was for husbands and wives to love each other. Morgan (1992) saw this as a shift in marriage being viewed as an institution to a relational or companionate model. He further argues that although marriage rate has fallen, people are not rejecting it, but instead delaying it until later in life. Cohabitation seems to be a test of compatibility and a prelude to marriage and it was predicted that one third of current teenagers will cohabit compared to one-tenth of their grandparents (Morgan, 1992).

Sweeping changes in marriage and childbearing shows that one-third of babies are now born outside marriage. Only 716000 babies were born in 2004 – a 21% decrease from the children born in 1971. Although Morgan claims this could be due to a major decline in infant mortality rate and couples no longer need to have many children to cover for the ones that would die, this could also represent a major decline in childbearing as the age of childbearing have increased due to the rising costs of marriage and women wanting careers before having children. On the other hand the increasing rise in childcare and childrearing cost has had an impact on the number of children people can afford to realistically raise.

### **Shift from the preventive contraception to self-fulfilling conception**

The first demographic transition refers to the original declines in fertility and mortality in Western countries from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards. The basic idea behind the concept of the second demographic transition was launched in 1986,

which demonstrated that industrialised countries have indeed reached a new stage in their demographic development – a stage characterised, by full control over fertility. During the first demographic transition, fertility was mainly confined to marriage, and contraception affected mostly fertility at older ages. Higher marriage durations were noticeable during this period and childlessness among married couples was low. The second demographic transition brought with it the advent of a multifaceted revolution on fertility, a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage, the disconnection between marriage and procreation and no stationary population (Van de Kaa, 1987).

According to Lesthaeghe & Surkyn (2004), the first revolution was the contraceptive revolution, which started with the invention of pills and IUD, and the use of hormonal contraception for postponing and spacing purposes. The Pill was described as a medical breakthrough, and the most convenient and reliable form of birth control ever invented, but it became much more. Initially prescribed only to married couples for spacing purposes and to prevent unwanted pregnancies, the Pill arrived at a moment of social and political upheaval. It eventually became a handy proxy for wider trends – the rejection of tradition, the challenge of institutions and the redefining of women’s roles. Putting things into proper perspective, Gibbs (2010), claims the era of the emergence of the Pill was unquestionably already a time of major social transformation for which the hormonal birth control became an engine for much of that transformation. The Pill not only became the chemical agent for making sexual revolution possible, it also enabled modern feminism that saw more women being independent and joining the labour workforce. As a matter of fact, the author asserts that there is a straight line between the Pill and the various family structures that we have. Hence implying that the Pill is indirectly responsible for divorces, cohabitation and remarriages, which created a plethora of family structures and relationships. Gibbs (2010) also claims that with the advent of the Pill, women are now able to enter the workforce without the fear of a career being interrupted by pregnancy, and employers lost a primary excuse for closing ranks on women. This essentially suggests that women are able to manage their fertility themselves and decide when and when not to have children, which subsequently led to the Equality Relations and Discrimination Acts.



However, another school of thought actually views the Pill as turning pregnancy and children to elective choices. These set of researchers and authors including Burke & Pakaluk (2010) believed that the first demographic transition benefited children through better health and physical welfare, greater family stability and increased access to education. However, the second demographic transition has proved otherwise. More marital instability through divorce and cohabitation has been reported in the second demographic transition, enormous upward swings in non-marital childbearing and a steady decline in the number of children per household. The role of the first demographic transition was to adopt contraception in order to avoid pregnancies, but during the SDT, the basic decision was to stop contraception in order to start a pregnancy. The baby boom of the 60s was eventually replaced by the baby bust of the 70s through contraception.

Whilst the first demographic transition was an overhaul of traditional family formation systems, the second demographic transitions brought with it the gender revolution where women refuse to be subservient to men and husbands, but were now seen to be seizing the right to regulate fertility themselves. They no longer had to undergo the 'fatalities of nature', and the pressing wish for 'biological autonomy' was articulated by subsequent quests for the legalisation of abortion. Heer and Gorssbard-Schectman (1981) claimed that the advent of the Women's Liberation movement was much connected to the revolution in contraceptive technology which began in 1960. The movement did not only heralded the reduction of the number of women in traditional role of wife and mother, but it also influenced the proportion of women who are married, marital fertility, illegitimacy ratio, male-female differences in education and labour force participation.

### **Shift from the era of the king-child with parents to the era of king-pair with a child**

The effect of the second demographic transition was noted in the decline of the number of children per family in the 19th century due to deliberate efforts to reduce fertility in marriage. Van de Kaa explained the reason behind the reduction of families to be economical in nature. Dumont (1890), argued that the desire to be

upwardly mobile would cause couples to have smaller families. When climbing the social ladder, having a large family was perceived to be a hindrance with childcare being a major barrier and as such birth rate would reduce as social mobility increases. On the other hand, Kirk (1944) considered behavioural changes to family sizes to be a function of progressive changes in society. This view was resonated by Notestein (1945) who stressed the impact of the modernization process in people's lives and in society as a whole and concluded that the demographic transition is a phase, which all countries were bound to pass through once they have achieved the level of development required. According to Aries (1980:640)

*“the ways people look at life usually are determined by more mysterious, more indirect causes, I feel that a profound, hidden, but intense relationship exists between the long-term pattern of the birth rate and attitudes towards the child. The decline in the birth rate that began at the end of the eighteenth century and continued until the 1930s was unleashed by an enormous sentimental and financial investment in the child. I see the current decrease in the birth rate as being, on the contrary, provoked by exactly the opposite attitude. The days of the child-king are over. The under-forty generation is leading us into a new epoch, one in which the child, to say the least, occupies a smaller place”.*

In explaining this notion, Van de Kaa elucidated that in the life plans of couples and individuals, the child is not absent, but is congruently seen as one of the various components that make it possible for adults to blossom as individuals. People could now refuse to have an undesired child and if carelessness or an accident results in pregnancy, this triggers a violent rejection reaction; an abortion is sought (Van de Kaa, 2000). However, a study carried out by Thomson et al. (2008) between women who gave birth in the 1950s and 1970s revealed that mothers in the older cohort felt that motherhood then was taken for granted more and they did not rely on experts as much as new mothers do now. The older cohort also mentioned that they did not have as many material goods or choices in how they live their lives, thus suggesting that there is increased materialism in the 2000s and due to traditional values prevailing in the 50s, the women had no choice in the birth of a child. However, the

older cohort lamented about the pressure on young mothers today to combine paid work with parenting young children. Hunt (2009) claims that motherhood has become more professionalised and more demands are placed on parents with an explosion of parenting programmes such as Supernanny, Nanny911 and Wife Swap.

Essentially this suggests that with both parents working in the 2000s, behaviour may be slipping (as seen in Sweden) which is why more parenting programmes and resources are being provided. On the other hand, it could be that parents are working harder than ever to become professional parents who provide their children with the love and discipline required during the formative years of a child. Nave-Herz (1992) claims that more parents are making time to spend with their children and often marriage is being transformed from being partnership-centred to being children-centred. This obviously contradicts the views of Aries (1980) and Van de Kaa (2000) of the child occupying a smaller place in the parents' lives. Bunting (2004) even cited an example of a British study which found that in affluent two-children families, parents are coordinating an average of 8 to 10 extracurricular activities a week for their children. This reflects a change from the previous eras discussed or it could be another shift in paradigms as parents return to a more balanced but new relationship of the King-pair with the King-child.

### **Shift from uniform to pluralistic families and households**

Much more diverse patterns of family structures are being seen to be developing in westernised countries with more complex ties, relationships, support, exchange, duty and obligations (Ford & Millar, 1997). There has been a significant shift from the uniform traditional family model to more pluralistic models over the years. Contraception seems to have brought with it a relaxation of traditional family values, deviation from the normal family structure and a multitude of living arrangements which were only heard of after the 1960s. Clark & Henwood (1997) described changes in family structures as family fragmentation with women playing a significant role in the centre. Women are now less likely to be part of a couple and more likely to be a lone parent, alone or part of a childless couple with two incomes. Internal structure of families has changed as the number of traditional multigenerational

households has decreased, with lone parenthood becoming more widespread. Ford & Millar (1997) claim that the growing social acceptance of separation of sex, marriage and parenthood is responsible for the increase in lone parenthood. Just as cohabitation now seems to be a stage in the marriage process, Ford and Millar (1997) expressed a concern in lone parenthood becoming accepted as a standard or typical stage in the family lifecycle rather than an aberration from the norm.

### **Impact of the changes in family trends on childcare**

Hunt (2009) remarked that the twentieth century family has shifted from the seemingly autocratic paternalistic family model to one, which gives more power to the women or mothers. The interesting facts arising from the shifts and changes in family patterns is the focus on women and their roles both within the family and the society. This reflects a marked shift for women away from the traditional housewife and spouse role to a more independent living. Hunt (2009) explains this as a shift to an individualistic and relational family structure where each member is unique and seeks to construct his or her social and personal identity. However one of the implications is the construction of the two-generation family and cohabiting couple relationship, which has become the norm for private life with the result that family solidarity is constantly being put under strain.

The changes in trends and demographic transitions demonstrated a close connection between economics, politics and the family. More women are empowered and 'liberated' to join the workforce without any fear of career breakdown through the contraception revolution. Although family income has increased with the formation of dual earner families, Hunt (2009) argues that the absence of women as home managers has significant impact on the children, the family and the society. There is now a decline in birth rate as women are no longer able to manage large families with their jobs. As family sizes reduce, the consequences are that fewer relatives such as uncles and aunts are available to support with parenting with more emphasis on grandparents who play a more significant role in childcare. Hence, governments would have to legislate various policies regarding childcare, women and family.

Changing family structures and sizes according to researchers is a challenge to policies. As birth control techniques become more widespread, and couples can decide on the number of children they have and the timing of their births, increase in the number of women in employment necessitates that policies need to respond to the growing demand from working parents for responsive childcare support. The challenge is to create a family friendly environment, which allows parents to have the number of children they want to have whilst also managing the demographic equilibrium and well-being of parents and children.

According to Esping-Anderson (1999), Britain is experiencing an onslaught of ongoing socio-economic transformation, the consequences of which he described as being visible in the behavioural and ideational change of individuals in the society. Congruently linked with this transformation is the changing role of women, which Esping-Anderson depicts as dramatic, especially in the terms of their participation in the labour market. In the past it used to be economically viable and politically advantageous for mothers to stay at home to look after children, whilst fathers were seen as the 'breadwinners' of the family.

Bruegel et al (1998) argue that significant changes in the socio-economic climates require most families to have two incomes, which then 'pushed' more women to the labour market, although other researchers believe that the first and demographic transitions have more to do with women's labour participation than just supporting the household financially. Women's participation in the workforce essentially means women would have to combine work with raising children in an increasingly 24-7 service based economy, where more parents can be seen working outside the traditional nine-to-five hours or the Monday to Friday timeline.

The gradual erosion of the family set-up and religious and cultural prescriptions which earlier spearheaded the traditional role of women as homemakers coupled with the unstable and unpredictable course of educational, occupational and family careers suggest that there are implications to the behavioural and ideational changes going on in the society on the family. Traditional childcare sources such as

grandparents have been predicted to become more increasingly unavailable, and extended families are fewer. Divorce and family separation have risen and migrations of families to other countries suggest there are fewer relatives around to help and support parents with childcare (McDonald & Evans, 2003). The traditional face of the typical family has also changed significantly. Parents may be part of a family unit, which may be different from the one they were brought up in (Pugh et al, 1994) which essentially means relationships and support systems and values may differ. Apparently, Britain now has more one-parent families, more divorce and separation and more re-partnering and re-marriages than it did in the sixties, which highlights that childcare could be more complicated especially for lone parents (Finch, 2004). The fastest growing household type was households containing two or more families, increasing by 39% from 206,000 households in 2003 to 286,000 households in 2013 (Office of National Statistics, 2013).

Apart from the impact of changing family structures, another factor which contributes to the use of childcare is the increase in unemployment amongst men in their thirties, many of who are fathers of young children following the economic recession in 2010 (ONS, 2011). Annual statistics revealed that only sixty-four per cent of men aged 18-24 are employed, with about twenty per cent claiming benefits. Although women's work participation has been on the increase since the sixties, it is very likely that fathers' worklessness and unemployment would force even more women to join the labour force. Already it has been reported that the population of working women with pre-school children in Britain has doubled since the seventies rising from sixteen per cent to about forty per cent in the nineties, thus reflecting that more women are spending more time away from home. This could connote that either both parents are sharing childcare responsibilities (depending on their work patterns) or quite possibly that more fathers through unemployment are now responsible for looking after the children, or the childcare task is simply contracted out to a childcare provider or friend/relatives depending on family circumstances. O'Brien and Shemilt (2003) argue that the combination of the increase in the number of working mothers and continued long hours worked by fathers make it unlikely that parents can satisfy their own childcare needs. This therefore signifies that they would have to share the responsibility of looking after their children with others or seek alternative care (Hall,

2006). Although there have been shifts in traditional male breadwinner family models, women are still primarily responsible for children. Therefore the availability of childcare is critical in enabling women to combine motherhood and employment, as work participation for mothers connotes having to entrust the responsibility of looking after their young children to others when they are at work.

## **Childcare in UK and Europe**

The UK market is choreographed as a dominant pay as you go private market which is now categorised as mature in macroeconomic terms (Blackburn, 2014). Strong growths in the market took place between the 1900s and the first half of 2000s which corresponds with peaks in more women joining the labour workforce. The main growth of the UK childcare market capacity took place after the labour government's introduction of the national childcare strategy which saw the number of day nurseries tripled from about 100,000 to 300,000 in 10 years (Blackburn, 2014). In 2006, the UK market was hit by the recession which resulted in the demand market failing to grow and in 2007, the supply market grounded to a halt in response suggesting that the market had reached maturity.

A study was carried out by Save the Children which ranked UK 23<sup>rd</sup> in a league table of 43 countries for the well-being of children (Coughlan, 2011). The UK falls behind France, Hungary, Sweden and Estonia, with the index highlighting that relatively low number of children enrolled in preschool education – 81 percent compared to 100 per cent in France, Germany and the Netherlands. Sweden ranks first with Italy and Japan sharing the second place and the UK lags behind these countries even though they are of similar economic/wealth status. In the same report, UK ranked 13 in the best place to be a mother with United States ranking 31, Canada – 20 and Japan – 28.

A closer glance at Swedish childcare policies (reported as the best in Europe) suggests that childcare in Sweden and UK are similar. According to the comparative analysis carried out by Sundlelin (2008), Sweden has preschools similar to the preschools in England; family daycare homes are run by childminders; and they

have open preschools and leisure centres equivalent to Out of school clubs in England. Sunderlin's analysis also reveals that settings are assessed against set standards by a regulatory body similar to Ofsted. Funding is also available for 4 and 5 year olds in Sweden similar to the 3 and 4 year old funding in the UK and that is where the similarities end. While most preschool education is provided by the private sector in England, Swedish preschools and nurseries are mainly financed by government grants, tax revenue and partly by parental fees. Parents in Sweden spend between 1-3% of the family's income on childcare depending on how many children they have, whereas in England, there is no maximum fee or cost regulation whatsoever. This evidently suggests that low-income families in the UK will struggle with fees and this would impact on the economic well-being of families. One could argue that UK provides means-tested childcare, tax credit, employer supported childcare vouchers and other benefits for low income families to enhance their economic well-being. However, not all families are entitled to these benefits thus making childcare unaffordable and out of reach for some in comparison with Sweden where for all families irrespective of their social economic status, childcare seems to be affordable.

Other aspects of similarities explored by Sundelin (2008) include workforce-gender, the ratio of children to childcare worker, reading and writing, outdoor play and social interaction. Both countries differed in these areas, with UK focussing more on curriculum, guidance and the child's development and progress, whilst Sweden favours the development of more interactive and interpersonal skills, basic values, care, consideration, gender equality and tolerance. Inferences drawn for the analysis showed that childcare in Sweden seem to tick the most important boxes for parents in terms of availability, affordability through the maximum fee policy. Education is not regimented, outdoor activities are prioritised with more closeness to nature and green parks, and educational development is well balanced with development of interpersonal skills, care and consideration. The guarantee of a place for every child between the ages of 2-6 years sets up the Swedish childcare system as the best because all parents are able to participate in the labour workforce should they wish to. Family life in Sweden also seems to be boosted with parental entitlement to a total of 480 days paid leave at 80% of a government determined salary cap between birth and the child's 8<sup>th</sup> birthday. Moreover, the days can be split whichever way with



60days reserved for the father specifically. Parents can also take up to 5months unpaid leave to support their family – suggesting well planned work-life balance strategies and policies. Hence it is not a surprise that career-wise, childcare seems to have a higher profile in Sweden as up to 5% of the workforce are men, compared to UK where less than 1% of the workforce are made up of men (Simpson, 2005). Women pursue male careers because they offer prestige, higher pay and opportunities for advancement, but men in non-traditional occupations have less to gain and much to lose. They may have to make sacrifices in terms of pay and status, as well as raising questions on masculinity and suitability for the job (Simpson, 2005).

Although Sundelin (2008) seemed to have described parental experiences when it comes to childcare in both UK and Sweden, a key omission in the report is the fact that due to no guarantee of spaces in the UK, accessibility to childcare is more difficult for UK parents than their counterparts in Sweden. Since there is no maximum fee policy, parents in UK would have to search far and wide to access affordable childcare, or have to give up work in order to look after the children when adequate childcare cannot be sourced. Some parents may even have to move out of city areas where childcare costs are the highest due to affordability issues therefore suggesting that childcare experience of parents in Sweden is better than that of their counterparts in England. Sundelin was also not very emphatic on the quality of childcare as the research seems not to elaborate on the impact of larger group care on childcare quality. Although he claims that affordability of childcare in Sweden seems not to be an issue for parents, the quality of the childcare gives the impression of a watered down version of what children experience in the UK. A closer look at the children to adult ratio in the group settings suggest that group childcare in Sweden though affordable for parents, is apparently of lesser quality compared to what is offered in the UK where the ratio of children to adult is lower. This consequently raises concern for outcomes for children left in group care in Sweden. Jonas (2011) in the article 'Universal Daycare leaves Sweden's children less educated' published in the National Post, advised the Canadian government against adopting the Swedish model of childcare delivery. His advice was mainly based on the child's experience of childcare in Sweden as very poor in terms of the quality of care provided due to increase in group size and children/adult ratio.

Himmelstrand (2011) also encouraged the government to look into policy development based on the child's experience and not parental experience. He argues that the Swedish government's policy to give parents 16 months parental leave, though fantastic, actually leaves parents with little or no option but to send their 16-month-old baby to group settings with sizes of 10 children to 4 adults in the 1980s, ( declining to 3 adults to 17 children in 2011 ). Sweden boasts one of the highest tax systems in the world. This suggests that although childcare seems affordable, the high tax rate seems to be designed to force parents to seek employment in the workforce. According to Himmelstrand, parents do not seem to have much choice in the matter as after maternity leave, 92% of all children aged 18 months to five years are known to be in group daycare in Sweden. The lack of parental involvement beyond 16 months, according to Himmelstrand is now taking its toll on the children and the negative outcomes are now on the rise in the areas of health and behaviour. Deteriorating parenting abilities and lack of the ability to set limits and sense children's needs are argued by him, to represent the characteristics of middle working class families in Sweden. Such critics might argue, from a negative standpoint, that such trends can be summed up as the implication of developing a 'nanny state'. From a positive perspective, it may also explain Sweden's curriculum focus on interpersonal skills, basic values, tolerance and care – (all of which the UK government has left out of the curriculum, and is for parents to take as their responsibility to deliver at home).

Conversely, Sweden's childminders though of less visibility than the group daycare, seem not to be subjected to the same criticism. Were this childcare option expanded and made affordable for all in Sweden, it at least could promote choice and provide an additional option of a one-to-one care for children. It is however interesting to note that the UK government in 2012 tried to explore the Swedish childcare system by expanding the staff/child ratio in group settings and with childminders. This met with quite a huge opposition from childcare practitioners as a retrogressive move that would impact on the quality of childcare and children's outcomes in the future. Government intervention in the childcare market as in the case of UK and Sweden is not a new occurrence. Next section focuses on the reasons for these interventions and the impact on families and the economy.

## **Government Interventions in Childcare Market**

Brewer et al (2005) argues that externalities and information failure are basically the key issues that could affect the efficiency of any childcare market. In terms of externalities, economic efficiency in the long term increases when parents are able to participate in the labour market whilst their children benefit from good education. Hence, government intervention in the childcare market is majorly to improve the efficiency gains of the country. Less consumption of hours of work due to childcare barriers and information failures between suppliers and users of childcare tend to attract government intervention either through direct provision or by providing subsidies where affordability is the main issue.

A recent study by NATCEN (2011) emphasised the importance of having information about reliable childcare, and availability of childcare as the most common factors that enabled mothers to remain in employment at different stages of a child's life. In essence, the report claims that information plays a pivotal role in workforce participation of mothers. The findings of the report also claim that a large proportion of non-working mothers surveyed stated they would like to work, with a notable number also declaring that they would like to increase their working hours as long as suitable childcare is available. Inevitably, this in itself suggests that for the government to increase workforce participation, they would need to facilitate the elimination of childcare barriers and other issues that hinder workforce participation.

The report further argues that although the take up of formal childcare has increased in the UK over the past decade due to recent childcare policies, disadvantaged families are still less likely to use formal childcare and are twice as likely to be unaware of the entitlement to free nursery education for two, three and four year olds in the country. This essentially suggests that a group of people are still being deliberately excluded or being missed out unintentionally due to inequality in information provision. These groups are not able to participate in the workforce due to their inability to access essential information about the options available to them for childcare. Schuller & Hussain (1998) sum this up better when they argued that it is only people who are better informed that are able to expect and seek high quality services; and the people less likely to seek information are most likely not to have

access to the internet and its resources. This thought was buttressed by Fox (2005) who confirms that certain groups continue to lag behind in getting access to information due to the digital divide. This includes some of those aged over 65 for whom the internet is basically a generation divide; and those from certain demographic groups where lack of education is the main barrier. Consequently, information- though meant to be an answer to childcare barriers-, when not appropriated to suit all groups could exacerbate issues by creating an even greater wedge leading to inequality and poor family outcomes.

In order to avoid inequality and improve family outcomes through labour participation, improving accessibility to information for all parents therefore needs to be paramount on the government agenda, and interventions designed, where necessary, to develop a market that takes into account the information needs and behaviour of parents. In the last decade, the British government has developed a plethora of policies in the bid to stimulate and enhance its childcare market. The policies, their impacts and challenges are discussed in detail in the next section.

## **Childcare Policies in England**

In 1998, the government launched the ten-year National Childcare Strategy and published a Green paper to set the strategic direction of childcare in England and Wales. The strategy highlighted the government's intention to provide accessible, affordable and quality childcare for all children aged 0-14years (and up to 16years for young people with a disability and special education needs). Three strategic outcomes were derived out of the proposed policy interventions - raising the quality of childcare; making formal childcare more affordable and more accessible by increasing the number of places in childcare; and improving information available for parents. This research is mainly focused on the third strategic outcome – improving accessibility through information provision by seeking to explore and assess policy interventions and the information seeking behaviour of parents within the childcare market in England.

According to a report from the DfEE (1998), the policies were aimed at stimulating and creating an enabling environment for the childcare market since there was a general acknowledgement that there was a limited supply of quality childcare places with further evidence that childcare costs were not affordable for parents. The policy interventions were intended to address barriers inhibiting the demand and supply of childcare provision by focussing on quality, affordability, and accessibility whilst also acknowledging diversity and partnership needs. Barriers identified in the strategy includes the cost of childcare which was high and out of reach of many parents; the disparate quality of childcare across the country; lack of access to childcare majorly due to poor information provision to parents; and lack of availability of quality childcare places. The proposals to mitigate these barriers were drawn through the provision of incentives, safeguards and regulations which can be grouped as either Demand-led interventions or Supply-led intervention. The effectiveness and impact of the policies are further elucidated in the next section.

### **Supply-led Interventions**

The main challenge facing the government prior to the National Childcare Strategy was the significant gap in the childcare market. When the strategy was introduced in 1998, empirical data on the supply of childcare highlighted that there were 830,000 places available for 5.1million children under the age of eight in England – one place for every four children (Department of Trade and Industry, 1998). However, by 31 March 2009 (ten years later), childcare places across the country had increased to 1.55million places representing an 86per cent increase, which can only be attributed to the impact of the strategy on the childcare market, and the safeguard policies introduced had significant effect from a supply perspective. Analysis of the factors underpinning government policy interventions to increase the supply of childcare places reveals fundamental assumptions based on basic socio-economic principles. Incentives such as set up grants for newly registered childminders were expected to generate more interest in childminding as a business or career. There was also the belief that incentives will enable third sector providers and small scale entrepreneurs who run nursery schools to expand and increase the number of their childcare places. Safeguards and regulations were expected to drive up quality in nurseries, children centres and crèches. The strategy created a framework for a more consistent regulatory regime, covering education and formal childcare, to set new

standards for early years development across the country through the Office of Standards for Education – Ofsted. Recent government policies have looked into the introduction of childminder agencies to oversee childminders and the suggestion of childcare deregulations have not necessarily gone down well with childcare providers.

Finally, an increase in the supply of registered childminders and places in schools was expected to drive down the cost of childcare. Penn (2007) argues that the government by intent or default through supply-led incentives has succeeded in not only developing the private sector, but has also created an oversupply of childcare places that is not necessarily matched by an increase in demand. With occupancy only rising to 77per cent, it could be argued that the childcare market was technically thrown into disequilibrium, leaving many childcare providers with sustainability issues. This could be due to reasons including parents not being well informed about the childcare services and options available. The oversupply of places included the creation of 25 new Excellence Centres across England which were expected to raise quality as they serve as models of best practice for good quality integrated education and childcare for local childcare providers, parents and informal childcare providers. It was anticipated that with the increase in the supply of childcare places and an equally responsive market, more childcare workers would be needed, and about 50,000 new childcare workers was predicted to be trained to support the delivery of the strategy through the New Deals programme to fill the current gaps in the market. This is further discussed under the Demand-led incentives in the next section.

### **Demand-led Incentives**

The supply-led incentives were balanced with demand-led policies to induce the demand for childcare services. Included in this package was the making the cost of childcare affordable for low-income families through Tax Credits; expanding the entitlement to early education funding for three and four year olds to the poorest families with two year olds; funding the provision of free information services through statutory legislation to make it easy for parents to find childcare and also improving the quality of information on availability of childcare to enable parents to make informed and rational decisions based on choice and transparency (DfEE, 1998). Childcare vouchers through a salary sacrifice scheme were introduced later and

were found to favour higher earners more than low income families. In October 1999, the government introduced the means tested Working Families Tax Credit for working parents to help meet the cost of childcare for those on low income. Parents would have to use registered childcare and the tax credit initially was worth up to 70 per cent of eligible childcare costs subject to an overall limit of £100 per week for one child and £150 per week for two or more children (depending on the family). Penn (2007) argues that this initiative was based on feminist demand assumptions seeking legal equality for women and reconciliation of work and family. The notion also seeks to equip individuals to compete in the market through their own efforts as it was designed not only to generate interest from lone parents, but it also fits the agenda towards a future orientated social investment state as the increase in the number of people joining the workforce suggest a resultant increase in contributions towards taxes and a reduction in the number of people claiming benefits. Although the Tax Credits were means tested, Penn (2007) and Brewer & Shepherd (2007) assert that the Childcare Tax Credit essentially favours the middle class more and lone parents were probably better off on benefits due to the misalignment of the tax credit and housing benefit. As soon as families join the workforce, they no longer qualify for housing benefit irrespective of their gross household income, thus reducing the family's disposable income especially for those who live in areas where house prices are high. This essentially suggests a major barrier to joining the workforce as parents would have to consider the consequences of joining the workforce in the short-term when income is likely to be low.

Apart from the barriers created by the misalignment with housing benefit, inconsistencies in tax credit calculations also created mistrust in the system. Due to lack of a proper understanding of the tax credit system, and gross misinformation, quite a few families had their tax credits wrongly calculated and had to pay back money that had already been spent. National Statistics reported that just about 22 per cent of those eligible to claim Tax Credit actually is in receipt of the incentive. Accessibility to adequate information could have mitigated the tax credit issues if available at the onset to guide parents through the system. The National Strategy recognised this gap through the introduction of the third strategic outcome – accessibility as discussed in the next section.

**Table 1: Summary of Demand-led Childcare policies in the UK since 1990**

	<b>Tax Credits</b>	<b>Employer Support</b>	<b>Free Nursery Entitlement</b>
<b>1990</b>		Tax relief for employer- provided workplace childcare	
<b>1994</b>	£40 weekly childcare disregard in Family Credit for working parents Raised to £60 (1996) and to £100 (1998)		
<b>1997</b>			Nursery Education Voucher scheme of £1,100 per year for 4-year-olds
<b>1998</b>			Free nursery places of 12.5 hours over 5 days for 33 weeks a year for 4-year-olds
<b>1999</b>	70% childcare tax credit for maximum of £100/£150 costs per week in Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) for parents working 16+ hours		
<b>2001</b>			Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (NNI)
<b>2003</b>	Tax credit transferred to childcare element of Working Tax Credit		
<b>2004</b>			Free places extended to 3-year-olds NNI incorporated in Children's Centres
<b>2005</b>	Tax credit raised to maximum costs of £175/£300 per week	Childcare vouchers for tax relief on maximum of £50 costs per week	
<b>2006</b>	Tax credit raised to 80% of costs	Maximum costs raised to £55 per week	Free places extended to 38 weeks a year
<b>2010</b>			Free places extended to 15 hours over 3-5 days
<b>2011</b>	Tax credit reduced to 70% of costs	Eligible costs reduced for higher rate taxpayers	
<b>2012</b>			Longer days for free places over 2-5 days
<b>2013</b>	Tax credit extended to parents working less than 16 hours in Universal Credit		Free places extended to 20% most disadvantaged 2-year-olds
<b>2014</b>			Free places extended to 40% most disadvantaged 2-year-olds
<b>2015</b>		Proposed: Tax-free childcare worth up to 20% of costs or £1,200 per year to replace childcare vouchers	
<b>2016</b>	Proposed: Tax credit raised to 85% of costs		Proposed: 2-year-old free places only for good quality



**Table 2: Summary of Supply-led Childcare policies in the UK since 1990**

	Regulation	Market Facilitation	Workforce Training
1992	Local Authority (LA) inspection of day-care		
1993		Out-of-School Initiative start-up funding	
1998		Start-up funding mainly for out-of-school facilities	
2001	Ofsted registration and inspection of day-care and childminding		
2006		Legal duties for LAs to ensure sufficient childcare for working parents	
2007			Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) qualifications
2008	Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) child development standards		
2011	Reduced regulation in maintained schools		
2012	Revised EYFS framework		
2013	Role of Ofsted enhanced  Proposed: Childcare registration and regulation in schools eased LA quality assessments removed	Childcare agencies assistance for new childcare businesses  Proposed: More information for parents LA support focused on most disadvantaged	Early Years Teacher Training
2014			Early Years Educators qualification

**Source Table 1& 2: Paull, G (2014): Summary of Childcare Policy Development. Institute of Economic Affairs**

**Note: 1990-7, Conservative government; 1998-2008, Labour government; 2010-, Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government. The details shown for the free nursery entitlement are for England; other parts of the UK have small variations in the detail of the policy.**

In the tables above Paull (2014) skilfully highlights the awkward and ambivalent way in which the dual purpose of public support for early childhood education and childcare are transformed into two major areas - the promotion of children’s social mobility through quality early education and the promotion of family economic well-

being through parental employment. However, the translation of these into disparate funding and infrastructures support policies by successive UK governments rightly confirms that by its very nature, childcare creates unusual challenges for an efficient delivery by the market (Lloyd, 2015).

## **Review of Government Childcare Policies and Reforms (1998-2014)**

Welfare policies over recent years have sought to improve childcare practices, normalise differing household situations including lone parenting, and the expansion and regulation of childcare provision by external parties. Significant shifts from the social democratic classic welfare state of the 1940s to the new welfare state of the 1980s and 1990s draws on liberalist values and objectives where the client of the old welfare state is now the consumer with individual choices (Blekesaune, 2007). There has been an increase in government intervention through family-led policies including the lengthening of maternity and paternity leaves, providing parenting care rights, children's rights, Tax Credits, flexible working option and the provision of other childcare subsidies to support working parents and to encourage those who are unemployed to go back to work (Cochrane, 1994; McDowell, 2005; Blekesaune, 2007).

Mahon (2008) in his comparative study of childcare policies and the diverse ways in which governments shape the scope of non-parental childcare arrangements highlighted that until the 1990s, childcare was ignored in government policies and focus was mainly based on social insurance and cash benefits. However, the increase in the participation of more women in the labour workforce has increased the recognition of childcare as an important factor. Feminist researchers interested in gender equality issues played a key role in bringing childcare into the frontiers of policy makers as they drew attention to the social policy challenges posed by the growing need for childcare (Ferre, 1984; Hochschild, 1989; Hass, 1986; Thompson & Walker, 1989). As expected, different countries responded to the governance challenge differently and Mahon categorised the governments based on their responses into male breadwinner regimes and female-friendly regimes. The male breadwinner regime was the former traditional system adopted by governments that

ignored childcare as a key issue, with a belief that childcare is the woman's role, and mainly focussed on the social insurance and benefits.

Duncan (1996) had a similar gender-based perspective as he highlighted that various state welfare regimes have different implications for how women and men are differentially positioned in labour market and welfare states. He argues that the connection between the regime types and gendered inequalities is ubiquitous. In differentiating between the regimes, Duncan highlighted the different approaches of the regimes to childcare. Social democratic welfare regimes would support public provision of childcare for all, thereby enabling more mothers to easily combine child rearing with pursuing a career (a good example was the Labour government in UK post 1998). Liberal regimes provide minimal public childcare provision that is mainly targeted at a group of mothers such as single mothers, with most of these mothers choosing part-time employment to fit in with school hours and mostly staying home with preschool children as it was with the Conservative government in UK pre 1998 (Baker, 2006).

Similarly, Esping-Andersen (1999) in his typology classified welfare regimes into three systems: The liberal system which targets its programs at low income, at-risk families or other families added at best, through individual or corporate tax deductions; the conservative corporatist which supports at-home care; and the social democratic system that supports public financing and provision of universal childcare. This essentially suggests that childcare policies are literally a reflection of broader assumption about the roles of states, markets and families within any welfare regime. This explains why Mahon (2008) argues that mainstream welfare that are concerned and recognise the demand for childcare tend to have policies that are reflective of the roles of the states, families, markets and the voluntary sector. He also argues that by locating childcare within wider welfare regimes, it shows that state involvement is not limited to countries where the public sector plays a key role in financing and providing childcare.

In analysing the impact of government policies on family life, Esping-Andersen (1999) outlines that the policies can either facilitate or obstruct aspects of household provisioning, most importantly when reflected in the changing roles of women and new family structures. The idea of a 'Nanny state' though off-putting seems to be a

reflection of too much government intervention in how families are raising their children, and government support for maternal employment marks a distinct shift of public policy (Cameron et al, 2002). Even if the government wishes to respect family choices, the decision-making framework surrounding the distribution of essential household activities, including childcare, requires the assessment of government policies as critical determinants in the household and external influences of household behaviour. The growing participation of women in the labour market and the resulting increase in the demand for childcare has attracted increased acknowledgement of the need for some form of government support; and as the reasons behind the growing demand for childcare vary, so does the forms of government involvement and interventions (Mahon, 2008).

Prior to the Labour Government National Childcare Strategy (1998), childcare in the UK was not deemed a crucial issue for economic or social policy and the limited daycare provision available mainly served as a welfare function for mothers who were unable to provide care for their children. Essentially, the government was more or less a conservationist system where childcare was concerned. Historically, childcare in the UK after the Second World War was seen as a private affair with little public provision and heavily reliant on politically constructed notions of motherhood within the male breadwinner/female homemaker model of welfare. At the time, this conservationist model suited the government and was politically advantageous as men earned good wages from high manufacturing jobs that could sustain the family. It was not until the crash of the manufacturing market and low paid jobs could not sustain the family, and two incomes were required to keep the family out of poverty that many homemakers were forced to join the labour market with limited public and private childcare provision. Although it is debatable that it was a combination of many forces that made many homemakers join the labour workforce, however, childcare provision was crucial to maintaining their participation.

In 1997, the UK Labour Government went further than any preceding government in endorsing public financing and universal provision of childcare by outlining a national childcare policy which recognised the need for childcare for working parents and extending nursery education entitlements (Department for Education and Employment, 1998). In the Green Paper 'Meeting the Childcare Challenge'

published in May 1998, Labour cashed in on the apparent childcare gap in the economy and declared that childcare had been neglected for too long. Since then an unprecedented amount of attention has been paid to childcare and early years and was seen as crucial components to ticking a number of boxes to fulfil the New Labour agenda. They capitalised on the apparent gap within the system and declared an attack on child poverty and social exclusion with a strategy of social investment to improve the chances of children, especially those in disadvantaged areas, by promoting the positive role model of an 'adult wage-earner' family (Hall, 2006). Childcare was linked with a number of central policy concerns including welfare to work, combating poverty, increasing social inclusion, improving labour participation and raising standards in education, and the growing participation of women in the labour market turned the combined factors of labour and care into major policy issues (Bruning & Platenga, 1999).

Introduction of the childcare strategy and the increase in the growth of female employment prompted Blau (2001) to comment that childcare is at last taken more seriously as an important macroeconomic issue. He argues that society should care about the quality of childcare by pointing out that childcare policy is a tool that could serve two purposes: encourage the employment of families with young children and enhance the quality of childcare to improve child development. In essence, he highlights the benefits of childcare to the government, whilst also proposing how the government can win the trust of families with the enhancement and provision of good quality childcare. The assumption that it is only families with younger children that need to be encouraged to participate in the labour market either presupposes that most of the families unemployed are those with younger children or claims that it is those families with younger children who find it more difficult to be employed due to lack of childcare or its affordability. However, in anticipation of the barriers to accessing childcare, Blau (2001) further proposed a means-tested child allowance to subsidize childcare costs and advised that all new parents are informed of the benefits of high quality childcare, that the parents are also trained to recognise and find high quality care; and that a means-tested childcare voucher is made available to parents with a value that depends on the quality of the childcare provider at which it is being redeemed. The suggestion to inform new parents about the benefits of childcare and how to find good quality childcare although implemented through the

information provision element of the strategy, has not fully achieved its purpose as over ten years later, parents still cite childcare as the major barrier to working (Bashir et al. 2011).

Although the aim of the National Childcare Strategy as already outlined in the previous chapter was to ensure good quality, affordable local childcare for children aged 0-14 in every neighbourhood, local authorities were charged to translate this to a local strategy by convening partnerships that would assemble information about the demand and supply of childcare in their local area, and produce local childcare plans. With the national agenda translated into local strategies all would seem covered if the national policies are equally integrated or synchronised as a global issue. Mahon (2008) argues that government policies have focussed mainly on national policies, and notably ignoring the impact of globalisation on childcare policies, as this is not clearly laid out in the National Childcare Strategy or other similar policy documents. The growing influence of international organisations such as IECD, World Bank, UNESCO and the European Union need to be acknowledged since policies papers and research documents published by any of these organisations could have an impact on our national policies.

In the following section I review a few of the childcare reforms and their impact on family outcomes. I also discuss how information provision links to these policies and about how this has influenced reforms and the usage of services. The development of Accessibility to Information over the years is discussed as a reform under the Childcare Act 2006 in subsequent sections.

### **Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCPs)**

The first reform to be discussed is the setting up of Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. Although this may not be categorised as a reform in itself, this initiative actually set the pace for the implementation of the national childcare strategy. It is crucial to note that before the existence of the early years service and the national childcare strategy, public provision of childcare provision was limited and the few available spaces were reserved for families that were deemed to be 'in need'

although there existed a thriving private sector that had local authorities as the registration and inspection bodies. The EYDCPs existed long before the national strategy and they were charged mainly with the duty to regulate the distribution of nursery places. It also seemed to make sense to task them with the responsibility of managing information about their local childcare market and developing local strategic childcare plans. The Labour government was quite clever in building on what currently existed to achieve their objectives, consequently EYDCPs was the tool used by the government to implement the childcare policy.

The structure of the EYDCPs varied across local authorities, but what they had in common was the multi-agency approach adopted by all the local authorities in having representatives of different childcare organisations; representatives of employer groups, jobcentre plus, and other community groups to support the integration of childcare and early education locally. However, Penn & Randall (2005) believed the government used the scheme to widen participation, engage civil society and involve stakeholders to gain early buy-in into their reforms and plans. It could also be argued that they were viewed to be the panacea for an effective way of providing more joined-up thinking in a field that has been characterised by much fragmentation. A great deal was expected of the EYDCPs, but they were not necessarily designed or modelled to be able to achieve much due to the bureaucracy that surrounded their decision-making. It was apparent that the agencies and organisations involved would want to further policies and agendas that suited their organisations but not necessarily the children and families that were meant to be at the heart of the policies.

A closer look at their remit reveals devolution of power from local authorities' autonomy over the childcare market and the associated tradition of municipal socialism as described by Penn & Randall (2005). They were expected to identify and map childcare provision and needs among all groups in the area; to work collaboratively with voluntary, community and private providers to increase availability and accessibility of provision; to ensure quality of provision; to ensure provision is affordable for groups who might otherwise be excluded; and to ensure good and accessible information of services available. However, the government turned around in 2006 to introduce a duty to local authorities requiring that they carry

out a full assessment of the sufficiency of childcare in their local area by mapping the demand and supply of childcare and identifying the gaps every three years with annual updates. The duty also required local authorities to ensure the sufficiency of childcare in the local area. This change essentially reflects that the government has realised that the devolution of the autonomy of the childcare market to the partnerships has not been effective and that local authorities are better placed to deliver all the functions without the help of the EYDCP.

A review of the EYDCPs conducted by Daycare Trust (2000) concluded that they worked well, but the challenge faced was ensuring the long-term sustainability of childcare and meeting government imposed deadlines. However, some critics including Wilkinson (2002) commented on their under-performance, administration and structures. Many of them were not viewed as effective as they should be due to large numbers of organisations represented, ineffective decision-making, lack of relevant experience and excessive bureaucratic structures. Conflict of interest was inevitable and inadequate resourcing by local authorities to meet set targets fuelled resentment and clashes between the partnerships. The partnerships were doomed to fail right from the beginning as there were no set guidelines on how many organisations should be represented on the board as some were so large that they became very difficult to manage – the larger they were, the more difficult it was to make decisions.

The local authorities' handling of the budget was also a hindrance as there was an obvious clash of interest in the delivery of the functions of the local authorities and the partnerships. Penn and Randall (2005) confirmed that in practice, there were real conflicts of interest over public versus private provision in the partnerships. In their opinion, EYDCPs provided a forum for all stakeholders to meet, express their concerns and get a better understanding of other organisations, and in a way bridged the gap that had been caused by the divisive consequences of previous policies. This is however controversial as many of the organisations could not work in a joined-up manner under the partnership. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the EYDCPs provided the opportunity for improved co-ordination and responsiveness to local provision and demand, whilst presenting and preserving a stronger sense of local community ownership of the childcare policy.



A study of the EYDCPs across the UK by Osgood and Sharp (2000) reveals that indeed, local partnerships overall were a success in establishing the national childcare strategy. Those that performed best were strategically led by the local authority and childcare work was mainstreamed within the local authority with local council members as childcare advocates within the partnerships (Cabinet Office, 2002; Penn & Randall, 2005). In addition to childcare policy the EYDCPs were also significant in the development and implementation of the New Deal for Lone Parents, Neighbourhood Nurseries and also created the platforms on which Surestart Children Centres were later built. All these initiatives are all linked to the child poverty strategy and welfare to work agenda targeted mostly at low-income families, lone parents and those living in areas of deprivation. Some of these initiatives are discussed in subsequent sections.

### **Neighbourhood Nurseries (NNI)**

A variety of area-based initiatives were established during the first three years of Labour rule, emphasising problems of moral breakdown, disorder and unemployment; but the main focus was in promoting economic growth. Childcare became a greater focus as an anti-poverty and employment strategy since the inception of the national childcare strategy in 1997. The neighbourhood nurseries initiative was launched in 2001 as one of the numerous programmes established with the specific aim of increasing the supply of childcare for working parents in poor neighbourhoods. According to Kearns and Forrest (1999), alongside specific measures to remove obstacles to labour market participation, the widespread interest among policy makers and academics in the social exclusion agenda has caused renewed and growing attention to area deprivation and policy initiatives.

Although the original target was to create 45,000 new childcare places for 0-4 year old children living in the most disadvantages areas of England, NNI also offered full daycare for children from birth to school age alongside early education and other forms of family support including family learning and health services. When it was established, the main focus of the NNI was on tackling child poverty through the

creation of high quality childcare in order to allow parents to return to the labour market. The key to tackling child poverty was seen to be employment, enabling the poorest and most disadvantaged families to improve their own opportunities and income. However, the major problem identified for families living in the most disadvantaged area was the lack of childcare and Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative was designed to tackle this problem. With almost 60% of Neighbourhood Nurseries located in the twenty most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the country, they were meant to be created by local providers from the private, voluntary and independent sector, with funding and support routed through the EYDCPs established in each local authority.

Analysis of the NNI programme by the DCSF (2007) reported that although NNI has a positive impact as shown by increased employment, employability and take-up of formal childcare, the area level impact was considerably small. This could be due to funding policies were heavily reliant on demand side subsidies being available to working parents, as an increase in take-up of daycare will depend to a large extent on achieving a synergy at the local level between employment and childcare programmes. As argued by the DCSF (2007), an increase in daycare provision could only be sustainable if parents can find jobs in order to be able to afford childcare costs. Better information about childcare services and government financial incentives could perhaps have also led to an increase in take-up of childcare places, and encouraged more parents to make informed decisions about childcare and work. However, the NNI programme was replaced with another government initiative, which was targeted at families with children under the age of five. This is the cohort of families already identified earlier as being more likely to include unemployed mothers, probably due to lack of childcare accessibility or affordability issues. This is further elucidated in the next section.

### **Surestart Programme and Surestart Children's Centres**

The Surestart programme was launched in 1999, shortly after Neighbourhood Nurseries with much wider remit to address community and family level exclusion with a view to improving child outcomes. It involved a brief to develop better and

more responsive processes of governance and service delivery in the most deprived areas, with the aim of achieving better outcomes for children, parents, and communities. It included increasing the availability of childcare for all children under the age of five; improving children's health, education and emotional development; and supporting parents in both their parental roles and in developing their employment aspirations. The main difference between the Surestart programme and the Neighbourhood nurseries initiative was the focus on a joined-up approach of different agencies from health, education and the local authority to support families in the most disadvantaged areas. According to Glass (1999), the Surestart programme actually placed a strong emphasis on joining up and improving mainstream services in the most deprived areas of the country in order to better prepare young children for school by enhancing their health, wealth and education. Each programme was to be managed by a partnership of statutory agencies, childcare professionals, voluntary and community groups including parents, working together to develop an integrated approach to services for families. It is a unique approach that combines the structure of the previous EYDCP structure with the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative but with more emphasis on the local community. This factor distinguished Surestart from previous initiatives and has been argued to contribute to any perceived success. The Surestart centres became a hub for families within the local area to go for help and support for childcare and health services. More agencies including Jobcentre Plus also joined the 'team around the family' at the centres to support parents (especially lone parents) back to work.

The first 60 trailblazer projects were launched in January 1999, and by March 2000 targeted home visits were being delivered by all local Surestart Centres to all parents of under fours in the centres' catchment areas with the aim to support these families – many of them lone parents – to overcome potential childrearing problems. Following the 2002 spending review, the Surestart programme was merged with the Early Years and Childcare unit to deliver the National Childcare Strategy in order to make the work done on joining up services more effective. The perceived popularity and success of the programme encouraged the government to build on the credibility of the programmes in the local community by giving them responsibility for Children's Centres and the provision for preschool children. Childrens Centres were expected to develop from existing Surestart programmes into early excellence centres in many

areas. It was assumed that by 2010, 3,500 centres would be within a 'pram-pushing' distance of every family in each local area.

The programme was deemed successful as centres played a crucial part in the development of services for young children and families, proving early intervention where really needed (Eisenstadt, 2011). However critics have raised questions about the level of participation and involvement of key stakeholders, some of whom regarded themselves as 'service-users only' particularly in relation to their level of awareness of the opportunities for involvement in arrangements and activities in the centre. This seems to deviate from Bovaird (2007) description of the programme as a form of co-production involving "user co-delivery of professionally designed services" where professionals dictated service design and planning, but users and community members delivered the services.

According to Pemberton and Mason (2008), there were perceived and actual barriers to engagement in the co-production of services. This was resonated by a report from the National Evaluation of Surestart (NESS), which criticised the original Surestart Programme for not effectively engaging the most excluded individuals and families including black and other non-white families (Craig et al, 2007). The government commissioned national evaluation of the Surestart programme had already highlighted that even a programme specifically targeted at disadvantaged groups can fail to reach those who have the greatest need and who could most benefit if the necessary parameters are in place (Belski et al, 2007).

Tunstill and Allnock (2007) also evaluated the contribution of Surestart local programmes to the task of safeguarding children's welfare, ( i.e. meeting the staying safe requirement of Every Child Matters agenda) . Key findings from their research reflected that there was tension between the role of Surestart programmes in supporting families - and social services departments whose focus has increasingly become a narrow child protection one. . Tunstill and Allnock (2007) however identified measures that could be taken to ensure that the necessary parameters are in place between both services to prevent problems by acting early and developing a shared sense of responsibility in safeguarding and protecting children from harm. These included forging inter-agency links and establishing trust across different

agencies; joint working based on shared understanding, information sharing and systemic recording systems; and the identification of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) as a bridge for communication between practitioners working with individual children and families.

For the Surestart initiative to maximise the meeting of its early aspirations, centres would either have to depend on families approaching the centre for needed services, or the centres would have to take the service out to the families. A much-needed service that was capitalised upon by the government was the health visiting service responsible for the monitoring of baby's progress right from birth. As pointed out by Anning et al (2007), children and disadvantaged groups are better targeted and involved in the delivery of services by health-led centres due to their enhanced ability to access health agency database (also via information sharing) which has provided the opportunity to establish relationships with parents at the pre-natal stage. This move was actualised in 2011 when health visiting services were relocated to children centres thus generating a flow of families into the centres, and giving other services the opportunity to target the most deprived families for support.

A greater proportion of the most deprived families attending Surestart children centres are lone parent families targeted by Jobcentre to support them back to work, whilst addressing the childcare barrier through the children centre. The Education Select committee has examined the role of Surestart Centres across the country. The committee reported that although popular and well-used by parents, there was a lack of clarity about their purpose and what centres should offer. Accountability was very much needed at both centre and local authority level. The committee concluded that the core purpose is very vague, broadly worded and should be focussed on achievable outcome. Inevitably Sure Start initiative, commissioned by a Labour government, and before the age of austerity, has been subjected to a range of political enquiries, with doubt expressed as to its ultimate success in improving child level outcomes. The final report from the National Evaluation reported that the results discerned in the follow-up study of 7-year-old children and their families provide some support for the view that government efforts to support children/families via the original area-based approach to Sure Start paid off to some degree with parent outcomes, but not with regard to child outcomes.

Rallings (2014) however argues that Children Centres need to remain in place for a generation for their full value to be recognised, and should not be compared with schools or health services that have been around for decades. He predicted that those interested in children centres need to win the battle to have them publicly recognised as important a service for under-five age group as schools for older children. He claims that as politicians in power would always reshape the education system by probably adjusting the national curriculum but would not abolish schools as they are seen as institutions that are vital to deliver education. However, the same value is not placed on children centres which he rightly argues continues to suffer at the hand of politicians; even more so due to the recent recession which has resulted in previously ring-fenced funding to be removed thereby leaving the centres vulnerable and at the mercy of councillors. Over the last two years, a significant number of centres have closed down as they struggle to maintain quality in the midst of dwindling funds from the central and local government. Those who would feel the impact most are the vulnerable and disadvantaged parents for who the centres have been a lifeline. In the next section I discuss the New Deal Welfare Reform aimed at supporting lone parents and its impact on childcare.

## **New Deal for Lone Parents**

There has been a large increase in the proportion of households headed by a lone parent in Britain since the 1970s. Research records that in 1972, only 7% of children were living in lone-parent families compared to 26% in 2006; and nine out of ten of these households are headed by women. How lone mothers combine or should combine being a mother with employment have become a central policy issue in many Western countries including UK and USA. As described by Hobson (1994) lone mothers are the litmus test for the various models of welfare regimes adopted by different governments as the growth in lone parenthood has generated extensive policy concerns linked to child poverty and potential welfare dependency (Kiernan et al. 1998, Lewis, 2001, Mokhtar & Platt, 2009).

Duncan (1996) explored how various governments approach the issue of lone parenting and concluded that this is tackled from different perspectives. Politicians working with a social problem discourse for example in the Scandinavian countries assume a protective stance when it comes to lone-parenting. They view lone mothers as victims or vulnerable members of the society who deserve public support. These politicians recommend incentives to lone mothers in the form of increasing social capital, training, education, childcare provision and other benefits to remove the benefit poverty trap (Duncan, 1996).

Another discourse or the politically right perceive lone mothers as a threat to family values and work ethics, and as such tend to discourage lone-parenting by inflicting punitive measures on lone mothers. For instance, it is claimed that those on the right believe in the sanctity of marriage and that unorthodox forms of families, such as lone parent households in their opinion, should be discouraged (Giddens, 1998). Such governments are more inclined to cut eligibility levels to benefits and other forms of social support for lone mothers in order to discourage what Duncan (1996) tagged as 'illicit' behaviour. Duncan cited the US as an example of this discourse. However, lone-parenting is still on the increase therefore suggesting that government policy is not necessarily seen as a deterrent to the growth of lone families (O'Grady, 2013). Nevertheless, the total budget spent on benefits for non-working lone parents may be low as they are encouraged to go back to work.

Britain has fluctuated between both discourses and there has been a steady increase in the proportion of households headed by lone parents over the past few decades (Driver & Turner 2002:67). There were about two million lone parents in the UK in 2011, and this number has grown steadily from 1.7million in 2001 (Office National Statistics, 2012). In 1997, just before the National Childcare Strategy, the British government introduced the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) initiative through the Jobcentre plus. The aim was to encourage lone parents to improve their prospects and living standards by improving their job readiness and taking up paid work.

In 2007, the UK government changed tactic in supporting lone parents by introducing a new welfare reform act (2007) that reduces a lone parent's eligibility for Income Support depending on the youngest child's age (DWP, 2008). The changes were introduced gradually to support the 'weaning' of lone parents from benefits and to help them make plans to support their move back to work. Prior to the reform, a lone parent could remain on Income Support until the youngest child was 16. However, the new reforms changed the eligibility criteria to be able to claim Income support up until when the youngest child reaches the age of 12 by 2008, age 10 by 2009 and then age 8 by 2010 (DWP, 2008). In analysing how feasible the changes were, Freud (2007) expressed that this is possible since school wrap around hours in terms of breakfast and after school facilities should be available in all schools by 2010. However, it is imperative that for the reform to be achievable, there needs to be a comprehensive childcare infrastructure in place to enable lone parents to go back to work as well as widespread availability of flexible working (Stanley et al. 2006; Freud, 2007), although there would still be the need to tackle under-utilisation of childcare by some groups of people.

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 further reduced the age threshold by the change to jobseekers allowance. The change was based on the government's belief that lone parents who are able to work will be in a better financial position if they received the right to get back into the workplace. Universal credit which also came into effect in October 2013 was deemed the biggest welfare reform in 60years and is set to gradually replace six income related benefits including Income Support and Job Seekers Allowance (DWP, 2012). The argument was that lone parents will be better off under universal credit as they will be able to keep more of the money they earn and it will pay to be in work than on benefits.

The correlation between parents work status and child poverty makes it quite crucial to get lone parents back to work. Reducing child poverty has been a policy issue in the UK for quite some time and the strategies to reduce this has been a double-edged affair through what Whiteford and Adema (2007) tagged as the benefits strategy and the work strategy. Most countries' policies in addressing child poverty are always based on either of the two or even both as is the case in the UK. However, striking a balance between ensuring there is enough benefits to sustain



families on low-income and finding work that would sustain the families long-term seem to be a matter that could be implemented concurrently but could be challenging.

In 2005, research by a lone parent based organisation – Gingerbread, claims that 50% of children in one-parent families are poor in comparison to Only 23% in couple families. The research also reveals that children in one-parent families make up 42% of all poor children. Another study in the same year by the Department of Work and Pensions (2005) revealed that children from lone parent families are more likely to live in social housing and to live on a low income than children from couple families. The Institute of Fiscal Studies however discovered that since 2005, the risk of child poverty has remained virtually unchanged for children in one-parent household in comparison to a large risk for children in couple households where there is only one full-time worker, part-time workers or indeed no workers. They believed that due to the little or negative real growth in entitlements to benefits and tax credits during 2005-06, therefore little or no changes should reflect in child poverty measurement.

Obviously the argument then could be that lone parents did not receive any increase to their entitlements either as they also relied on benefits and tax credits. The only logical explanation was pointed out by Freud (2007), that there was a steady increase in the number of lone parents going back to work due to the NDLP programme, hence revealing the positive impact of the programme in eradicating child poverty. At face value, this may suggest that given time, child poverty for children from lone parent families could be reduced in comparison to child poverty for children in couple families but with just one full-time job, two part-time jobs or even unemployed. However, a missing point could be in the calculation of tax credits for both families. Apparently, lone parents tended to benefit more in how their tax credits were calculated in comparison to couple families. A combination of a higher benefit rate and the NDLP would account for the differences in outcomes for both types of families.

Further research by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Cribb et al, 2012) revealed that the fraction of children in poverty who live in couple families rose by 4.4% from 2005-2008 (although this was attributed to a rise in the proportion of all children in couple

families and not simply an increase in relative poverty). Although there was also a 3% increase in the number of children who live in families with someone in work during the same period, an upward trend in child poverty is predicted with the risk still higher in lone parent families even as the number of workless households increases due to the recession.

Although the government claims that work is the best route out of poverty, this implies that work is not the only route, but is the preferred or main route in tackling child poverty. A wide range of policies is needed to lift children in one-parent families out of poverty of which employment is crucial; and since about one third of lone parents have a dependent child under five, adequate and satisfactory childcare arrangements are crucial to the uptake of paid employment (Brewer et al, 2009). The NDLP is one element of the government's welfare-to-work programme which has over the past ten years been aimed at encouraging lone parents to move back into work. As already stated, the success rate of 11% in ten years suggests that more needed to be done, to increase numbers of lone parents going back to work if the target of eradicating child poverty has to be reached by 2020.

The NDLP's soft approach of not enforcing the programme for all lone parents, but making it a voluntary option has worked for those that enrolled on it, although Simmonds & Bivand (2008) reported that there were problems with keeping up in the first few months, with childcare breakdowns and child illnesses resulting in early job losses. This then questions the success of the NDLP initiative. Eleven percent in ten years could hardly be declared as a landslide as it suggests longer time in poverty for families, ultimately impacting their economic well-being. This may suggest the reason why the government decided on the graduated weaning method of getting lone parents out to work – still soft touch, but a much firmer approach to ensure that the target to eradicate poverty by 2020 is met, and with more families achieving economic well-being. The only question is that the strategy is still dependent on the willingness and commitment to work of the individual; and this fact is resonated by Dolton (2006) in a study carried out on lone parents' eligibility for NDLP, which purports that commitment and attitude to work was crucial to the success of the initiative. Nine sets of altitudinal statements were used to gauge commitment, and statements such as, "A person must have a job to feel a full member of society." and

“If I don’t like a job, I’d pack it in....” were used to reflect that without the individual’s willingness to move back into work, it could be difficult to wean such a parent from benefits.

Challenging these attitudinal or behavioural barriers could pose a challenge as the root cause could even be underlined by other issues. However, Dolton’s report revealed that commitment to work was especially high among lone parents already working, those intending to work in the near future and black lone parents. In the UK, despite considerable anxiety about the growth of lone parenthood, the discussion of lone parenthood and welfare reform has not been as racially inclined as it is in the US, where lone parenthood has been associated with a response to structural unemployment that particularly affects black people. Dolton in his research revealed that the highest percentage group of lone parents claiming Income Support in the UK are women and white. Half of this group reported having one child, with a further five claiming they had a child under the age of five. The majority lived in rented accommodation paid for by the government through housing benefits and over half had been claiming benefits for two or more years. Another report by Daycare Trust (2007) indicated that in certain communities, families are more likely to be headed by a lone parent, with an increased prevalence of lone parenting among black families in Britain.

The report also opined that 25% of white families are headed by a lone parent in comparison to 45% of black Caribbean families. Mirza (1993) challenged this stereotype and asserted that 79% of Caribbean mothers who are officially classified as ‘lone mothers’ actually have a male partner and reside in conjugal union. The factors responsible for this statistical representation are both cultural and economic in nature and an understanding of Caribbean family structures, their cultural values and long standing traditions provides a broader perspective of the female-headed households that are embedded in the history of Caribbean families (Mirza, 1993).

Although Caribbean lone parents have traditionally continued to experience high rates of economic activity through full-time paid work, Berthoud (2001) claims there has been an increase in the unemployment of young Caribbean mothers under the age of 25; which is representative of the current high unemployment rate amongst

youth in the UK. On the other hand, Reynolds (2005) argues that there is an undeveloped viewpoint that young Caribbean mothers unlike their mothers are reluctant to engage in full time employment, but are more inclined towards a gendered moral rationality that identifies moral costs to the children and family as a consequence of mothers working full-time hours. In my opinion, these young mothers are more attuned to the choices available to them as mothers and are emulative of the behaviours of their white counterparts. Even then, Platt (2007) acknowledged that despite high rates of lone parenthood among African Caribbean women, this group still boasts the highest employment rates than any other ethnic group in the UK.

Black families in general experience higher rates of unemployment through migration, asylum seeking, language barriers, and other socio-economic issues. There is also an increased likelihood of living in low-income households most especially in communities that have more children; therefore suggesting that their childcare seeking behaviours will be exponentially different. In the next section I discuss childcare barriers to the employment of lone parents.

### **Childcare Barriers to Lone Parents' Employment**

According to research, many parents who worked faced a number of barriers suggesting that parents do not necessarily move out of work when they cease to face barriers but when they are not able to retain or sustain work in spite of barriers (Dolton, 2006). A lack of affordable and accessible childcare was also seen by both schools and professionals as a major barrier to continuing education for young mothers and they use on-site crèche facilities or family as their main childcare resource (Meadows et al, 2004).

The most cited barrier to work is often related to childcare, however Dolton points out that barriers faced by lone parents actually differ based on if they have never been employed. This assertion suggests that barriers for those who have not worked could be based on perceptions rather than experience, as would be the case for those who have worked. Lone parents who are working are less likely to cite a lack of

confidence or skills as a barrier, and are also less likely to worry about leaving their child with a stranger or concerned that employers would not hire them due to childcare responsibilities. On the other hand, those who have never worked always have an array of similar barriers but on a more grandiose level based on their lack of experience or individual perceptions. The 'normal' initial adjustment struggle in combining parenthood with holding a job that they observe their friends going through could also be a deterrent to actively seeking work. They are also very likely to cite childcare, lack of opportunities for work, perceptions about employers and pay; and low confidence levels as barriers to work. Bolton's research rightly claims that working lone parents have the same issues, hence indicating that some lone parents actually manage to work despite these difficulties.

The issue of supporting lone parents back to work needs to be conceptualised with addressing the complexities of women's lives. According to Bolton (2006) mothers returning to work after some period of time of work grapple with interlinked issues including adjusting to regular employment, rebuilding lost confidence, sorting childcare (as this is always perceived as the responsibility of the mother) which includes arranging and rearranging childcare due to childcare breakdown. Some are unable to hold down a job for long due to child illness; some due to migration issues have had to take jobs below their academic qualifications; and some have had to take a salary cut in order to be able to combine employment with childcare and are struggling to cope with a new reduced level of income. On the same note, since women workers are concentrated in low paid areas of the labour force, the income generated is sometimes not enough to keep them out of debt.

Receiving support in managing these key issues during the transition is crucial to mothers' ability to seek employment actively and sustain the employment. However, it has been established that women receive little or no support in this area (Bolton, 2006). The combinations of one or few of the issues outlined above consequently make lone mothers rationalise whether work actually pays or not. Most parents on benefits would like to work, but are unwillingly to work for the minimum wage simply for the reason that they will not be able to afford to pay their bills especially housing or rental commitments and childcare costs. Ensuring a successful transition back to

work would involve a joined-up approach between government agencies to support parents in ensuring that work pays.

In line with the discussion, Duncan and Edwards (1999) argue that lone parents act as rational economic people in response to government policy change, as assumed by the discourses of politicians in US and the Scandinavian countries. In terms of perceived economic costs and benefits of taking up paid work or not may be subject to other relational and moral rationality which actually varies between social groups, neighbourhoods and welfare states. This Duncan & Edwards (2000) called the 'rationality mistake' as evident in how people make decisions about their moral economies, about combining parenting with paid work; and the type of paid work to embark on shows that people do not necessarily act rationally. Obviously, work would be economically viable in the long-term, but in the short-term making a decision not to seek work is made in response to moral and socially negotiated views about what is proper and right, not just for them individually, but for others.

Conceptualising what is proper and right in the context of childcare and work; and how a woman sees herself in the middle of the decision making, reveals that lone mothers may not simply view childcare as a barrier to taking up paid work, rather they feel morally obligated to care for their children themselves and may also wish to do so. These mothers see 'mothering' as their role and in relation to children, there seem to be a non-negotiable and deeply gendered moral requirements to take responsibility for children's needs and to make this a priority over paid work (Weeks et al., 2001; McCarthy et al., 2003). Consequently, it is imperative that research and services move away from focussing on childcare availability as the categorical barrier to lone parents taking up paid work. Rather, more work should be done in understanding why 'mothering' seems to be the work identity these women would like to assume and how to support them better in this role. The ways by which this key role of 'mothering' can be discharged is subject to different interpretation of the term 'mothering' and how this can be fitted into taking up employment. This could be the rationale behind the government's decision to wean lone parents gradually from the full time mothering role once the last child reaches school age, and getting them back into paid work since it is assumed that the level of care should reduce as the child grows older. However, contrary to this assumption, Lewis (2006) argues that:

“motherhood does not simply become easier as the children grow older neither does parental responsibility decrease. Rather, both change over time together with the needs of the children”

Although Lewis believes issues synonymous to daily parenting including separation, transition from early years to school, health problems are not necessarily age related, the argument can be made that education and learning experiences are mostly age related in the UK. The three and four year old funding could be used as a lever to move into part time employment whilst also ensuring the social development of the child is successful from the child’s perspective, but seems to be useful only as a form of respite for the parent if they are not able to secure part-time employment.

Previous research on ‘mothering’ in the UK has reported that many women believe that paid work is essentially incompatible with good mothering, whilst some believe that part-time around school hours would work better. Some reports also claim that many mothers who work long hours would ideally prefer not to, irrespective of their age, education or career opportunities, hence suggesting that sometimes the rational thinking behind paid work and childcare are subjective to other factors depending on individual perceptions of their role as women and mothers; and how they make sense of their worlds as individuals torn between these roles. As different groups of lone mothers have different views about ‘mothering’, researchers claim that perceptions about childcare also vary depending on mother’s social class, conventionality, ethnicity and sexuality (Duncan & Edwards, 1999; Standing, 1999; Knijn & Van der Wel, 2000). This discourse is also resonated by Vincent and Ball (2006) in their statement:

“In a variety of ways, childcare provision and the way in which it is used affect and are affected by situated values of childrearing as well as the material circumstances of families.”

Parental decisions around childcare, as claimed by these researchers, are a complex mix of practical and moral concerns, with social relations being rated as important as economic circumstances. This proposes that a choice still has to be made and options weighed in terms of the social development of the child in the

mother's care, against achieving economic wellbeing partially in the mother's care through part-time working combined with childcare or through full-time employment and matching childcare. This reasoning is resonated by Vincent and Ball (2006) who postulate that childcare opportunities and choices are strongly stratified and very closely linked to the assets of the families. They hypothesize a social stratification in childcare by claiming that the combination of cost and choice are inversely linked to social classes; and class fractions are separated from one another in different and well bounded circuits of care. However, a good understanding of the social values underpinning the rationalities governing a mother's decision about employment and childcare is quite crucial as these social values interplay with the values system that relatively guides how different social groups navigate through alternative constructs (Duncan & Edwards, 1999). Over the years, various government reforms have been introduced to support the childcare market and most importantly families. Major interventions are enumerated in Figure 1a.

## **Balancing Work and Family**

Balancing work and family life has played a pivotal role in political agendas particularly on issues relating to how best different forms of flexible working will resolve the problem of scheduling and managing work and family time. Flexible working policies were only adopted in 1997 for the first time after the Second World War by the UK government in what was tagged as 'providing support for working families'. Since then government intervention over the years has taken various forms of family friendly policies including the extension of maternity leave, introduction of paternity leave, parental leave, time off for dependants and the stimulation of childcare services to help families balance work and family life. Essentially, for the government to reduce benefits and promote economic growth, barriers to work that includes childcare and difficulties in balancing family and work life need to be resolved.



## **Fig 1a - Government Reforms 1998 – 2016**

### **National Childcare Strategy, May 1998**

Launched by the New Labour Government in May 1998, the initiative was introduced for the development, expansion, implementation and sustainability of early years services in Britain. It sets targets for the development and support of high quality sustainable, accessible and affordable childcare in the community.

### **Early Development and Childcare Partnerships, April 1998**

Central to the strategy is the establishment of the EYDCPs which were the mechanism for the expansion of childcare places, and the charged with the implementation of the strategy locally. These were composed of key local groups including the local authority, providers, parents, employers, schools and churches.

### **New Deal for Lone Parents, October 1998**

A labour market intervention intended to contribute to an increase in the sustainable level of employment and a reduction in social exclusion. NDLP is targeted at lone parents on income support whose child is over five years old, to prepare them for work and for entry to the labour market.

### **Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative, 2001**

The NNI was launched in 2001 to provide high quality childcare in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of England, to help parents into employment, reduce child poverty and boost children's development. This further evolved into the Surestart initiative.

### **Work-life balance & Flexible Working Policies, 2000**

Introduced to support families in balancing individual work and their life outside work most importantly for employees with caring responsibilities. Reinforces that choice, control and flexibility are important in work, and that personal fulfilment is important outside work and may enhance contributions to work.

### **Surestart Children Centres, 2002**

A government led initiative aimed at giving every child the best start in life and which offers a broad range of integrated services focussing on family health, early years care and education and improved well-being programmes to children under the age of five and their families when and where needed. With one centre for every community, 3,500 centres were created across England by 2010.

### **Every child matters, 2003**

One of the most important policy initiative and development programmes in relation to children and children services. Its main aim are for every child, whatever their background or circumstances to have the support they need to be safe, be healthy, enjoy and achieve, make positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.

**Extended Schools Programme, 2006**

Designed to support learning, raise school standards and promote healthy lifestyles, enabling schools to work closely with members of the wider community and connect local people with local services including breakfast and homework clubs, sport, art, drama, ICT, programmes for parents and families, and community use of premises.

**More great childcare – Raising quality, 2013**

The reports highlights the vision of a dynamic childcare market delivering high quality early education by building a stronger and more professional early years workforce by reforming early years qualifications, introducing Early Years teachers, strengthening the inspection regime, making Ofsted the sole arbiter of quality. New childminder agencies were introduced to increase the number of childminders and improve the training and support they can access.

**More affordable childcare, September 2013**

Builds on more great childcare and sets the government's agenda to help families to meet the costs of childcare, increase the amount of affordable provision and give parents the right information so they can make informed choices about childcare.

**Funded early education 2003 – Proposed 2016**

Supports children's development and also helps parents with childcare costs. Launched in 2003 for three & four year olds, the scheme has been extended from 12.5hrs to 15hrs for 38 weeks in 2010. The scheme was extended to two year olds from the most disadvantaged families in 2013. New pilots for the extension to 30hours for working parents to be launched in September 2016 and rolled out nationally in September 2017.

**Tax free childcare (2015) & Universal Credit – Proposed 2016**

Proposal for the introduction of tax free childcare to working families with the government contributing 20% of parents' yearly childcare costs phased in 2015. Universal credit is for people on lower incomes aimed at bringing together a number of working age benefits into a single monthly payment. Working parents will still be eligible to claim for up to 70% of their childcare costs (as is the case for the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit introduced in April 2003). Helps with provision of upfront costs of childcare and supports the existing costs of childcare if parents become unemployed.

***As reflected in Figure 1a above, balancing work and family, and flexible working policies were introduced in the year 2000. These are further discussed in the next section.***

Public views and orientation on flexible working policies have generated critics of the policies and those who wholeheartedly support the reform. Supporters of the reform argue that parents need to be able to balance work and family life in order to be able to support their families, remain in work and achieve economic well-being. The right for parents to request for part-time work was revolutionary, as it would support families to raise their children whilst also pursuing a career. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2009, concluded that parents who are looking for work are looking for work that fits around their children's needs, which is why the supply of labour for part-time work is dominated by parents, with 59% of lone parents seeking work looking for part-time work. The research also indicated that parents with care responsibilities find problems not only in starting jobs but also in keeping them when either emergencies or indeed regular events such as school holidays come up; therefore suggesting that the parental wish to work either full-time or part-time is affected by availability and affordability of childcare, and conclude that the time constraints placed on parents result in depressed part-time earnings rates and low family incomes. This suggests that if these time constraints were changed, then parents with childcare responsibilities may well choose to work differently, and very likely, longer hours than they feel able to do at present.

Critics of the reform on the other hand claim that on face value the policies seem to be brilliant, but some believe that it is not anything about the family, but the furtherance of political agendas and economic growth. For example, Esping-Andersen et al (2001), providing a European critical context highlighted that policies in this field are usually linked to the promotion of women's employment in order to further economic growth and competition agenda. Lewis (2006) another critic, highlights that the main issues about work and family reconciliation policies is the extent to which they are instrumental and about something other than just making it easier for men and women to work and to care for young and old dependants in order to further economic growth or indeed a political agenda.

A review of parental leave, early maternal employment and child outcomes by Greg and Waldfogel (2005) queries why mothers would want to work full-time in the first 18 months of the child's life when the child needs the mother most; therefore suggesting that such policies are more politically inclined. However, Greg and

Waldfogel (2005) were not particularly clear about when it will be deemed appropriate for a mother to be able to leave her child and go to work or if indeed flexible working policies should support mothers staying at home for example, maternity leave extension until the child is 18 months old. Interestingly, as the beneficial effects of the 3 and 4 year old funding has received considerable support in academic literature, the funding has been extended to 2 year olds since 2012 to support the most deprived children in the country, which fundamentally indicates that more children will be separated from their parents at an early age. Although the government claims their involvement in daycare is to enhance children's equal opportunity and reduce social disadvantage, this has resulted in a separation of children's preschool years from life at home. This implies that the goal of improving child welfare is subsequently conflicting with goals of promoting the employment of mothers of young children.

Another critic of the policies argues that statutory efforts to reconcile work and family responsibilities could exacerbate gender inequality as the policies permit more selective participation by men at the household level (Windebank, 2001). However, another school of thought claims that, "...wider issues of ageing, fertility and child poverty have mainly focussed on policies directed towards encouraging labour participation especially for women, but these may not necessarily address the issue of promoting gender equality if no attention is paid to the gendered divisions of unpaid labour". This suggests why Lewis (2006) opposes policies that provide leave to care as they will facilitate informal care by women, most especially when the leave is long and poorly compensated – indirectly referring to maternity leave.

The maternity leave has been the most popular and well-known form of flexible working offered to women just before they give birth. It was the first form of work-life balance policy enacted to support families, especially mothers in balancing raising a family whilst still pursuing a career. Since the introduction of the maternity leave, parents in the UK have enjoyed a plethora of flexible working policies to support and encourage working families to stay on at work - which I discuss in detail in the next section.

## **Flexible Working Policies**

Parents have found balancing work and family life challenging since the shift from the traditional family model of the women as the homemaker and men as the traditional breadwinners. The traditional family system had clear-cut roles to meet the challenges of raising a family and supporting the family financially until women started joining the labour workforce due to differing reasons dependent on individual and family circumstances. The ability to raise a family and at the same time provide for the family by working is a decision that many parents have to make to ensure the family achieves the quality of life they desire. However, raising a young family poses quite a few challenges that could actually deter the parents from achieving career success due to conflicting demands on time. A family with a new baby wants to provide the child with the nurturance, love and care he or she needs to survive and develop into maturity whilst meeting the child's emotional and physical needs. On the other hand, the means to provide for the child's physical needs is equally important so the child could have the best start in life.

Since 1997, public policy has for the first time during the post-war period been actively committed to supporting working parents (Cameron et al, 2002). This is not surprising as it seemed logical not only to support those working so they could remain in work, but also to encourage those who have made the decision not to work, (under the guise that it is the best option for their family whilst living on state benefit) to realise that with support, it is indeed possible to combine raising a family with work. A plethora of flexible working policies were enacted to encourage more families back to work, including the introduction of parental leave, time off for dependents, the promotion of family-friendly employment policies and stimulating the expansion of childcare services (as shown in Fig 1 on page 63). Balancing work and family life has played a large part in political agendas particularly in analysing how much impact the various flexible working options has on solving the problem of scheduling and managing work and family life. Lewis (2006) however argues that the main issues about reconciling work and family policies is the extent to which they are instrumentalist and about something other than making it easier for men and women to work and care for young and old dependants.

## **Fig 1b: Flexible Working Reforms (1911-2011)**

### **Maternity grants, 1911**

The National Insurance Act, proposed by the then chancellor, David Lloyd George, came into force in 1911. It included a universal maternal health benefit, putting the issue of maternity rights on the political agenda.

### **Women go to work, 1941**

From 1941, women's conscription into industry prompted debate over their "double burden". By 1943, 1,345 nurseries had been established – compared with the 14 existing in 1940 – to help women to juggle work and childcare. But they were temporary, and the concept of formal maternity leave remained firmly off the agenda.

### **International issue, 1970**

During the 1970s, maternity leave in Britain remained patchy, though the issue assumed international prominence. In 1974 Sweden introduced cross-gender parental leave into law. Meanwhile, in Iraq, many women could expect to receive full pay while on maternity leave while benefiting from an extensive system of state-subsidised nurseries.

### **Dark days, 1980**

In the 1980s maternity leave varied from company to company and was linked to length of service. From 1985, workplace-subsidised nurseries were deemed a taxable benefit, adding £700 to £1,000 to women's tax bills. In 1987, the universal maternity grant was removed. State-paid maternity allowance was restricted. The same year, a training supervisor, Maria Brown, lost a lawsuit against her employer, who had selected her for redundancy because she was pregnant.

### **European exceptions, 1988**

In 1988 a European Commission report demonstrated the extent to which Britain lagged behind its contemporaries in employment law. The only state not to provide full statutory maternity leave, Britain had blocked the adoption of a draft directive setting out minimum standards on parental leave.

### **New Labour, 1999**

Two years after New Labour swept into power, the Employment Relations Act granted all employees a minimum of three months' unpaid parental leave, while mothers were entitled to 18 weeks' paid leave.

### **Paternity leave, 2001**

In 2001, Gordon Brown included men's right to paternity leave in his Budget and, from 2003, male employees received paid statutory paternity leave for the first time. In January 2010, fathers were given the right to take six months statutory paternity leave while their partners returned to work, in effect taking the place of the mother at home.

### **European advances, 2010**

European Parliament decided that all companies should pay maternity leave at full pay for 20 weeks and paternity leave for two weeks. Currently women receive 90 per cent of their salary for the first six weeks of leave, followed by the statutory rate of £125 per week for the remaining 46.

## **Fig 1b: Flexible working reforms 1911-2011**

It is however arguable that although the government seems to have a vested interest in increasing labour participation through the introduction of flexible working policies, families who have made the decision to work and improve their quality of life also stand to benefit from these policies as they provide a pedestal for parents to approach their employers to work flexibly in order to balance work and family life. I also propose that what would have been useful is for families to have access to flexible childcare and school sessions to meet their needs during term time and school holidays. The researcher interviewed parents to find out if they are aware of the various flexible working rights and options they have as employees. Parents were also asked if they have used or are benefiting from any of the policies. Fig 1b showcases some of the major flexible working policies introduced by the government over the years.

### **Accessibility through Information Provision**

The third strategic outcome of the National Childcare Strategy was making childcare accessible through the provision of quality, accurate and up to date information about childcare within the local area. This not only presents the fundamental market intelligence necessary for childcare providers and parents to make informed decisions, but it also enhanced the strategic management of the local childcare market and the commissioning of new services by local authorities. The strategy reinforced the need to increase and improve information provision by mandating all local authorities to offer a free information service dedicated to providing childcare information to all parents and carers in the local area. A national helpline and website were launched in 1999 to link all the local childcare information services and provide an overview of childcare services across the country. The main ethos was to encourage local authorities to enhance local childcare information through developing relationships with the providers and making the information accessible, whenever, however and wherever required by parents. Included in this was advice on what to look for in a childcare service; help in deciding the most suitable arrangement for the family particularly when the child has a disability or special educational needs; up to date details of childcare availability in the area where they

work or live and advice on financial support that may be available to help meet the cost of childcare (including advice on benefits and tax credits).

The accessibility through information provision approach seems to ride on a number of assumptions. Firstly, that information should be free and at no cost to the suppliers of childcare services and consumers of the service. This in effect automatically removes any cost-related barrier that could have deterred parents from seeking information. Secondly, the approach assumes that with a perfect knowledge of the market, the information service will be fully equipped to provide childcare information. Thirdly, the approach assumes that parents will be able to make rational decisions based on the information provided. Fourthly, the approach presupposes that childcare providers will be able to fill their vacancies and showcase the quality of their services through the information service. And finally, the approach assumes that all end users – including childcare providers and parents, can access this service through various delivery channels and interfaces including face-to-face, telephone, white mail, email, and the Internet. The strategy assumes that since information is provided free of any charge, it will be accessible to everyone. The idea to make information free at point of access in itself is a huge incentive towards matching demand of childcare to the supply of childcare in the local area. However, this assumes that cost is a major barrier to information provision for everyone, which may be true to some extent most especially for low-income families.

The second assumption that the information service would have a perfect knowledge of the local childcare market and hence would be fully equipped to deliver childcare information failed to clarify how the information would be sourced and the quality maintained by the information services. Basically, it assumes a perfect information sharing process between the local authority, childcare providers and the information services. This seems to place a huge responsibility on the information services as it was not too clear in the strategy how, who and what information should be shared with the local authority. It assumes that providers would share information about their services with the information service, without putting any formal protocols in place for providers to share information about their services. It also disregards the fact that the childcare market is a competitive market and providers may not be willing to share 'trade secrets' or give the right picture about their services out of the fear of



competition. This in itself could raise the question of the authenticity of the information held by the services as providers do not seem to be bound by any legislation in the strategy to provide up to date details of their provision to the information services.

The next assumption that parents would make rational decisions if armed with information about local childcare provision rides on the premise, that people behave and make decisions rationally. In economics, rational behaviour assumes that individuals maximise some objective function under the constraints they face. The concept of rational behaviour allows us to derive optimal economic behaviour in a normative sense and can be used to explain and predict actual economic behaviour. The basic assumptions of rational behaviour are that – choices are made among a given fixed set of alternatives; with subjectively known probability distributions of outcomes for each alternative; and in such a way as to maximise the expected value of a given utility function. From a decision-making perspective, rational decision-making involves a cognitive process that requires thinking through and weighing the alternatives to come up with the best potential result. The process typically would involve:

- Defining the situation/decision to be made
- Identifying the important criteria for the process and the result
- Considering all possible solutions
- Calculating the consequences of the solutions versus the likelihood of satisfying the criteria
- Choosing the best option

Characteristically, in choosing childcare, the assumption that parents would behave and make decisions rationally presupposes that it is possible for parents to consider every option and also know the future consequences of each. It also disregards the fact that the decision-making depends on the cognitive abilities of the person making the decision. The criteria they are presented with may also be subjective, difficult to compare and may require a great deal more time and more information.

The assumption that childcare providers will be able to fill their vacancies through advertising free of charge with the information service and showcase the quality of

their service presupposes that the information services would have information about all childcare vacancies in the local area, which only would be possible in an ideal situation whereby each provider is able to notify the information service once there is a vacancy in their setting. Again, this is subject to provider openness in a competitive childcare market. However, the idea of showcasing the quality of provisions is subjective as only providers with 'outstanding' and 'good' Ofsted grades would benefit more under the assumption that demand would be higher for provisions identified with high Ofsted performance standards. This obviously discounts other factors that parents consider when looking for childcare such as location or cost in favour of the quality of the care.

The last assumption that all end users will be able to access the service through various delivery channels though robust in terms of the interfaces provided, anticipates that all parents are able to look for information, and are willing to seek information. It also assumes that all parents will be able to find information through the various channels provided hence overlooking the fact that some families are 'hard to reach', not known to many services and would not necessarily know about services in their local area due to little or no engagement with services, illiteracy, language barriers and a host of other factors. It is therefore not surprising that a report from the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) 1998 claims that "...organising up to date, effective information services which meet individuals' needs are a difficult task".

### **Evaluation of Information Services**

In 2002 about four years after the information services were set up, Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) a leading research, consultancy and auditing firm was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to evaluate the performance and effectiveness of the information services set up and managed by local authorities across the country. The report claimed that the information services were generally performing well, with satisfaction and recommendation levels reasonably high among parents and providers, thus suggesting that the service was very much needed and meeting the needs of families and childcare providers. However, the study reported that there is the need for better marketing and publicity

for the information services hence implying that not many parents are aware of the service. The Interdepartmental Review of Childcare (2002) that draws on Parent's demand survey claims that only three per cent of parents surveyed had used the family information service as a source of information on childcare and only one per cent had used the online national website to find childcare.

The report further claims, that parents know little about childcare or where to look for childcare information. Both claims suggest that although the information provided by the Childcare Information Services is very valuable to both parents and providers, very few are actually aware of the existence of the service. This raised the question about how wide the awareness for the Information service was nationally and locally. The report is also subjective to how wide the survey was carried out, which age groups actually completed the survey, and branding issues as many parents are oblivious of the fact that most information services were part of the local authority. However, worthy of note is the fact that in response to the report of low usage of the information services and national website, a Sure Start delivery target "to at least double the number of users of the Childcarelink website and local children information services by March 2006" was commissioned.

As the government aims to ensure that all parents have access to high quality, accurate and timely information, the development of services providing information was integrated into other key policy initiatives such as the Every Child Matters agenda in 2003. Essentially, it was identified that high quality information can help parents support their children to achieve the Every Child Matters five outcomes – to be healthy, to stay safe, to enjoy and achieve, make positive contribution and achieve economic well-being (DfES, 2004).

### **Extended Information Services**

The parents demand survey (2002) also outlined that parents reported a shortage of coherent local information to help them in their parenting roles, with 75 per cent of those surveyed claiming that there were times in their lives or in the lives of their children, when they needed access to additional information or support and as such was not able to make informed choices on childcare and other services to suit their

needs. Five years after the National Childcare Strategy, the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) published the “Ten Year Strategy for Childcare – Choice for parents: the best start for children” in December 2004. The new strategy aimed to ensure that parents had access to information and advice about locally available services and other support services.

Section 12 (7) of the Childcare Act 2006 was used to set the legal framework for a vision of information delivery for parents. The act extended local authorities’ existing duty to provide information to the public on childcare and related services. From April 2008, local authorities were required to provide a range of information which parents might need to support their children right through to their 20th birthday and up to the age of 24 for children with SEN/disability. Further to this in December 2007, the Department for Children and Families introduced the Children’s Plan: Building Brighter Futures - to set out the government’s ambition to make Britain the best place in the world for children and young people to grow (DCSF, 2007). As with previous policies, information delivery was right in the middle of implementing this policy. The government commissioned a national directory to host information about registered and regulated care such as childminders, nurseries, holiday schemes, preschools, schools and Out of school facilities. The directory was however different from the initial website – Childcarelink, set up to support the National Childcare Strategy as this new directory was designed to also hold more information about unregistered but structured activities in schools and the local area; more information about parenting and family support; and information about other agencies and organisations that can support families of children up to the age of 20. The idea obviously was to support parents in finding all related information in one place rather than having to search different websites and directories for information.

Although the idea to have a national directory seemed excellent, the success of the initiative depended largely on local authorities’ abilities to source information about local services and keeping the information up to date. Local authorities were expected to have local directories or websites that fed into the national directory. The argument would then be that the national directory was a duplication of what was already available in every local authority; which could be the reason why it was easy for the next government to withdraw this resource as part of its cost reducing

strategies. There was basically no need for a national directory since the information provided on the national directory could also be easily accessed on each local authority's website and directories. Moreover, one could also argue that the best place to search for local information would be local directories as local needs are best met locally even though this may be subject to trends and changes in families over time. However an exception would be that the national directory could provide a benchmarking platform for those interested in assessing local provision. Quite recently, the DfE (2013) confirmed that although Family Information Services who host local directories in local authorities are good sources of childcare information, sometimes the information is out of date, therefore suggesting an improvement in these services.

Childcare traditionally has been viewed as a woman's role until more women expressed the wish to delay childcare or pursue a career outside the home. This has had significant impact on childcare, women's role in the family and the society at large. Gender and childcare is discussed in the next section.

## **Gender and Childcare**

Despite the increased presence of women in the paid workforce since the 1960s and the amelioration in women's political and economic rights, household labour and childcare remain divided along traditionally gendered lines (Coltrane, 2000; Thompson & Walker, 1989). Numerous studies documented the persistence of a gendered division of domestic labour and childcare (England & Farkas, 1986; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Ferree, 1990; Presser, 1994; Dempsey, 1997; Coltrane, 2000) even though, it is clear that attitudes on gender roles are changing (Scott, 2006). Secularisation and increased education are both working to challenge the traditional gender role ideology, but it is not certain that this will result in equitable gender division of labour. Despite significant shifts in women's lives, and how family and work responsibilities are combined and managed, there is no anecdotal evidence that future involvement of men in family chores and childcare will improve significantly (Scott, 2006). The cross national analysis of men across Europe and the United States revealed that there are similarities in the men's attitudes, beliefs and

values when it comes to sharing domestic tasks and childcare, thus suggesting that it is not necessarily a cultural issue.

The social role theory (Eagly, 1987), suggests that the sexual division of labour and societal expectations based on stereotypes produce gender roles. Gender roles are socially and culturally defined prescriptions and beliefs about the behaviour and emotions of men and women (Anselmi and Law, 1998). Whereas the communal role mostly associated with women is characterised by attributes such as nurturance, emotional expressiveness and domestic activities, men are commonly characterised by attributes such as assertiveness, independence and public activities.

Gender roles are closely linked with gender stereotypes – which are over-generalised beliefs about people based on their membership in one of many social categories. Traditionally, men have been viewed as financial providers, whereas women have been seen as caretakers. In the past, gender division of labour was prevalent with socially determined ideas and practices, which defined what roles and activities, were deemed appropriate for women and men. However, recent changes in family structures have witnessed gender equality concepts sweeping across society with women having the same opportunities as men, including the ability to participate in the public sphere. There is equivalence in life outcomes for both men and women, recognising their different needs and interests and requiring a redistribution of power and resources.

Since the 1960s, society has undergone a process of social evolution and economic pressures have made it increasingly difficult for most men to fulfil the role of sole providers. Feminine gender role socialisation has been transformed as women are now socialised to perform roles both in the public world of work and in the private world of the family (Silverstein et al, 1999). Despite these changes employed women are still responsible for the largest share of household and childcare responsibilities compared to their spouses. Women are not only responsible for childcare and household responsibilities, they are also expected to manage, plan, organise and supervise, as the case would be if childcare is being contracted out to a childcare provider (Coltrane, 2000; Dempsey, 2002; Thompson & Walker, 1989).

### **Theories of gendered division of labour (including childcare)**

There are four main theoretical perspectives that account for the gendered division of activities within a family – resources, structural factors, and gender ideology and construction approaches (Coltrane, 2000; Kluwer et al., 2000; Presser, 1994). These theoretical perspectives attempt to explain domestic labour as a whole, but fail to distinguish between housework and childcare. Gender construction theories propose that men and women engage in different household tasks to demonstrate and reaffirm their gendered selves. Attitudes toward gender roles could be responsible for the division of labour in households. Men and women with more egalitarian ideologies tend to have more equal division of labour (Shelton & John, 1996), whilst more traditional couples have husbands who participate less in housework or childcare (Coverman, 1985).

Congruently linked to the gender theory is the resource theory which proposes that relative resources are a key determinant of how household labour is divided (Ferree, 1991). It posits that the higher the spouse's income or educational attainment or occupational status, then the higher their power to make decisions. Hence, the highest income earner in the family has access to greater decision-making power to translate his/her wishes into reality (Coltrane, 2000; Johnson and Huston, 1998). According to Coverman (1985) and Presser (1994), it is possible that the greater the resources contributed by a spouse, the smaller his/her share of housework and participation in childcare. However, the gender construction approach has proved that there could be inconsistencies in the resource theory. The gender construction theory states that a wife could do more housework even though her share of household income exceeds that of her husband's (Bittman et al, 2003; Brines, 1994; Ferree, 1990). Gender construction theorists explain this curvilinear relationship as a couple's attempt to reduce the threat to the husband's masculinity and to reaffirm the wife's femininity in the face of their masculine income-generating behaviour. This could be the case when couples tend to have traditional provider roles in their relationship. However, this does not explain why women would continue to do more domestic work in the household when both spouses have liberal gender ideologies. Deutsch (1999) proposed that such women might judge their actions and worth as mothers by an idealised standard of motherhood. Based on a gender construction approach, retaining major responsibility for housework and childcare may be a way

that women 'do gender' as women feel discomfort when they move away from their motherly roles (Major, 1993).

Other factors such as the structural characteristics of the family, including the amount of time the mother works outside the home, number and ages of the children also influence the division of labour and childcare in the household. The demand response model asserts that the more time a spouse has available to participate in household labour, the more the structural demand and the greater the amount of household labour performed. Again, this could be challenged as couples who are married or living together tend to negotiate who does what and make decisions together on a daily basis (Kirchler, 1993). The decisions made determine daily routines in the family as well as future behaviours and balance of power between them (Coltrane, 2000). The ongoing and daily interactions concerning the division of labour within a family unit is therefore contextualised by gendered behaviour as masculine or feminine is created, maintained and renegotiated (Berk, 1985; Osmond & Thorne, 1993; Risman, 2004; Thompson & Walker, 1989).

It seems that among men there has long been a contradiction between the ideas they profess and the way they actually live. Men and women living together do not always give the same assessment of their relationship, in general, and the distribution of tasks between them, in particular (Hearn, 2002). Gender construction theorists have conducted several qualitative studies to examine division of labour negotiations between couples. Coltrane (1990) investigated how and why families change after mothers take up paid employment and found evidence for change in the meaning of gender. When household tasks including childcare were shared equally fathers developed maternal thinking. A Finnish research even suggests some unemployed men may have closer ties with their children than their employed peers. (Tigerstedt, 1994). Similarly, Deutsch (1999); Risman & Johnson-Summerford (1998), explored couples' retrospective accounts of the negotiations and discussions that enabled them to share childcare equally. They came to the conclusion that these unique couples were characterised by egalitarian relationships guided by fairness and sharing principles.



The gender distribution of income may be used to legitimate gender-specific divisions of labour and justify patriarchal family models, when men earn more than women. However, when women earn more than men, the argument may not be applied (Pahl, 1995). Given the considerable differences that still exist between men and women's earnings, it could be argued that it is not surprising that it is the woman who stays at home after the birth of a child, since she is usually the person with the lower income. A couple do not need to be wholehearted advocates of traditional domestic ideology to opt for the traditional solution (Pringle and Hearn, 2006).

### **Role Altering Strategies and Work-Family Conflicts**

The division of household labour, including household work and childcare is one of the greatest areas of conflict and dissatisfaction for married couples (Kluwer, 1998). The care of young children has, traditionally, always been a female role, but the recent dramatic changes in the increasing participation of mothers of young children in the labour force correspond with an increase in egalitarian division of family and household responsibility. There have been speculations as to whether the participation of mothers in employment has any impact on the allocation of responsibility for the care of the children (Johnson, 1978). Increased participation of women in the workforce and the prominence of the dual-earner lifestyles have instigated researchers to adopt a conflict perspective that asserts that incompatible pressures from the work and family domains produce conflict for individuals who combine these two roles (Barnett, 1998).

Gender differences in how we define and achieve success also have an impact on both women and men in society and have a ripple effect on the family. However, how we define success has a significant impact on a myriad of choices in both our personal and professional lives. Definitions of success can affect our educational choices, choice of employer, work involvement, career attainment, financial resources, relationships, family commitment and life satisfaction (Dyke & Murphy, 2006). Although success originally referred to any positive outcome, it has increasingly become associated with wealth and prestige and, indeed, by many to be more synonymous with masculine socialisation (Duetschendorf, 1996; Doyle, 1983). The breadwinner role continues to be central to the definition of masculinity (Faludi,

1991) and is so fundamental to male identity that it shapes physical energies, sexuality and the nervous system (Toulson, 1977). However, recent research found that the younger generation of men tend to be more accepting of women's work roles, even though they are reluctant to accept women as co-provider, which suggests that the role of family breadwinner is still strongly ingrained in men's self-identity. Many men believe that achieving hierarchical advancement and financial success is part of the provider role and represents a significant contribution to their families (Eagly 1987; Eagly, Wood & Johannesen-Schimidt, 2004). Men are less likely to reduce their career aspirations or devalue career status due to work-family conflict. According to Riggs (1997), men who sacrifice financial security for care giving were viewed less positively than men who eschew this role.

Women, on the other hand, face a different set of expectations as their prescribed roles cluster around caring for others and nurturing relationships. This was supported by Gilligan (1982) in his comparison of how males and females make ethical decisions. He described women as centred in a personal network of relationships, whereas men negotiate an impersonal hierarchy of rules; women tend to accommodate their career within their roles. According to Johnson (1978), the vast majority of working mothers merely add their work role to their family role, rather than sharing parenting responsibilities. In research conducted on college students' perceptions of the work-family challenges that lie ahead, they have expectations about their future involvement in work and family activities (Weer et al, 2006). Many college students intend to combine a career with marriage and children and become part of a dual earner relationship and realise they will face challenges in balancing their work and family commitments. Even though they are yet to experience work-family conflict, Weer et al. (2006) believed that students make a preliminary appraisal of the conflict they expect to experience and also construct strategies to reduce the future conflict. Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1994) postulated that the individuals who appraise a work-family situation as potentially stressful are more likely to develop coping strategies to reduce or counter the stress. This view is supported by Barnett et al (2003) who identifies two types of role altering strategies that students might consider - career altering strategies and family altering strategies.

Career altering strategies involve accommodations made by individuals in the career domain to ensure that work pressures do not interfere with family commitments. Family altering strategies involve making accommodations in the family domain so that family pressures are less likely to interfere with pursuing a career. Reducing the aspiration to attain a high-level career position and reducing the importance placed on status are strategies that individuals anticipate using to reduce future work-family conflict.

According to Major, Klein & Ehrhart (2002), pursuing high level career positions involves a substantial time commitment which has been identified to interfere with family life. Brett & Stroh (2003) similarly suggested that achieving high status, especially financial success, often involved working long hours. Unlike men, women are known to anticipate and use career altering strategies in response to the needs of the family as they tend to continue to maintain primary responsibility for the management of their family and children (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Hoschild, 1989). The fact that women view success as more than achieving hierarchical advancement and rewards also determines their use of career altering strategies.

Traditionally, women's success has always been judged by the relationships they forge and not their achievements in the work place or public realm even though they have taken on additional responsibilities to their participation in the home (Levinson & Levinson, 1996). Recent studies have shown that young women continue to be socialised to place priority on traditional care-taking roles (Dyke & Murphy, 2006). This is buttressed by studies carried out by Simon (1995) on work and family roles. All the women studied viewed employment as an added responsibility and felt that a woman's primary obligation to her children and spouse is to provide a well-kept home, emotional support and nurturance. McKeen and Bu (2005) even discovered that many men expect that wives will sacrifice career accomplishment to facilitate the fulfilment of domestic roles.

## **Gender and Information Behaviour**

According to Wilkand (1998), gender could be assumed to be a social phenomenon with a fundamental social and structural ordering of men and women in society. Biological, mental and social differences between men and women can be manifested in different ways of information seeking and use. This could be caused by different information needs and strategies of access to information resources. (Steinova & Susol, 2007).

The broader roles of gender differences need to be incorporated in the broader context of social role demands and gender traits in which domestic versus external distinctions tend to differentiate the focus of men and women when looking for information. Quite a few researchers have investigated the information behaviour of men and women when looking for information including information behaviour of nurses, doctors, patients, parents when seeking health information, and students' information behaviour when using libraries for assignments, or conducting research. Gender seems to have become a variable that is often considered when assessing information behaviour even though this has been queried as a variable when conducting information behaviour research. However, Steinerrova & Susol (2007), believe gender as a variable can help to better understand cognitive and social frameworks of human information processing.

In their study of user's information behaviour from a gender perspective, Steinerrova & Susol (2007) investigated the usual ways of information seeking by gender, the use of electronic sources and perceptions of electronic publishing and current behaviour at the time of information seeking in libraries. They concluded that women prefer being more co-operative and collaborative when seeking information and are not too bothered about cost, whilst men preferred the Internet, individual work and cheap or free options of information. The study assumes male behaviour imposes a sense of hierarchy, logic and linearity. It also poses the question of quality versus quantity in terms of free fast access to electronic resources. Although on one hand the study looks into social and relational attributes of men and women, it failed to

establish or indeed investigate if situational or non-linear information structures could be closer to women's information seeking.

Different development of mental representations and different emphasis on social and cultural contexts could have an impact on information seeking behaviour. While women stress the need for relations between people, men are concentrated on individual performance. This has been proved by several studies of differences between men and women in the use of Internet (e.g., Fallows 2005, Losh 2003, Kennedy et al. 2003). A few researchers have investigated gender gaps in the use of and access to internet as an information resource including Sherman et al, 2000; Bimber, 2000; Wasserman & Richmon-Abbot, 2005;). In the earlier days of the introduction of the Web and Internet as sources of information, more negative computer attitudes were portrayed in researches carried out by Durnell & Thomson, 1997; and Whitley, 1997. Both studies emphasised higher computer anxiety and lower female self-confidence in using the web. This is buttressed by Durnell & Haag (2002) when they reported higher computer literacy and self-efficacy among males than females. These researchers also elucidated more positive Internet attitudes, longer Internet use and lower computer anxiety in men than in women, with gender being independently linked to Internet experience.

Joiner et al (2005) and Broos (2005) also reported that a significant relationship exists between gender and use of the Internet and that more experience reduces anxiety in men but not women. The reason for this anxiety in women, according to literature could be the possibility of girls and women being discouraged from using the Internet at a point in time due to its delivery via a computer interface, and because of the nature of the association of the operations within a traditional masculine technological environment (McIlroy et al, 2001; Toddman, 2000). This confirms Sherman et al's(2000) statement that "we need to appreciate that online behaviours and attitudes are extensions of offline social processes".

Across disciplinary, national, and cultural boundaries, the widespread agreement is that the use of newer information and communication technologies (ICTs),

particularly the Internet, has accelerated the production, circulation, and consumption of information in every form. However, Hess and Ostrom (2001) pointed out that, “Distributed digital technologies have the dual capacity to increase as well as restrict access to information.” Thus suggesting that ICTs have helped to exacerbate existing differences in information access and use, and may even have fostered new types of barriers.

The *gender gap* as highlighted by the researchers, can be seen in different communication, information and recreation patterns. Different developments of mental representations and different emphasis on social and cultural contexts have also had an impact on gender information behaviour. Social psychology defines physical, mental and social differences of men and women. The former includes original roles of hunters, fighters and protectors and the latter includes qualities of care and sensitivity to others, emotional expressivity and adaptability (Renzetti and Curran, 2003). While women stress the need for relations between people, men are concentrated on individual performance. This has been proved by several studies of differences between men and women in the use of Internet (e.g. Fallows 2005, Losh 2003, Kennedy *et al.* 2003. Fallow’s longitudinal study of the Internet and American Life Project (Fallows 2005) reveals that women are more particular about the communicative features of the Internet, while men are more inclined to participate in online transactions, get information, play games and use entertainment.

However, women have admitted more concerns with regard to privacy and misuse of Internet and larger information overload. According to Colley & Matting (2008), the internet influences women’s lives more differently in the facilitation of new interpersonal interactions, providing access to information from the domestic sphere, and facilitating the purchase of goods, whereas it influences men’s lives more than women by providing employment or assisting career development. Jackson *et al* (2001) had a similar confirmation that women’s interpersonal orientation influences their Internet behaviour as they use the internet to make new friends, meet partners and renew old acquaintances.

Women generally take a more practical approach in higher frequency of accessing information online (Colley and Matting (2008); Tsai & Lin, 2004) as they judged a larger amount of information as relevant than men did. When communicating with systems women's behaviour was more interactive and they were more willing to pay for information. According to Agosto (2001) research shows that men and women value technologies differently. Women prefer social collaboration, contextual information and personal identification, whilst men's uses are determined by preferences of individual work and competition. New technologies to men represent an intellectual challenge and play. With women, usually other emotional perception occurs as they also find it important to include the information into broader context or story (Agosto, 2001). This explains why in learning, women make use of personal identification and imagination.

Agosto in his research also analysed different attitudes when it came to relevance judgements. Women in his study, judged a larger amount of information more relevant than men did, and were more interactive with communication systems. They were more willing to pay for information seeking than men. He concluded that free access to electronic resources is less important for women than it is for men. Men were claimed to put much more stress on free, non-paid access to electronic resources, while women use more frequently resources on the basis of various licensing agreements between publishers and users' own institution. With regards to different features of electronic and traditional information resources, the results seem to confirm gender differences regarding the use of paid electronic resources. When it comes to traditional resources, no significant gender differences were found, although women reflect slightly more on the role of a publisher, its seriousness and prestige and, surprisingly, the factor of simple use seems to be a bit less important for women. This in itself suggests that the lack of confidence in the use of Internet is not due to technical capability of women, but rather on other issues that could be related to cultural or social values.

Enochsson (2005) shows that with the new *net* generation differences between men and women in the use of Internet are diminishing. However, Enochson supported

Kennedy's views that the socio-cultural background of gender still leaves women with more computer anxiety and feelings of lower self-efficacy. Women are believed to approach the information seeking process more carefully, which was seen as indicative of greater fear of assessment. They have confirmed stronger uneasiness and anxiety at the beginning of information seeking process and indicated deeper relief at the completion of the information seeking. Kennedy was also of the view that women suffer from lower self-confidence in managing technologies (Kennedy *et al.* 2003). This could be subjective to the author's definition of self-confidence in relation to scepticism to something new and unfamiliar.

As the social and material condition of the society evolves, Lee & Horrigan (2005), described the web as one of the most readily available, up to date and relatively fast sources of information about children. Parents increasingly rely on the web for a variety of information types as the thirst for information about child development increases over the years (Bocella, 1995).

Rothbaum *et al.* (2008) examines parent's reliance on the web to find information about children and families, looking into the socio-economic differences in use, skills and satisfaction. They described the web as an increasingly popular source of childrearing information among parents. Their results claim that the most frequently reported purpose for parents using the web is to seek information rather than amusement or commerce as generalised in previous studies. Interestingly, their findings also confirmed that fathers used the web more frequently than mothers for general purposes.

This research also aims to verify that gender is significant in use of the web to find information about childcare. In the next chapter I review information behaviour theories, paradigms and models. The next chapter highlights the theoretical framework supporting this study, including theories of information seeking behaviour, information behaviour models and inter-linkages between economic, social and political factors that impacts on parents when looking for childcare.



## **SUMMARY: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Britain is experiencing a fast period of social and, economic change with consequences for individuals , families and communities . Associated with this transformation is the changing role of women, their participation in the labour market; and the consequences children, the family and the state. The combination of the increase in the number of working mothers and continued long hours worked by fathers make it unlikely that parents can satisfy their own childcare needs. This therefore signifies that they would have to share the responsibility of looking after their children with others or seek alternative care (Hall, 2006).

The chapter discusses childcare in Europe and elucidates how the UK compares with its counterparts. Whilst the British childcare ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> in a world league table, a comparative analysis with Swedish policies, which are rated the best in Europe reveals significant differences in the staff/child ratio and in the cost of childcare which is capped in Sweden but not in the UK therefore suggesting that although the quality of childcare in the UK is high, childcare in Sweden is actually more affordable for families, with cost being a major issue in UK.

The National Childcare strategy launched in 1998 identified barriers in the UK childcare system including the high cost of childcare which makes childcare to be out of the reach of poor families, the disparate quality of childcare across the country, lack of availability of places and the lack of good quality up to date information. Three strategic outcomes were derived out of the strategy as proposed policy interventions – to raise the quality of childcare, make formal childcare more affordable and more accessible by increasing the number of places in childcare and to improve information provision for parents. This research focusses on the last policy intervention – improving information.

A plethora of initiatives and reforms were launched by the government in the quest to intervene in the childcare market since the advent of the NCC and categorised into Demand-led and Supply-led initiatives in this chapter. Included in reforms were

financial incentives given to parents to help them meet childcare cost – Tax Credits, Employer Supported Voucher Schemes and the free Early Education Funding for two, three & four year olds. However, the cost of childcare which has been on the increase and higher than the inflation rate suggests that families still struggle to afford childcare despite the incentives provided by the government. The disparate and fragmented nature of the benefits and incentives confirm the complicated nature of the UK childcare market and the challenges encountered by families.

On the supply side, the government supported the development of new childcare provisions by creating new childcare places and supporting the expansion of existing businesses through grants. The number of nurseries across UK rose from 100,000 before the NCC to over 300,000 ten years later. However, due to the economic recession of recent years, settings that are not able to survive the childcare market forces have closed down due to sustainability issues. . However, as central government funding to local authorities dwindle over the past three years, about 1000 children centres have been closed down as they are deemed unsustainable and in their place are skeletal services that are not inspected by Ofsted which then questions the quality.

Identifying improving information provision as the main focus of this research, this chapter highlights the role of information provision in making childcare accessible to all and presenting the fundamental market intelligence necessary for childcare providers and parents to make informed decisions, but also enhances the strategic management of the local childcare market and the commissioning of new services by local authorities. Despite legislations for the provision of information and the development of national and local websites to provide childcare information to families, information services are being cut down by local authorities resulting in parents reporting lack of good quality information as a key barrier to employment.

This chapter reflects on the impact of the initiatives on families and highlights some of the roles they have played in political agendas and economic growth.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Having set the local context in which this research is being carried out, in this section I discuss the theories underpinning this research - Role theory in relation to division of labour within the family; and information seeking behaviour theories which critically looks into the processes involved when looking for childcare and the childcare behaviour of parents.

This chapter provides the conceptual framework for the multidisciplinary research into childcare information seeking behaviour. As Turner (1987) noted, the goal of theory is to enable the researcher to make decisions on what is “central to a topic and develop simple and prudent statements about its dynamic properties”. This will be the guiding principle for this chapter. The research questions postulated and tested in this study spans across different but related theoretical backgrounds and traditions. The core theoretical framework for this research is the theory of demand for information, which is a factor and function of different parameters and variables. This is well positioned in this research as the theoretical inter-linkages between demand, rational choice, roles in relation to gender and childcare, sociological theory of motivation and how Information seeking behaviours are established.

To understand the nature and patterns of information seeking behaviour of parents when searching for childcare services, it is important to analyse the theoretical and conceptual development of interrelated economic, social and political factors. From an economic perspective, childcare is a vital resource that allows parents, especially mothers, to work or study to sustain their livelihoods, while also contributing to the total economy through labour supply. From a social perspective, the selection of childcare is very sensitive due to its subjectivity to both social and cultural factors, which override economic rationality in favour of morally acceptable alternatives. However, the economic and social perspectives of childcare are influenced by other structural factors such as government policies, which can either facilitate or constrain the process of childcare selection (Hall, 2006).

There is a paradox in the provision of information to families, as each family is unique, each searching for relevant information in a way that makes sense personally and each expecting that their questions or problems will be resolved in a culturally appropriate and supportive setting. As Walker (2001) noted, information seekers possess unique mental models, experiences, abilities and preferences that they use to develop and define their individual processes for defining tasks, controlling interaction with information systems, examining and extracting relevant information and then determining that the process has completed. But, are information seekers in the childcare market really rational in their decision-making? There are a number of other considerations such as moral, ethical and socio-cultural preferences that need to be factored into any 'unique mental model'. There is yet to be a theory that specifically governs the information seeking behaviour of parents when looking for childcare. Hence a grounded methodological approach has been selected in Phase 2 of this research work to generate theories from parents' experiences as captured in the interviews. Underpinning this research is a host of theories based on the integration of three conceptual frameworks including the socio-economic approach, the socio-cultural approach and the socio-cognitive approach.

### **The Socio–Economic Approach - Demand for Childcare Information**

The most fundamental assumption of the socio-economic approach is that changes in economic climate may affect the way families use their time and organise work and home-based activities, especially those related to the care of children. (Brayfield, 1995). Smith (1759) proposed and advocated the Exchange theory in Sociology that paved the way for Walras (1876) and Marshall (1890) to lay the foundation for Demand theory. The Exchange theory proposed that the desire to maximise utilities and minimise or avoid deprivations or punishments was the key to understanding the central motivating force in the classical utilitarian model of social interaction. Social exchange theory grew out of the intersection of economics, psychology and sociology. According to Hormans (1958), the initiator of the theory, it was developed to understand the social behaviour of humans in economic undertakings. The fundamental difference between economic exchange and social exchange theory is in the way actors are viewed. Exchange theory "views actors (person or firm) as

dealing not with another actor but with a market” (Emerson, 1987), responding to various market characteristics; while social exchange theory views the exchange relationship between specific actors as “actions contingent on rewarding reactions from others.” (Blau, 1964)

The basic concepts addressed in social exchange theory are: Cost, Benefit, Outcome, Comparison Level, Satisfaction, and Dependence. Benefits include things such as material or financial gains, social status, and emotional comforts. Costs generally consist of sacrifices of time, money, or lost opportunities. Outcome is defined to be the difference between the benefits and the costs:

$$\textbf{Outcome = Benefits - Costs}$$

Individuals have different expectations of relationships, and as such an individual's satisfaction with a relationship depends on more than just the outcome. For any two people with the same outcome, their level of satisfaction may differ based on their expectations. One person may not expect very large outcomes, and therefore would be more easily satisfied in relationships than someone who expects more. This notion of satisfaction is formalized as the difference between the outcome and the comparison level:

$$\textbf{Satisfaction = Outcome - Comparison Level}$$

Satisfaction is not enough to determine whether a person stays within a relationship or leaves for an alternative. That is to say, there are people who stay in unhappy relationships as well as those who leave happy relationships. What determines whether an individual stays in a relationship or leaves is the set of alternative relationships available. If there are many alternatives available to an individual, then that individual is less dependent on the relationship. This notion of dependence is formalized as the difference between the outcome and the "comparison level of alternatives":

$$\textbf{Dependence = Outcome - Comparison Level Of Alternatives}$$

In the context of the childcare market, the parents are the consumers of childcare services and therefore place a demand on the market. They derive utility (i.e.

measure of satisfaction) from the services they choose to use. This means that potential sum of the 'measures of satisfaction' – utilities - will guide parents to choose the childcare service that maximises their utilities and minimises or avoids the consequences of childcare deprivations. This assumes that there is a premium or value that parents will place on the accessible childcare information, used to derive potential estimates of utilities. The value of information they have received or derived, formally or informally, from various sources or networks could help explain parents' information seeking behaviour and information needs.

Miller (2005) outlines several major objections to our problems with the social exchange theory:

- The theory reduces human interaction to a purely rational process that arises from economic theory. Although this may not be what ensues with every relationship, but is applicable to business relationships. Human interaction when related to services would trigger a form of economic theory.
- The theory favours openness as it was developed in the 1970s when ideas of freedom and openness were preferred, but there may be times when openness is not the best option in a relationship. This could be true to an extent when applied to the childcare market, as this market is not a closed one. People are free to pick and use the information channel they choose to communicate with.
- The theory assumes that the ultimate goal of a relationship is intimacy when this might not always be the case. Miller's notion on this assumption is correct as the Social Exchange theory can indeed be applied to relationships based purely on delivering goods and services
- It also is strongly seated in an individualist mindset, which may limit its application in and description of collectivist cultures. In agreement with Miller, it can be argued that people have become more individualistic in their approaches rather than being relational. This has been the trend of family relationships since the 1950s.

The foundation papers of Walras (1876) and Marshall (1890) lay the basis of Demand theory as the analysis of the relationship between the demand for goods or services and prices or incomes. In the context of this research, the focus is on

the information seeking behaviours that influence the demand for childcare information services. There are a number of laws of demand – the higher the price, the lower the demand and the lower the price, the higher the demand. This holds true for demand for services such as childcare provision, but information provision is free because it is statutory. However, this largely depends on whether parents would place a premium on a free information service and how the information service shapes their demand for childcare services. It also depends on if accessibility has been the cornerstone of parents' information needs in sourcing childcare provision. Although information is free because it is a statutory requirement, there are other indirect costs considered by parents. Costs generally consist of sacrifices of time, money, or lost opportunities and not all these may be quantifiable.

The cost-benefit paradigm related to decision-making theories is sometimes linked to the Zipf's principle of least effort even though it has noticeably different assumptions. The principle of least effort (pragmatic in its approach) predicts that seekers will minimise the effort required to obtain information even if it means accepting a lower quality or quantity of information. The cost-benefit approach, though normative in its suppositions, proposes that as people seek information they select channels based on their expected benefits weighed against likely costs. This perspective aims to explain behaviour in terms of a trade-off between the effort required to employ a particular type of strategy and the quality of the resulting outcome.

Hardy (1982) highlighted that the cost-benefit paradigm proposes that:

“..as people seek information, they select information channels based on their expected benefits against likely costs”

Based on this rationale, parents' information seeking may emphasize a calculation of the benefits to be gained from obtaining the most complete and accurate information (Fisher et al, 2005). As information services provided by the government is free, it is vital to explore if this then affects or shapes the information seeking behaviour of parents or their information needs, and to what extent information provision is deemed accessible. Hicks (1957) extended the cost-benefit

premise by arguing that Demand theory is nothing more than the conventional theory of utility and consumer choice. This, he noted, underpins the theoretical linkages between demand, rational choice and utility for childcare provision and information seeking behaviour.

One of the key drivers of demand is the household income. As Brayfield (1995) suggested, the changes in economic climate affect the way families (including single parents) use their time and organise their work and home-based activities, especially those relating to the care of their children.

In resolving a critical problem in Bayesian decision theory on how to value and price information, Moscaini & Smith (2002) established the theory and law of demand for information. Although, Radner and Stiglitz (1984) had already argued that the marginal value of information is initially zero, Moscaini & Smith (2002) noted that the rise of the Internet had created the need to fill the gap in the notion of inexpensive information, which invariably reduced the information marginal cost. Moscaini & Smith (2002) reinforced key findings of Radner & Stiglitz (1984), Chade & Schlee (2001) and Shapiro and Varian (1999) that advanced the notion that the valuation and pricing of a single informative signal and, consequently, its value is not globally concave. They noted that the first order conditions do not aptly articulate the laws of demand, which says that there is an inverse relationship between demand for services and price or income. The implication of these findings advances the Government policy of offering a free and impartial children information service through local authorities (DCSF report, 2002).

Moscaini & Smith (2000) extended thinking on the theory of demand for information by proving a new logarithmic asymptotic formula which explicated that in large demand for information exhibits a falling demand curve aligned to the laws of demand. The critical assumption was how Moscaini and Smith interpret the quantity of information. If the law of demand, therefore, holds in large demand for information, it implies that decision making is about 'avoiding mistakes', which in turn derives from the Strong Law of Large Numbers (SLLN). This highlights a number of policy implications. While Shapiro and Varian (1999) provide a platform for free information services based on the law of demand, Moscaini & Smith (2000) provide the bases for local authorities to charge for information. However it is not certain if the quality of



childcare information provided to families actually meets the information needs of parents in England and Wales. As the current childcare information provision is free, an assessment of how this influences parents' information seeking behaviour is required. If it is observed that the quality is poor, qualitative data collated from the field study will be used to assess the extent to which parents are willing to pay for enhanced childcare information. However, according to Atkin (1973) and Johnson (1997) the most common utility of information is thought to be the uncertainty reduction and the need to satisfy a need to know, and to help achieve a goal. In the next section I discuss Rational Theory as a factor of childcare selection.

### **Rational Choice Theory**

Rational choice theory describes a purposive action whereby individuals judge the costs and benefits of achieving a desired goal (Allingham 1999; Cook & Levi 1990; Coleman & Fararo 1992). Humans, as rational actors, are capable of recognizing and desiring a certain outcome, and of taking action to achieve it. Connaway et al, (2008) posits that information seekers rationally evaluate the benefits of the information's usefulness and credibility, versus the costs in time and effort to find and access it.

Becker (1996) noted that "the extension of the utility maximising approach to include endogenous preferences is remarkably useful in unifying a wide class of behaviour, including habitual, social and political behaviours". Although, Coleman (1986) opined that the rational actions of individuals "have a unique attractiveness". Coleman (1990) provides an exposition on rational choice theory that advanced the multi-level nature of rational choice at a lower level. It assumes that individuals have cognitive capacities and values to maximise the outcomes of the choices they make. An aggregate of these individual choices rolls up into specifications for the social structure. But other authors have put forward specific values that individuals aim for, such as distributive justice (Jasso, 1993), uncertainty reduction (Friedman, Hechter & Kanazawa, 1994) and local status (Frank, 1985). Uncertainty reduction seems to describe a critical issue when it comes to seeking childcare information.

A number of criticisms have been levied at the rational choice theory. Hechter and Kanazawa (1997) suggested that it lacked realism in its assumptions that individuals calculate the expected consequences of their options based on the information they have acquired and choose the best option that maximises their utility. They demonstrated that a vast body of research exists to discount rational choice theory – individuals often act “impulsively, emotionally, or merely by force of habit”. They, however, proposed that the theory really aimed to focus on social rather than individual outcomes. According to Ketcher and Kanazawa, (1997) rational choice theory (unlike the decision theory) is inherently a multilevel enterprise. At the lower level, its models contain assumptions about individual cognitive capacities and values, among other things.

Fischhoff (1991), Hechter (1992), Goldthorpe (1996) and Logan (1996) in their direct or ‘indirect’ criticism of the motivational assumption of rational choice provided the theoretical linkages between rational choice and theory of motivation. Brody (1980) held the view that there was always a model of motivation in the analysis of cognitive behaviour, which leads to an implicit theory of motivation as posited by Turner (1987). A key criticism of early theories of motivation was that they did not capture the dynamics of motivation. This research will empirically discuss, in the context of information seeking behaviour, relevant aspects of the sociological theory of motivation advanced by Turner (1987). This includes the need for the sense of trust and ontological security to avoid diffused anxiety.

### **The Socio-Cultural Approach: Role and Child Development**

The most fundamental assumption of the socio-cultural approach is the part played by role in relation to childcare. Role theory posits that human behaviour is guided by expectations held both by the individual and by other people. It could be seen as the role society places on individuals (Stark, 2007). The expectations correspond to different roles individuals perform or enact in their daily lives. It specifies the goals pursued, tasks that must be accomplished and the performances required in a given situation. In essence, it holds preconceived notions of how people should behave in conformity to sets of rules or norms that function as plans or blueprints to guide

behaviour. It determines which behaviours are appropriate and those deemed inappropriate. Role is predictive by nature, holds preconceived ideas about individuals' day-to-day activities and the corresponding behaviour. Role corresponds to behaviour and it could also be said that behaviour is conversely related to role. It influences beliefs and attitudes; and it is known that individuals will change their beliefs and attitudes to correspond with their roles. According to role theorists, the role theory bridges individuals' behaviour and the social structure.

Biddle (1986) explored and highlighted the differences in the interpretation and the use of the term 'role' in academic literature. He noted that some authors like Biddle (1979) and Burt (1982) refer to characteristic behaviour while Winship and Mandel (1983) refer to 'role' as the social parts to be played. Conversely, Bates & Harvey (1975) and Zurcher (1983) focused on social conduct. For the purposes of this research, 'role' as advocated by Allen & Van de Vliert (1984) is defined as the "behaviour referring to normative expectations associated with a position in a social system". There are two aspects to this; on one hand there is the role of the parent (couples or single mum or single dad seeking and making childcare decisions). This enables the link of role theory to the impact of gender in articulating childcare information seeking behaviour of lone parents, married couples, civil partners and guardians. Conversely, there is the role of the childcare provider (along the gender divide) and the perceived value parents will derive for their child's development while placed in their care. Consequently the roles of parents as primary caregivers, information-seekers and childcare consumers influence the expectations for performance and outcomes. Role in itself can be categorised into two main approaches – Functional and Relational. From a structure-functionalist perspective, role is one of the most important ways by which an individual's activities are socially regulated. The functionalist approach would rather focus on the relatively inflexible and universally agreed upon activities that are appropriate to specific roles. This has been found to be a rigid, static and fixed approach, which does not allow the individual to account for the vast difference in how the individual conceives their role.

The relational approach on the other hand is more fluid, subtle, negotiated by the individual and it is neither fixed nor totally prescribed. In this approach, individuals adopt roles and adapt them through interpersonal interactions. This approach best

describes childcare providers who would have to switch roles often to suit parents (as a service provider) and child (as a substitute parent). In this instance childcare providers could find themselves in role distancing situations, through displayed indifference to avoid attachment to the child. Mother's reaction to children's attachment to their childcare provider could influence their childcare information seeking behaviour as attachment can be viewed as child's happiness, or it could trigger maternal jealousy. Role theory thus offers a person-in-context framework within the information-seeking situation which situates behaviours in the context of a social system (Mead, 1934; Marks & MacDermid, 1996); buttressed by Abercrombie *et al.* (1994, 360) stating, "When people occupy social positions their behaviour is determined mainly by what is expected of that position rather than by their own individual characteristics."

Cognitive social psychology was enhanced when Moreno (1934) projected in his early discussion, the impact of role-playing. Role-playing is changing one's behaviour to assume another one subconsciously to fill a social role or consciously to act out an adopted role. As Biddle (1986) posited, role-playing appears when someone imitates the roles of others. Parental role is a function carried out by parents and other carers in order to facilitate the growth and development of a child. Parental figures in the life of a child ensure that the child's physical needs are met, protect the child from harm and also ensure that the necessary skills and values are imparted to the child until they reach adolescence. This role is usually carried out by the biological parents of the child, but in situations where childcare providers are involved in the raising of a child, role playing can only be effective where parental expectations were met (Janis & Mann, 1977). According to Moreno (1961), role is holistically a person's specific way of being who they are in any given situation. Role expectations appear simultaneously in at least three modes of thoughts – norms, preferences and beliefs. This advances a sophisticated model for a 'person's thoughts about roles and allows the integration of role theory with various traditions of research on attitudes, the self-concept and related topics' (Biddle, 1986).

A woman's 'proper' role as a home-based mother was a normative expectation of womanhood. However, from the 1950s, married women taking up employment increased but followed a pattern of 'non-standard employment' (Crompton, 1997),

mostly in part-time work that could be fitted around domestic responsibilities. For decades, public policy was explicitly opposed to the employment of women with young children (Tizard, 1976) but during the 1980s and up to 1997, public policy opposition to working mothers was replaced by the rhetoric of 'parental' choice. Public policy claimed a neutral stance in what was regarded as a matter to be settled within the private sphere of the family. In effect, neutrality meant providing little support for either employed or non-employed women. Since 1997, the rhetoric of choice may still be heard. However, policies such as the New Deal for lone parents (set up in July and August 1997) and the National Childcare Strategy (set up in May 1998), make clear the high value attached by the Government to paid employment for all – including women with children. The reasons were shifted from parental choices to economic, social and moral factors.

Nevertheless, with more mothers going back to work, there has been a significant shift and changes to beliefs and traditional values that assume that it is the woman's role to stay at home and look after the child. This cultural shift has resulted in the dual roles now played by mothers (as mother and bread-winner), which could result in role conflict situations for the mother. The cultural shift has also initiated the increase in the childcare providers taking on the parental role whilst the parents participate in the labour market. Parental expectations are expected to determine their information seeking behaviour and their choice of childcare provider. Such expectations could be subject to parental attitude and hopes and aspirations they could have for their children in terms of educational attainment or even the quality of care. Childcare providers also face the dilemma of role-playing as they develop themselves to provide the qualities required to deliver the care parents would expect. As already mentioned, there are also attachment implications which could lead to providers practising detachment in order to maintain professional lines. Another recent shift in mother's role play from being just 'mum' to being 'mum and bread-winner' is in instances where the father has to stay at home whilst the mother works, resulting in the dad assuming the traditional role expected of the mother as a stay-at-home father. In the next section, I discuss information behaviour theories.

## **Integrated Theoretical Perspective - Information Seeking Behaviour Theories**

The third theoretical approach underpinning this study is the socio-cognitive approach in which the individuals' thinking and the social and documentary domain in which the individual operates are seen to influence the seeking and use of information. In this section I discuss the theories, concepts and models of information behaviour as related to parents' information seeking behaviour.

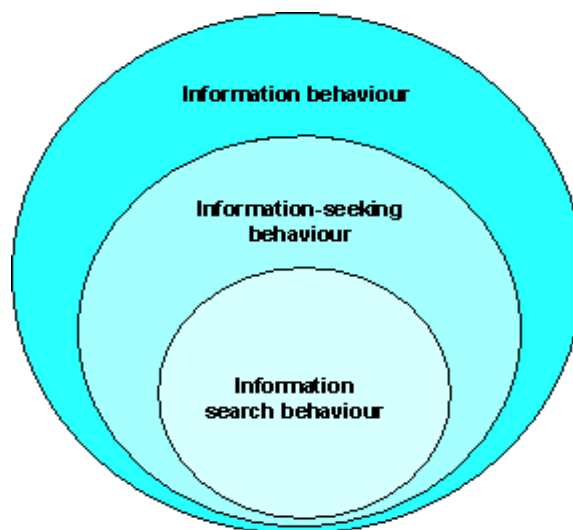
Information seeking behaviour gained more attention in the mid and late 1990s although scholars have used different and varied terms to refer to it in different backgrounds. Case (2002) defined information seeking behaviour as a terminology that captures a broader range of information related phenomena, many of which are 'receiving fresh attention'. Although some researchers use information behaviour to refer only to information seeking activities, Fisher et al (2005) points out that a majority actually follow Wilson's (1999) encapsulation that 'information behaviour is the totality of human behaviour, including both active and passive information seeking and use'. Pettigrew (2001) elucidated further on Wilson's definition by defining information behaviour as "how people need, seek, give and use information in different contexts."

Andrew Green (1990) described 'need' as an element of four different concepts. Firstly, he described need as always instrumental – it involves reaching a goal. The key factor is that knowing it will put the receiver at or closer to, an end state that he or she wants to achieve. Secondly, he described 'need' as usually contestable. Thirdly, he also described need as a concept of necessity in such a way as to carry more moral weight. Wilson (1981) agreed to some extent with an argument that information is clearly a secondary, rather than basic need. Green further described need as not necessarily a state of mind, as it is also possible to be unaware of one's true needs. For the purpose of this study, information behaviour will be conceptualised according to Pettigrew's definition.

## Theories of Information Behaviour – cognitive, social and multifaceted approaches

Pendleton and Chatman (1998) describe information seeking behaviour as the multifaceted relationship of information in the lives of human beings, a relationship that can include both active searching through formal information channels and a variety of other attitudes and actions, including scepticism and ambivalence.

Ellis (1989) provided the context for the behavioural model of information searching, Kuhlthau (1993) the information search process and Wilson (1997) the exposition on problem solving models in a linear dimension. The contributions of Palmer (2001) and Spanner (2001) laid the foundation that linked information seeking behaviour theory from an interdisciplinary perspective.



**Figure 2: A nested model of information behaviour**

Like any other complex concept, information seeking means different things in different contexts. In the simplest terms, information seeking involves the search, retrieval, recognition and application of meaningful content. This search may be explicit or implicit, the retrieval may be the result of specific strategies or serendipity, the resulting information may be embraced or rejected, the entire experience may be carried through to a logical conclusion or aborted in midstream, and there may be a million other potential results. Information seeking behaviour has been viewed as a cognitive exercise, as a social and cultural exchange, as discrete strategies applied

when confronting uncertainty, and as a basic condition of humanity in which all individuals exist (Kingrey, 2002)

The notion of information as a prime motivator for uncertainty reduction dates back as far as the nineteenth century (Morowitz, 1991). Atkin (1973) offered a definition of information need as a function of extrinsic uncertainty produced by a perceived discrepancy between the individual's current level of uncertainty about important environmental objects and a criterion state that he seeks to achieve. Atkin believes people sense differences between what they know and what they want to know as regards levels of knowledge against goals that they wish to reach and react by seeking information whenever they sense uncertainty. Taylor (1991) compiled eight classes of information use generated by needs perceived by groups of users in particular situations. These have been summarised in the table below:

**Table 3: Categories of Information use generated by needs**

<b>Enlightenment</b>	the desire for context information or ideas in order to make sense of a problem
<b>Problem understanding</b>	the need for better comprehension of particular problems.
<b>Instrumental:</b>	the need to find out what to do and how to do something
<b>Factual</b>	the need for and consequent provision of precise data.
<b>Confirmational</b>	the need to verify a piece of information.
<b>Projective</b>	the need to be future oriented, concerned with estimates and probabilities.
<b>Motivational</b>	the need to find additional information based on personal involvement with a task
<b>Personal or political</b>	the desire to control relationships, status, reputation, personal fulfillment.

***Categories of Information use generated by needs (Taylor 1991)***



Much research has been carried out in other areas relating to the information seeking behaviour of different groups of people based on their situation, jobs or ages. Case (2002) grouped studies on Information behavior into two groups – research by social role and research by demographics. Amongst the groups researched are young people, students, patients in the health sector, social workers and university lecturers to mention a few. Specific studies have explored the information-seeking behaviour of cattle ranchers (Spink & Hicks, 1996), battered women (Harris, 1988/1989), intercity gatekeepers (Agada, 1999), students and library users (Kuhlthau, 1991), health workers (Lundeen, Tenopir, & Wermager, 1991), and university researchers (Ellis, Cox, & Hall, 1993). A growing body of literature has examined everyday life information seeking (ELIS) and the information needs of ordinary citizens (Savolainen, 1996). There is yet to be a study on the relationship between the information seeking behaviour of parents and childcare in the UK. The impact of childcare on the family and the economy in general has been thoroughly researched. The information seeking behaviour of parents when looking for childcare is unique as it is likely to vary according to the cultural, financial, physical and social needs of the family and yet to be researched. This study will also explore factors influencing how and why information for childcare is sought and how the choice made depends largely on the interwoven socio-cultural and socio-economic issues. Hence, this study will seek to establish a theory for childcare information seeking and models of information seeking that would suit and be applicable to parents' patterns of behaviour when looking for childcare.

## **Information Poverty**

Information poverty is defined as that situation in which individuals and communities, within a given context, do not have the requisite skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it appropriately (Britz, 2004). Dervin (1983b) described information poverty as when, for whatever reason, a group or entire groups of people do not get the same information as other groups. The group could be defined by income, education, location, or other variables. She describes the group as having a 'knowledge gap' or being 'information poor'. A gap

could be referred to as an individual's encounter with a discrepancy or lack of sense in their environment.

Chatman's theory of information poverty research on life in the rounds posits that certain groups of individuals have difficulty obtaining useful information for solving everyday life problems. She claims that there is a class of information poor persons who lack access to information and they are characterised by their difficulty or inability to obtain useful information either from people they know (insiders) or outsiders to their group or even from other mainstream sources of information such as the media and other information channels. (Chatman, 1996)

Britz (2004) further characterized information poverty by a lack of essential information and a poorly developed information infrastructure. He argued in his article that information poverty is a serious moral concern and a matter of social justice and as such should be on the world's moral agenda of social responsibility. His literature review accentuated that history has always identified the fact that the peoples and societies have always lacked in some shape or form materials, resources as well as skills important to satisfying their information needs. In discussing the concept of information poverty, Britz (2004) also pointed out that there are three main interrelated approaches utilised in information poverty literature. These are the information connectivity approach; the information content approach; and the 'human approach', which emphasises the knowledge aspect of information poverty.

The information connectivity approach focuses on lack of access to modern information technology infrastructures and defines the digital divide as the gap between those who have the skills, capabilities and resources to access modern technology and those who do not. Although based on the assumption that there is a causal relationship between the material status of people and accessibility to information the digital divide can actually be due to other issues including age, gender, race income and social status.

The main premise of the information content approach is that unavailability and inaccessibility to quality information required for development or to make critical

decisions trigger information poverty. The approach assumes that information poor people notably lack the necessary skills and resources required to access quality information. In essence, the digital divide between the information poor and the information rich relates to issues of affordability, availability and the suitability of the information itself (Britz, 2004 and Burgelman et al.,1998).

The human approach capitalises on the knowledge aspect of the information divide. In support of his argument for this approach, Britz (2004) defined information as “a social construct that enables human decision making and problem solving and is co-determined by the attitude/approach towards information and the value that can be attributed to it.” He argues that having access to information is not on its own sufficient, but that people must have the ability to derive a benefit from information and harness this to meet their needs. This ability he purports is determined by individual level of skills, experience and other contextual factors. Although literature on information seeking behaviour teaches that different user groups have different information practices in terms of familiarity with, access to and uses of formal and informal sources of information such as libraries, archives, museums, Internet, media, individuals and organisations.

In his argument, Britz (2004) relates information poverty to illiteracy and lack of information literacy as presented by Warschauer (2003) that since ICT is imbedded in a “complex array of factors encompassing physical, digital, social resources and content there is the need to rethink the concept of a so-called digital divide and see this as “literacy divide.” Webber & Johnston (2002) defined information literacy as “the adoption of appropriate information behaviour to identify, through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, leading to wise and ethical use of information in society”. Essentially, parents need to be information literate in order to acquire the skills required to identify and access childcare information so they can make informed decisions to meet their families’ needs.

Information provision has been identified as a key component of social inclusion (Caidi & Allard, 2005). With particular reference to newcomers and immigrant

communities, the researchers highlighted the importance of information in supporting newcomers and immigrants to settle into their new environment and integrate into the society. This is highly dependent on locating and accessing information in forms that are understandable and useful. The argument for this would be that due to their circumstances, the environment in which they find themselves often puts them in a vulnerable position and can lead to feelings of marginalisation or even social exclusion.

Increasingly, diverse societies require new directions for information organisation aimed at different groups. Promotion of culturally sensitive and relevant resources and services along with involving immigrants in the process of gathering and designing information systems that are meaningful helps to narrow the digital divide between the information rich and the information poor. However, Lievrouw and Farb (2002) pointed out that although recent debates on information poverty have been overshadowed by the knowledge gap created by ICT and system technologies, the issue is much more complex and cuts across other phenomenon including cultural and language diversity, levels of education, accessibility and benefits from information. Britz (2004), supported the argument by not ruling out the dominant role played lately by ICT in dividing the world to information 'haves' and 'have nots', but also elucidating that the information divide is not limited to technology insiders and technology outsiders, within societies and countries, but also between individuals who even share same cultural characteristics.

Lievrouw & Farb (2002) in their analysis of information inequality literature grouped researches into two groups – vertical or hierarchical perspective and horizontal or heterarchical perspective. The vertical perspective assumes that people who are wealthier, more educated, younger, or who live in affluent neighbourhoods are assumed to have greater access to all kinds of information, and are better able to use it, than those who are poorer, less educated, older, live in poor or rural areas. In essence it assumes the basic meaning of the poor being information poor due to lack of resources or opportunities and the rich being information rich due to their ability to deploy and maximise the resources at their disposal to meet their needs. The studies are mainly based on the premise that the information use and access are a function

of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The horizontal perspective believes that people and groups with similar social and economic traits may differ widely in terms of their information needs, access, and use based on their interests, concerns, expertise, experiences, and social contexts which affect their requirements for and uses of information, even within the same community, economic, or ethnic group.

In dissecting the characteristics of an impoverished information community, Britz (2004) described this group to possess one or more of the following characteristics:

- a lack of critical information;
- a lack of economic capital to pay for information;
- a lack of the technical and other abilities to access information; and
- a lack of an intellectual or rational capacity to filter, assess, evaluate and benefit from information.

A critical assessment of the causes of information poverty and the overall impact on the development of people in all spheres of life has revealed that information poverty can be caused by the inability and failure to assign appropriate meaning to the information within the same context. This also implies that one person, within a specific context, can be information rich and will be able to assign appropriate meaning to information whilst another person in the same context might be information-poor due to an inability to assign appropriate meaning to the information within the same context (Britz, 2004). Lack of knowledge, to evaluate and assess the quality of information could lead to alienation. As information is akin to power, Blitz analyses the impact of the global migration from a production-based to an information-based economy as being pioneered by capitalism with the distributors of information products and services as well as the producers of hardware and software for the information sector dominating the economy. Narrowing the digital divide is a key challenge to improving social justice, and encouraging every individual to proactively seek to engage, participate and contribute to society.

Parents' ability to have access to quality information, make sense of the information, appropriate the meaning in the right context and use the information in order to make

an improvement in their situation, engage, participate and contribute the society will be assessed within this study. As suggested from the horizontal viewpoint, values and content issues will be considered (Lievrouw, 2000; Schement, 1995) and how well people are able to make use of the resources they have in a particular context (Garnham, 1999; Besser, 1995). This will also be based on different variables and socio-economic factors as already discussed in this section.

## **Information Horizon**

Another theoretical perspective in information behaviour to be considered within the scope of this study is information horizon of individuals when seeking information. The concept includes the role of social networks and contexts as having the ability that could either constrain or enhance information behaviour. The framework as presented by Sonnenwald (1999) emphasises that people's information resources are determined socially and individually and may be different for different contexts even for the same individual.

Fisher et al (2005) discussed the framework extensively under different propositions highlighting that information horizons may be bounded by social economics and politics and could even be shaped personally by the individual. Hence an individual information horizon may depend on

- when, where and how the individual decides to act and seek information.
- the individual's social network, situation and context
- the individual's perception, reflection and evaluation of change in self, others or their environment.
- collaboration of an individual with the information resources and among the information resources
- conceptualization of the variety of information sources and their relationships.

Intrinsically based on the notion of social capital, this theory explains how the quality of social resources available to an individual within his or her social network or

information ground influences the success of achieving the desired outcomes or goals.

The information horizon theory dovetails nicely with other information seeking behaviour theories including theory of social network, social capital theory and information grounds, to mention a few. This study will concentrate mainly on the close relevance to information poverty framework in relation to information 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Fisher et al (2005) pointed out the link between Chatman's information poverty and Lin's theory of social structure and action. A closer look could also reveal a similar link between information horizon and information poverty in the same context of the information 'poor' people's preference of informal information sources over formal sources. Their difficulties to achieving their desired goal could be attributed to the limitations of their information horizon and their social capital. Similarly, considering Pettigrew's information grounds theory, the more diverse an individual is in engaging with others from different backgrounds, the better the opportunities he or she can benefit from such associations. (Pettigrew, 1999).

Although it is a known fact that people prefer informal sources to formal sources of information, it is not a generally known who gets chosen and how relationships or ties and social structure affect choice of an information source (Fisher et al, 2005). This study aims to explore this arena within the scope of parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare. Word of mouth has been cited as one of the major sources of childcare information; however this study will aim to assess who gets chosen, and how relationships, ties, and social structure affect choice of childcare information source.

### **Information Seeking - Sense Making & Situation Awareness**

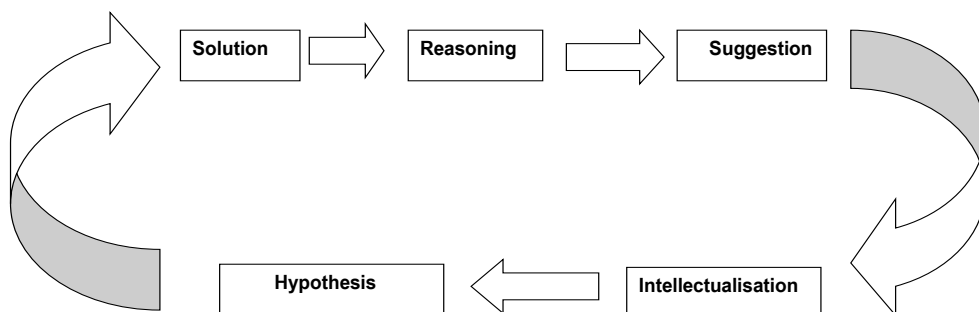
Indeed, two theories of information seeking - the sense making theory and the situation awareness theory - are significant in describing and explaining how parents make sense of their family situation and subsequently make decisions that best meet the needs of the family.

Klein et al (2006) defined sense making as the ability or attempt to make sense of an ambiguous situation. He described sense making as a process of creating situational awareness and understanding in situations of high complexity or uncertainty in order to make decisions. Klein et al (2006) also emphasised that sense making is a motivated, continuous effort to understand connections (among people, places and events) in order to anticipate their trajectories and act effectively.

In individuals, sense making is the largely cognitive activity of constructing a hypothetical mental model of the current situation and how it may evolve over time, when threats and opportunities for each action are likely to emerge from this evolution, what potential actions can be taken in response, what the projected outcomes are and what values drive the choice of action in future.

The core of the sense making research could be derived from Dewey (1960) in his philosophy and learning theory. Dewey viewed individuals as cycling through five phases of reflective operations – suggestion, intellectualisation, hypothesis, reasoning and then testing a solution by action as described below:

**Figure 3: Dewey’s cycle of philosophy and learning theory**

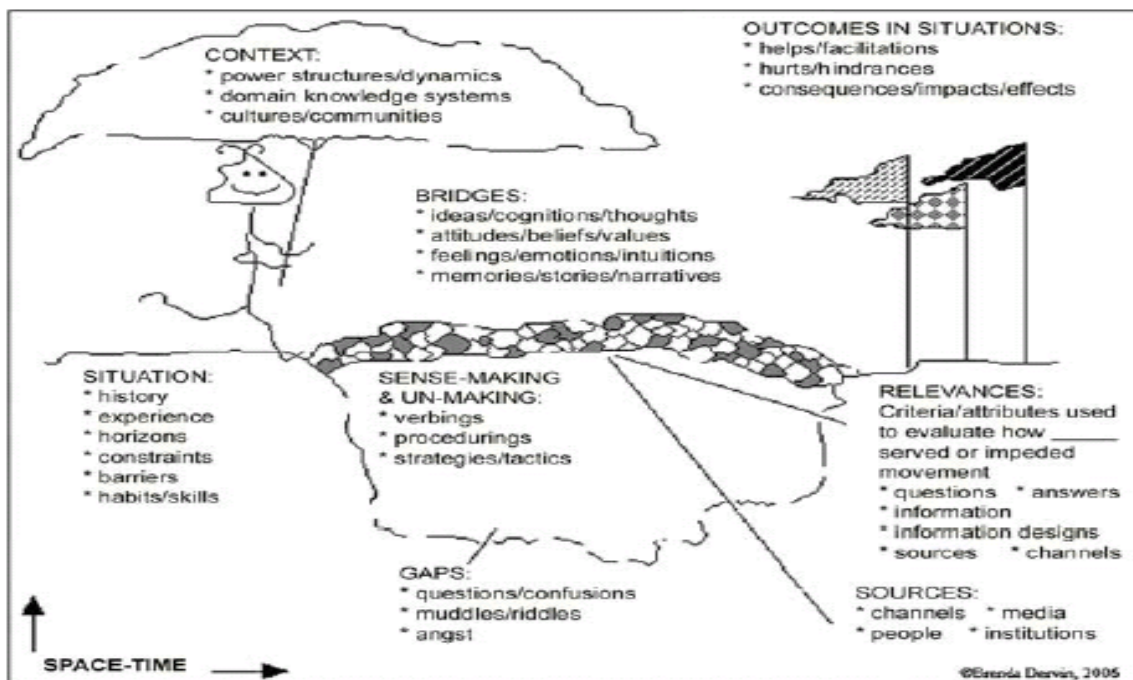




Kelly (1963) had similar views in his theory of personal construct formation, which is a key component of his theory of personality. He viewed a person's behaviour as strongly shaped by his or her mental constructs of the world and how it operates. Kuhlthau (1988) defined these constructs as knowledge structures that enable us to anticipate events and predict outcomes. Dervin (1996) has investigated individual sense making theories underlying the cognitive gap that individuals experience when attempting to make sense of a problem. The sense making research agenda produces detailed knowledge of the strategies that individuals employ to cope with problematic situations like childcare (Case, 2006).

The main tenant of sense making is that information does not exist apart from human behavioural activity; rather information is created at a specific moment in time and space by one or more humans (Dervin, 1992). Whilst other approaches to information seeking see information as something 'out there' that is transmitted to people, sense making sees information as something constructed internally in order to address discontinuities or gaps. This approach uncovers the problems that people experience in life and how they face those obstructions (Case, 2006).

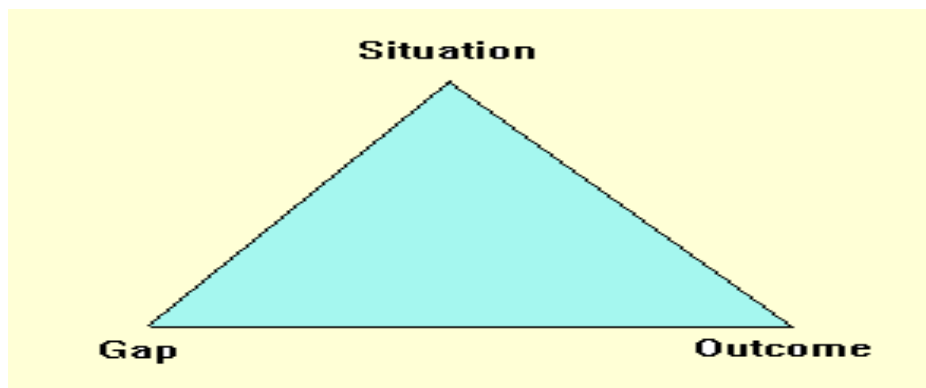
**Figure 4: The Sense-Making Metaphor (Dervin, 2005)**



In the area of information needs and user studies, the sense making approach is one of the influential theories, which adopts user-centred viewpoints. The theory is a set of conceptual and theoretical premises and related methodologies for assessing how people make sense of their worlds, with emphasis placed on situation, gap and use of information resources.

The basic dynamics of the sense making theory according to Dervin (1992) is that sense making uses metaphors. An individual's movement through time and space is depicted at two levels of abstraction. In her theory, Dervin presents a concrete and metaphorical picture of a man walking along a road, when he comes upon an impassable hole in the ground. In this situation, he is obviously facing a gap. He has no choice but to build a bridge of his own across the gap, which helps him pass over the hole. He resumes his walk until he meets another gap. The steps at which he is forced to stop are moments of discontinuity. Each of these steps is a stage or phase, which constitutes the famous triangle of situation, gap and help as shown below.

**Figure 5: Dervin's triangle of situation, gap and outcome**

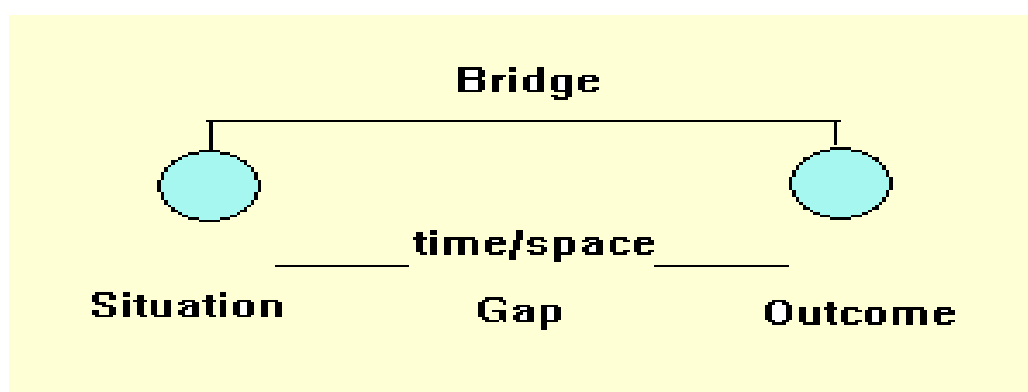


As explained by Dervin, the situation provides the context in which the individual needs to make sense of something (gap), which in turn drives him or her to seek help, and then he or she emerges in a new or changed situation. The fact that people have information needs is a fundamental assumption regarding information seeking. Scholars in this field have indeed suggested that there is a phenomenon

that remains beyond our observations – the activity in human minds that leads to an individual recognising an information need.

A number of thinkers illustrated information needs on a continuum that reflects their assumptions about the nature of information – why people seek it and what they use it for (Belkin, 1978; Dervin, 1992; Kuhlthau, 1991; Taylor, 1991). Case (2006) proposed to call one end of the spectrum the objective pole and the other the subjective pole. At the objective end of the pole are those who view information as reflecting an objective reality and for them information seeking is driven primarily by a rational judgement that some uncertainty exists that can be resolved by specific information. In this instance, the emotional motivations of the search process such as anxiety are set aside. In contrast, the subjective pole represents the idealised view that many searches are prompted by a vague sense of unease, a sense of having a gap in knowledge or simply by anxiety about a current situation. This focuses on the psychological aspects of how information is processed. It also views some types of information seeking as trivial or irrational, most especially when people do not use authoritative or authentic sources of information or totally ignore seemingly relevant information. Using the bridge metaphor more directly, Derwin's theory can be presented as below in Fig 6:

**Figure 6: Dervin's 'sense-making' model re-drawn**



Sense making according to experts in the field including Brenda Derwin, begins with an unexpected event, surprise or shock that may not readily be explained. Since cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable, people search for a plausible explanation to fit their beliefs. When people begin to act on preliminary explanations, they build

commitment that serve to make explanation more likely. Further action strengthens the explanation and gives rise to supporting evidence that in turn is used for further justification.

Sense making is important to accurately determine the meaning and significance of a new situation before appropriate decisions can be made (Case, 2002). In essence, once the situation has been assessed, sense making is important to decision making to ensure that information is evaluated properly to arrive at the best conclusions.

Another information seeking theory is situational awareness that tends to look at the perceptions of environmental elements within a volume of time and space, the comprehension of their meaning and the projection of their status in the near future. Situational awareness involves being aware of what is happening around you to understand how information, events and your own actions will impact your goals and objectives, both now and in the future. Lacking situational awareness or having inadequate situational awareness has been identified as one of the primary factors in accidents attributed to human error (Hartel et al. 1991; Netemeyer et al. 2005).

Situational awareness is a critical yet often elusive foundation for successful decision making across a broad range of complex and dynamic systems such as childcare. Endsley (2000) states that one's current awareness can determine what one pays attention to next and how one interprets the information perceived or received. The volume of available information in complex operational environments including the childcare market could be quite complicated for novice decision-makers especially new parents. Being unable to attend to, process or integrate childcare information efficiently may result in information overload and negatively impact their situational awareness. In contrast, experienced decision makers or those who have previously used childcare can assess and interpret the current situation and select an appropriate action based on conceptual patterns stored in their long-term memory as mental models. Cues in the environment activate these mental models, which in turn guide their decision making process.

Whilst sense making is viewed as a motivated, continuous effort to understand connection in order to anticipate their trajectories, and act effectively, situational awareness is based on the state of knowledge. Endsley (2000) points out that as an

effortful process, sense making is actually a subset of the process used to maintain situational awareness. In the vast majority of cases, situation awareness is instantaneous and effortless. Situational assessment is, generally, thought of as a process of fitting the observed facts to a familiar model, while sense making implies more of an inductive and constructive process – actively creating awareness and understanding to account for many vague and disparate pieces of information concerning multiple decision-critical events that occur simultaneously over different functional areas. Case (2006) reckons the sense making agenda produces detailed knowledge of the strategies by which individuals cope with problematic situations and in so doing, sense making places a high value on the insights gained by the individual as they construct their solutions to past problems.

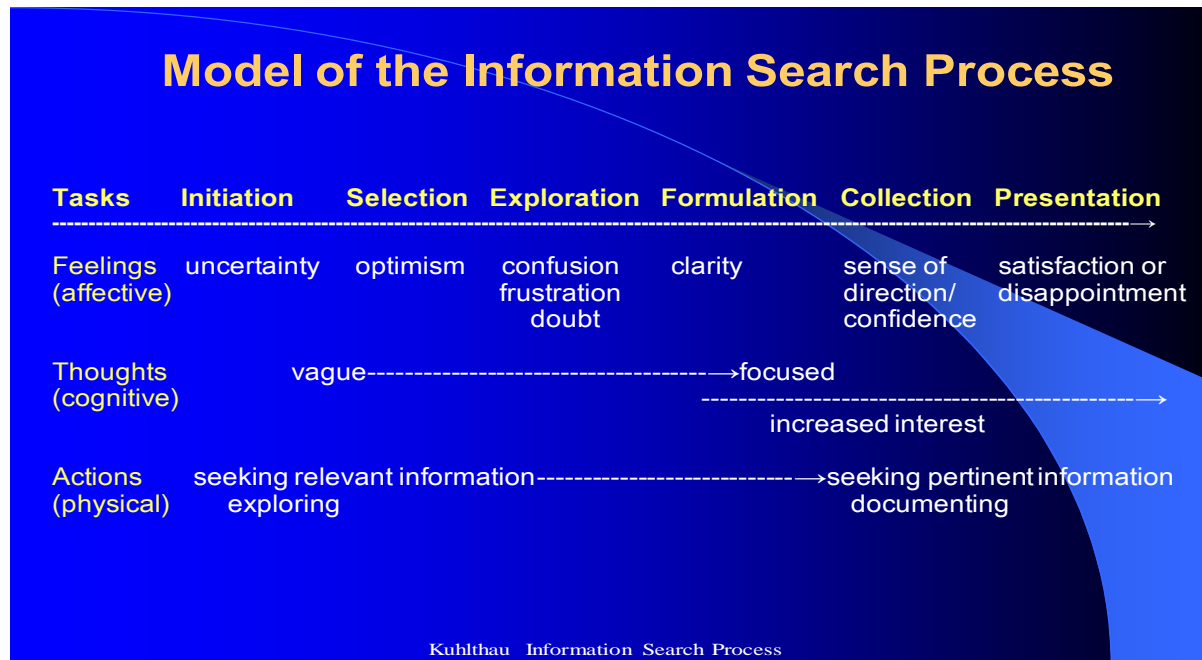
Applying both theories to the information seeking patterns of parents would seem to be logical as parents may switch from one mode to the other depending on their circumstances and experiences when in search of suitable childcare. Indeed, the awareness of one's current situation could inadvertently lead to the recognition of a gap, which then triggers the need to find a solution. However, this is based on the assumption that the individual recognises the need as a 'real' gap that could affect his or her future. If the gap can be ignored i.e. 'not real' to the user, he or she would not see any need to close the gap in as much as it does not have any impact or can find a way around it.

## **The information search process**

Based on George Kelly's personal construct theory, the information search process model describes common patterns in users' experience in the process of information seeking for a complex task that requires construction and learning to be accomplished (Fisher et al, 2005). Kuhlthau described people's experience when seeking information to be holistic, with interplay of thoughts, feelings and actions. The process takes into cognisance the affective aspects or feelings of a person in a process of information seeking along with the cognitive and physical aspects. Kuhlthau (1993) considered uncertainty as a beginning stage in the process of finding information. As stipulated by Fisher et al (2005), information seeking is more than just finding information. The process involves seeking meaning and involves

exploration and formulation of an holistic experience that henceforth influences the decisions and choices a person makes throughout the information seeking process.

**Figure 7: Kuhlthau’s Information Search Process**



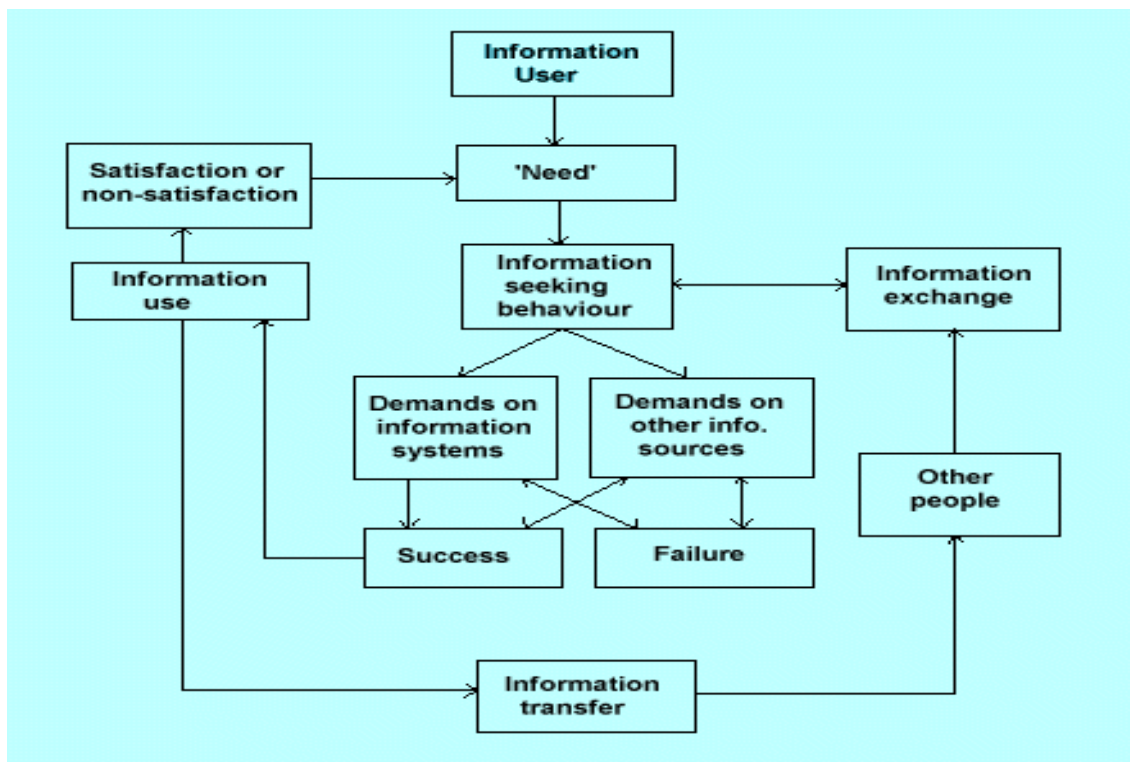
### Information Behaviour Models

Wilson (1999) described an information model as a framework for thinking about a problem and it may evolve into a statement of the relationships among theoretical propositions. In the context of seeking and providing childcare information, an interdisciplinary and integrated model seems to be missing. Existing frameworks are either hard to apply empirically or do not provide for the selectivity characteristic of parents looking for childcare and the duality of the users. Although there are quite a few models of information seeking, not all of them describe or depict patterns in childcare information seeking by parents and as such are not necessarily applicable. Johnson (1997) and Case (2000) both pointed out that models have strengths and weaknesses, and the strength of a model to simplify a phenomenon can cause or become a weakness when it is over generalised to another dissimilar phenomenon.

Wilson (1999) further points out that the models of information do not embody fully formed theories by describing models as a framework for thinking about a problem and it may evolve into a statement of the relationships among theoretical

propositions. Most models apply to a task or a job and were intended to apply to the information seeking behaviours of different groups of people including scientists (Menzel, 1964; Orr, 1970; Paisley, 1968; Voight, 1961); social scientists (Ellis, 1989; Herson, 1984), security analysts (Baldwin & Rice, 1997); and professionals (Pettigrew & Sylvain, 1996).

Wilson’s models of information seeking reflect trends in the theory and practice of information seeking research and their evolution makes them interesting to analyse and apply to various groups. His first model (see Fig 8) shows that the user has a need, which may stem from his or her level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with his or her current situation or previously acquired information. The perceived need leads the user to a series of activities, which involves making direct demands on information sources or systems.



**Fig 8: Wilson’s First model of Information Seeking – The Information Behaviour Field**

The outcome of the demand on information systems and other sources lead to either success or failure. If the user is successful, this leads to information use. There is only one clause in Wilson’s first model, that the failure to find information should trigger another need, which should lead the user to go through the process over

again. Going over the process of looking for childcare could be frustrating, most especially as this could lead to loss of income. However, Wilson's model recognises interpersonal information sharing with other people (also known as word of mouth to some theorists) as a good source of information. Evidently, most parents using childcare have sited word of mouth as their source and the main influencing factor in deciding the best suitable choice of childcare to meet their needs.

Wilson's second model of information seeking, more complex than the former invokes explicit theories that point to three key aspects of information seeking:

- Why some needs activate prompt information seeking more so than others (stress/coping theory from psychology)
- Why some information sources are used more than the others (risk/reward theory, from consumer research)
- Why people may or may not, pursue a goal successfully, based on their perceptions of their own efficacy (social learning theory, from psychology)

In his second model, Wilson (1999) described what motivates a person to search for information as activating mechanisms/motivators which are affected by six intervening variables: psychological predispositions (risk averse or curiosity), demographic background (age, ethnicity, and education), social role factors (a mother or a practitioner) environmental variables (resources) and the characteristics of the sources (accessibility and quality). These mechanisms and motivators will be elucidated further in this research in the methodology chapter.

## **Research Propositions**

The overall purpose of this study is to investigate patterns of childcare information seeking of parents in the UK and to gain an understanding of the social and economic factors involved in the decision making process of choosing the childcare that best meets the needs of families. There is a paradox in the provision of information to families, that each family is unique, each searching for relevant information in a way that makes sense personally and each expecting that their questions or problems will be resolved in a culturally appropriate and supportive setting. Given the assumptions of the integrated theoretical perspectives, the study will seek to test the validity of the hypotheses below:



1. Changes in economic climate affect the way families use time, and organise their work and home based activities especially those related to the care of children
2. Parents' views and perceptions of childcare determine their information seeking behaviour.
3. Parents' information seeking behaviour is influenced by social, cultural and moral values, with childcare choices resulting from complex moral and emotional processes involved in assessing the child's needs and the parents' needs.
4. Parent's socio-economic characteristics are linked to their information seeking patterns and the outcome of the information experience on choice.

Further to these, specific individual aims within the scope of this study are summarised as follows:

- To identify and measure the various information sources and channels parents use when looking for childcare by a randomly selected sample of households with contrasting socio-economic characteristics.
- To explore the interrelationships between the information seeking patterns and the impact of the outcomes of the information seeking experience on parental choice.
- To investigate how socio-cultural, economic and political factors interact when parents are looking for childcare and explore parents' perception of childcare and the options available to them and how these perceptions impact on their choice of childcare.
- To explore the impact of childcare information provision and information seeking behaviour on family outcomes
- To contribute to policies and theoretical understandings, relating to childcare and information seeking behaviour.

In the next section I discuss the methodological design of this research whilst also providing a local context of Medway, which has been chosen for this research based on pragmatic reasons and due to its characteristics of having a combination of rural, urban and areas of deprivation with some pockets of affluence.

### **SUMMARY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This chapter focuses on the multi-theoretical framework underpinning this multi-disciplinary research. The study adopts a three-dimensional approach which focuses on the economic, social and cultural perspectives influencing parents' decision and choices when looking for childcare. From an economic perspective, childcare is a vital resource that allows parents, especially mothers, to work or study to sustain their livelihoods, while also contributing to the total economy through labour supply. From a social and cultural perspective, the selection of childcare is very sensitive due to its subjectivity to both social and cultural factors, which override economic rationality in favour of morally acceptable alternatives.

The theories underpinning this research include the theory of demand for information, role theory, and some information seeking behaviour theories including sense-making, information poverty, information horizon, least effort and the concept of trust. Role theory challenges the shift and changes to beliefs and traditional values that assume that it is the woman's role to stay at home and look after the child. This cultural shift has resulted in the dual roles now played by mothers (as mother and bread-winner), which could result in role conflict and the fear of being judged to be poor parents. The demand for information challenges the cost benefit analysis of using an information system and the amount of time and effort expended in deriving the outcome. Information poverty theory posits that there are certain groups of individuals/families who have difficulty obtaining useful information for solving everyday life problems due to digital divide, knowledge gap, or literacy divide. Explaining this further, information horizon concept highlights the role of social networks and contexts as an environment that could constrain or enhance social mobility. Lastly, the sense making theory as applied to this research identifies childcare as a process of creating situational awareness and understanding in situations of high complexity or uncertainty in order make decisions that would impact on the family's outcomes. The research builds on Wilson's models of information seeking as they reflect trends in the theory and practice of information seeking research; and their evolution makes them interesting to analyse and apply to various groups.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **METHODOLOGY**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

This research seeks to identify and categorise childcare information seeking behaviour of parents in England. It aims to investigate the relationships between behaviour, choice and the socioeconomic characteristics of parents. The research will also explore and develop a model for childcare information seeking behaviour that will enhance our understanding of how responsive services can be developed to meet childcare needs of parents in England. The research approach and design will adopt a mixed methods approach through the administration of 500 survey questionnaires and conducting 35 in-depth interviews to establish the behaviour and experience of parents when looking for childcare in Medway.

The justification for selecting mixed methods approach for this research will be explored in this chapter. Subsequently, in other sections the underlying assumptions, potential ethical issues, research instruments, the data collection methods, and the limitations of the methods proposed will be discussed. In the next section, I discuss Medway and its characteristics

#### **MEDWAY - LOCAL CONTEXT**

Medway is a unitary authority within Kent and it has been chosen for this research based on its unique characteristics. An understanding and overview of Medway's local area is required in order to be able to adequately and effectively understand the childcare information seeking behaviour of the parents in the area. In this section I present current data on Medway's childcare political context, population profile, employment rates, levels of pay, skills and deprivation with the baseline data sourced from the 2011 Census and 2013 Mid-year estimates.

## **CHILDCARE POLITICAL CONTEXT - MEDWAY**

Medway Council was established as a Unitary Authority in 1998, replacing Rochester Upon Medway City Council, Gillingham Borough Council, and adopting the functions and responsibilities of Kent County Council for these areas. The council was established at the start of the Labour Government of 1997-2010 around the same time as when the National Childcare Strategy was introduced in 1998. For the period 2003 to 2010 the Council and the Government were led by opposing parties. Generally, Councillors in Medway have not taken an overtly partisan approach to early years and Sure Start services. Conservative Councillors have supported Labour Government initiatives that have been seen to benefit Medway children & families. Likewise Labour Councillors have supported the Conservative Council leadership. Only very recently – in the face of significant spending cuts – has Sure Start and early years become a key political battleground.

The second and third terms of the Labour Government (2002-2010) was characterised by a centrally driven and prescribed policy programme. Very detailed Plans such as the 10 Year Childcare Strategy of 2004 and the 2007 Children's Plan were accompanied by ring-fenced funding streams (hypothecated grants) with prescriptive reporting regimes. As a result – local government took on the role of being the local delivery framework for central government policy. Subsequently irrespective of whether the local politicians or leadership were supportive of the government's plans, the extensive grant funding provided by central government departments could only be used for government schemes and programmes. Therefore funding for the creation of a nationwide network of Children's Centres was entirely provided – revenue and capital – in ring-fenced grants that were closely and extensively monitored by civil servants or increasingly by agencies working for the government department (Such as "Together for Children").

Medway's embracing of central government programmes (and funding) led to the rapid and effective expansion of local early years and childcare services. The position of Medway as a unitary area within the larger and generally more affluent Kent County, meant that swift improvements could be delivered. Medway was a pilot for many of the government's programmes.

The subsequent Coalition Government brought a change in political direction. But the influence of the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Liberal Democrat Childcare Minister resulted in key early years policies being extended despite the overall austerity programme of the government. This included the introduction of targeted education for low income & vulnerable 2 year olds. Again, Medway's position as an effective LA, willing to embrace government policy irrespective of political difference, brought additional resources to the Council.

However, increasingly, the Coalition government removed the central ring-fences around funding. Under the assertion of "local freedoms", Council's funding streams were brought together. The once rigidly secure "Sure Start Early Years & Childcare Grant" became part of a more general "Early Intervention Grant" – meaning that early years programme had to compete for funding within the Council with other services such as youth and family support. Later the grant programmes were removed entirely, which means Councils now have the choice as to how funding is spent even when the amount of available funding is drastically reduced. In effect the central government has handed decision-making about where to make cuts to the local councillors.

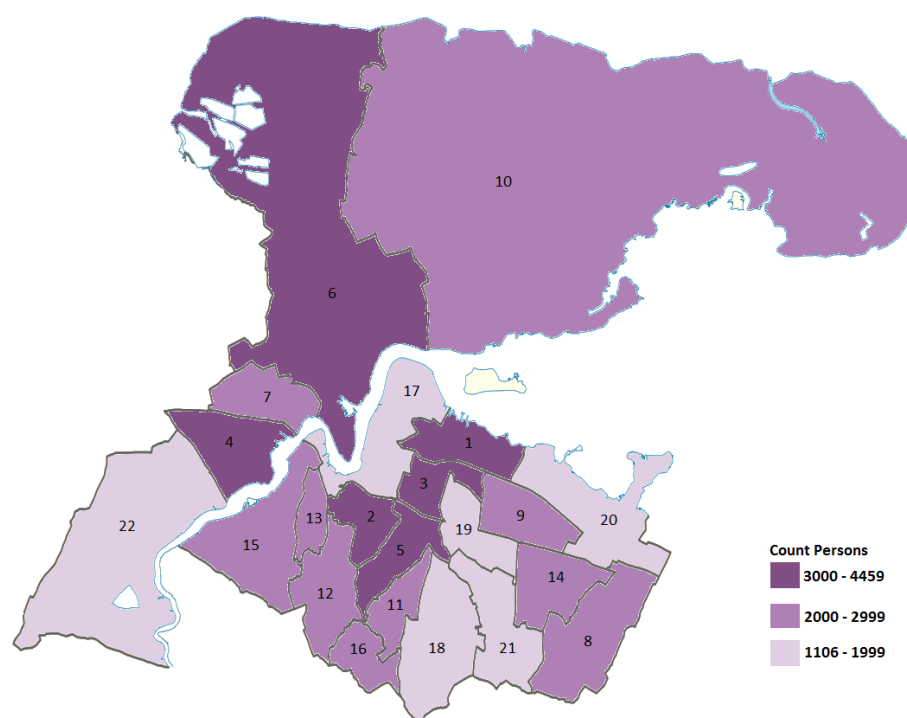
The 2015 election has led to a greater focus on tackling the deficit, and "austerity". Sure Start and early years services are increasingly part of local council's attempts to reduce expenditure – often in the context of spiralling demand for adult social care, and high end services such as child protection and special educational needs. Nationally, councils are retrenching to the delivery of only the most statutory services. Locally, the current budget reduction proposals are extremely challenging – but unlike some areas, are not wholesale destruction of the work of the past 15 years. And meanwhile, central government is proceeding with its manifesto commitment to extend free childcare for some working families.

***(Excerpts from Holmes, M - 2008, 2014, 2015, 2016: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee Reports - Sure Start Children's Centres and Early Childhood Outcomes)***

## POPULATION PROFILE

2012 Mid-year population estimates from the Office of national Statistics indicate that the current population of children between the ages of 0-16 make up a total of 58,282 of the Medway Population. The number of 0-14 has increased from 48,413 (in 2011) to 51,185 (in 2013) indicating a 13.9% increase. The highest concentration of children under the age of 16 is found in Gillingham North, Chatham Central and Gillingham South; followed by Strood South and Luton & Wayfield.

**Figure 9: Population of Children in Medway (by Wards)**

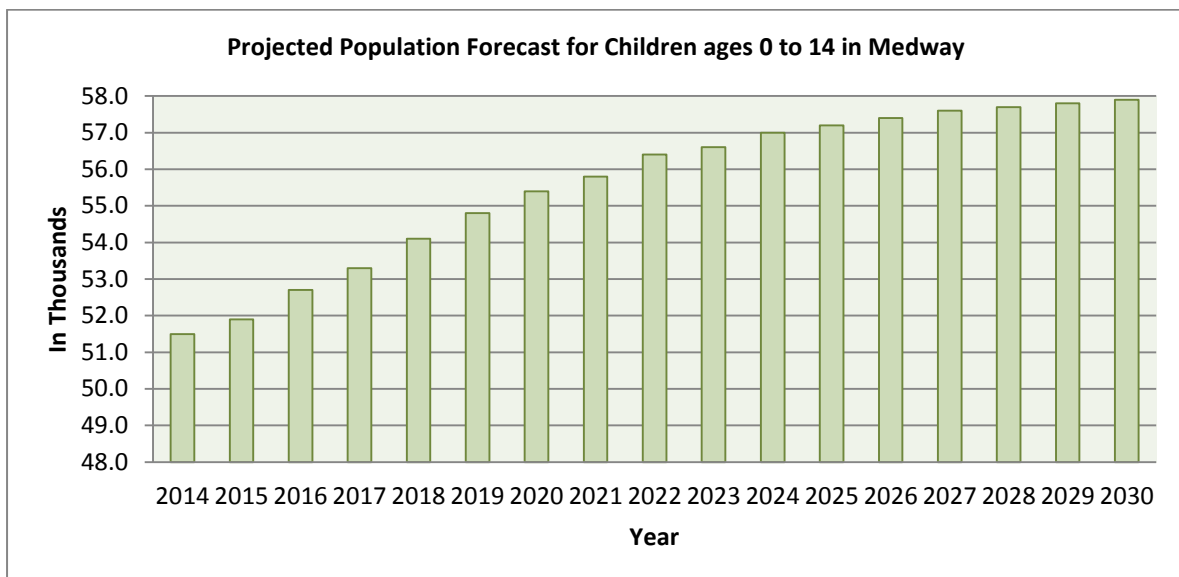


1	Gillingham North	4459	12	Rochester South	2518
2	Chatham Central	4381	13	Rochester East	2346
3	Gillingham South	4112	14	Rainham Central	2176
4	Strood South	3764	15	Rochester West	2078
5	Luton and Wayfield	3535	16	Walderslade	2069
6	Strood Rural	3066	17	River	1964
7	Strood North	2938	18	Lordwood and Capstone	1900
8	Rainham South	2804	19	Watling	1869
9	Twydall	2778	20	Rainham North	1674
10	Peninsula	2733	21	Hempstead and Wigmore	1439
11	Princes Park	2573	22	Cuxton and Halling	1106

2012 Mid-year population estimates from the Office of national Statistics indicate that the current population of children between the ages of 0-16 make up a total of 58,282 of the Medway Population. The number of 0-14 has increased from 48,413 (in 2011) to 51,185 (in 2013) indicating a 13.9% increase. The highest concentration of children under the age of 16 is found in Gillingham North, Chatham Central and Gillingham South; followed by Strood South and Luton & Wayfield.

Population Projections speculate that the population of children under the age of 16 would increase over the next 10 years, with a prediction of 10.1% growth and a population of 57200 by 2025. The entire Medway population has also been forecasted to increase by about 27,400 persons by 2025.

**Figure 10: Projected Population of Children in Medway**



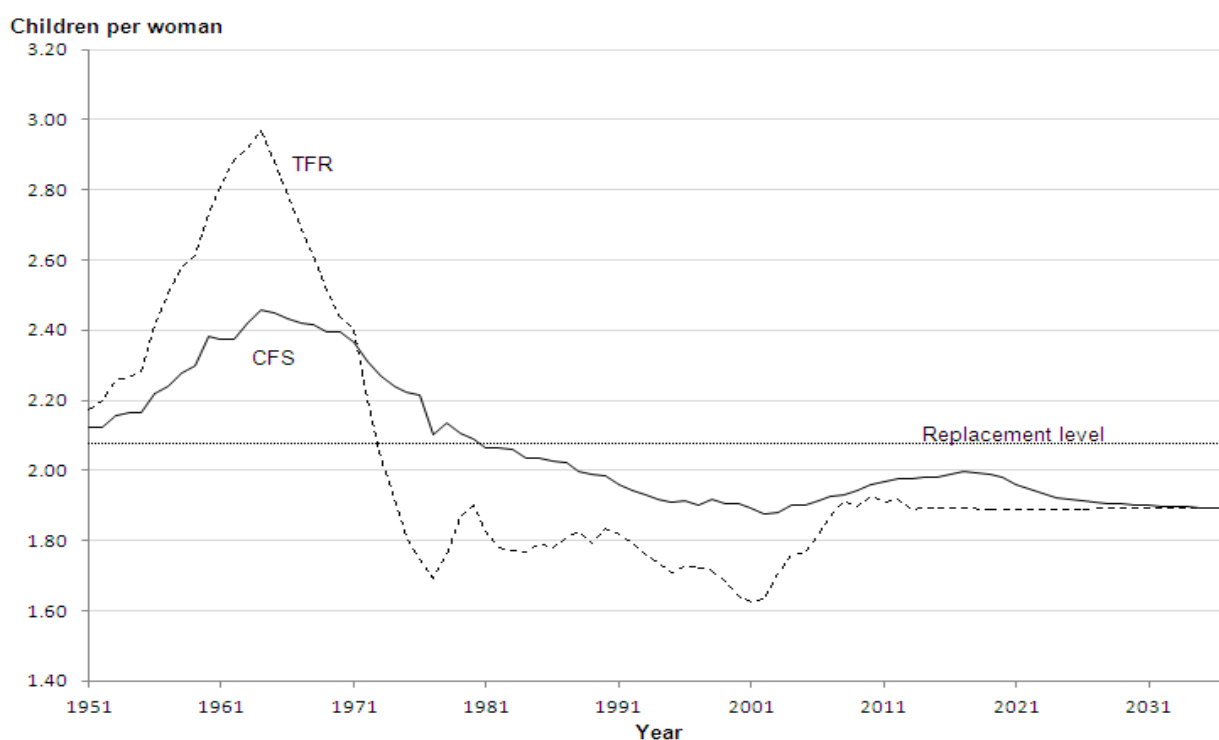
Source: ONS 2012 Mid-year Population Estimates

### **BIRTH RATES**

According to ONS statistics, in 2012 there were just over 4,580 conceptions, representing a rate of 83.3 conceptions per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 44. Of those conceptions more than one in four led to an abortion. Medway has a higher conception rate than the South East and England and Wales. Medway also has a higher rate of teenage pregnancy (39 conceptions were recorded in 2012 representing 7.7 per 1,000 15 to 18 year olds). Around half of these conceptions led to an abortion (ONS Conception data).

Medway Council reported that during the 2012-13 financial year, there were nearly 3,400 women who saw a midwife or a maternity healthcare professional, for a health and social care assessment of needs, risks and choices by 12 weeks and 6 days of pregnancy. (NHS England). In 2012, there were 3,693 births in Medway; Chatham Central and Gillingham North wards had the highest number of births in that time period (ONS 2012, Birth Statistics)

**Figure 11: Actual and assumed total fertility rate (TFR) and average completed family size (CFS), United Kingdom, 1951–2037**



Source: ONS Datasets (2012)

Recent population trends reveal that there has been a decline in completed family size and total fertility rate over the years. In the 2012-based projections, the long-term completed family size is assumed to be 1.89 children per woman. This is 0.05 above the level assumed in the 2008 and 2010-based projections, but is still below 'replacement level'. The 'replacement level' family size of 2.075 represents the approximate number of children per woman needed for the population to replace itself in the long-term (in the absence of migration).<sup>7</sup> The TFR in the UK has been below replacement level since the early 1970s and the completed family size assumed for the long-term falls around 9% below replacement level (ONS 2011, Fertility Data)



## FAMILY TYPES

Although there are more one-person households in Medway than any other group, married couples with dependent children is the second highest family type in Medway forming about 17% of the population. This is followed by lone parent households with about 9% of the population. Lone parent households are higher in Medway than the South East average of 7% and the England average at 8%.

**Table 4: Household Types in Medway, South East and England**

	Medway	South East	England
<i>All Households</i>	106209	3555463	22063368
<i>One Person Household</i>	29434	1023154	6666493
<i>Married Couple Household; With Dependent Children</i>	18414	641967	3607557
<i>Same-Sex Civil Partnership Couple Household; With Dependent Children</i>	17	605	3122
<i>Cohabiting Couple Household; With Dependent Children</i>	5974	146785	942613
<i>Lone Parent Household; With Dependent Children</i>	9233	237739	1747646
<i>Multi-Person Household; All Full-Time Students</i>	489	18226	120874
<i>Multi-Person Household; Other</i>	2536	95526	666810

(Source – ONS Mid-year Datasets, 2012)

In Table 7 below, families with dependent children make up about 46% of the households in Medway. The largest group are families with one dependent child in the family aged 12 to 18. This is followed by families with one dependent child in the family aged 0-4, indicating the potential and possibility of childcare requirements.

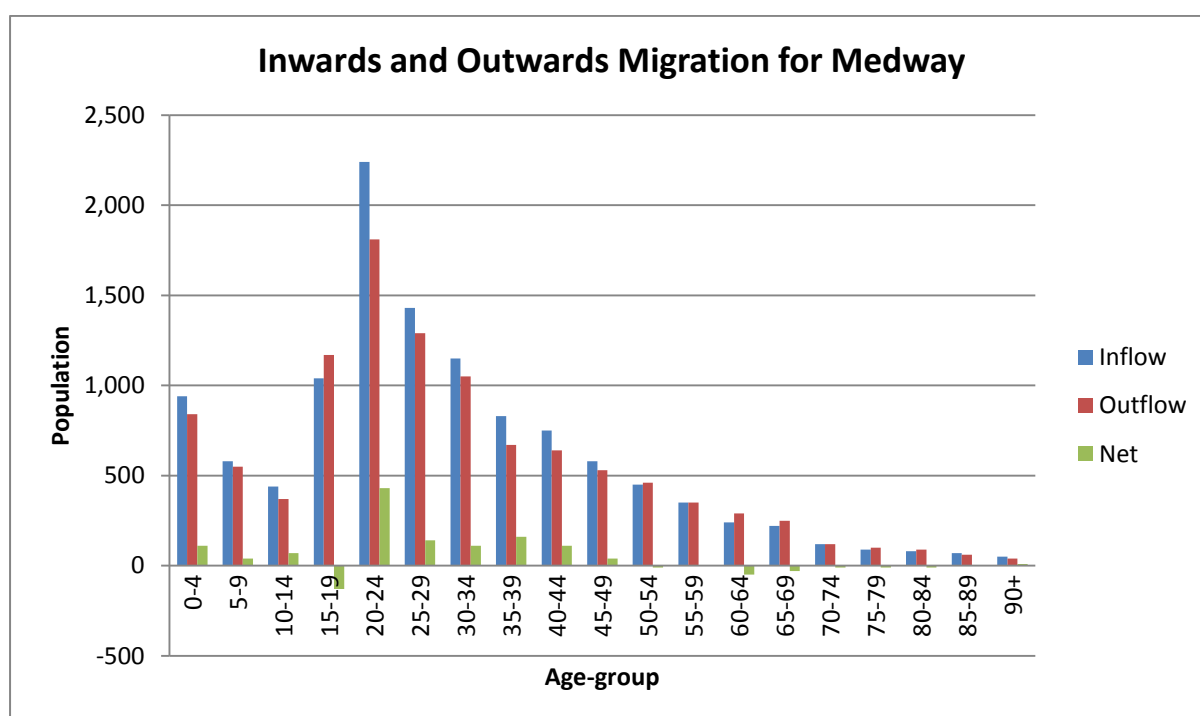
**Table 5: Families with Dependent Children – (ONS Midyear Estimates, 2012)**

Families with Dependent Children	Medway	South East	England
<i>All Families in Households</i>	75062	2458022	14885145
<i>No Dependent Children in Family</i>	40864	1417001	8476581
<i>One Dependent Child in Family; Aged 0 to 4</i>	5450	167421	1064130
<i>One Dependent Child in Family; Aged 5 to 11</i>	3464	100736	673379
<i>One Dependent Child in Family; Aged 12 to 18</i>	6478	188982	1213580
<i>Two Dependent Children in Family; Youngest Aged 0 to 4</i>	5203	162401	957255
<i>Two Dependent Children in Family; Youngest Aged 5 to 11</i>	5239	165388	939630
<i>Two Dependent Children in Family; Youngest Aged 12 to 18</i>	2812	92021	520828
<i>Three or more Dependent Children in Family; Youngest Aged 0 to 4</i>	2961	85422	566275
<i>Three or more Dependent Children in Family; Youngest Aged 5 to 11</i>	2193	66384	402166
<i>Three or more Dependent Children in Family; Youngest Aged 12 to 18</i>	398	12266	71321
<i>Total Dependent Children</i>	61250	1860927	11437443

## MIGRATION

Medway experienced the largest inward migration over the last 10 years in 2012 with a staggering increase of 1800 persons that year. Movements from United Kingdom has dominated the inward movement to Medway from other parts of the country, with the largest migratory flows from the nearest London boroughs – Greenwich, Lewisham, Bexley and Bromley (*Policy & Development team, Medway Council – August 2013*). The data reveals that those moving to Medway are slightly younger than those leaving Medway. Those in their 20s account for about fifty percent of net migration into Medway, therefore suggesting that these may be students coming to study at Medway Universities. The report further confirms that the age profile of residents moving to London is younger than those moving to Medway. A significant proportion of these are in their 20s, suggesting that these could be in search of work opportunities.

**Figure 12: Inwards and Outward Migration by Age Group.**



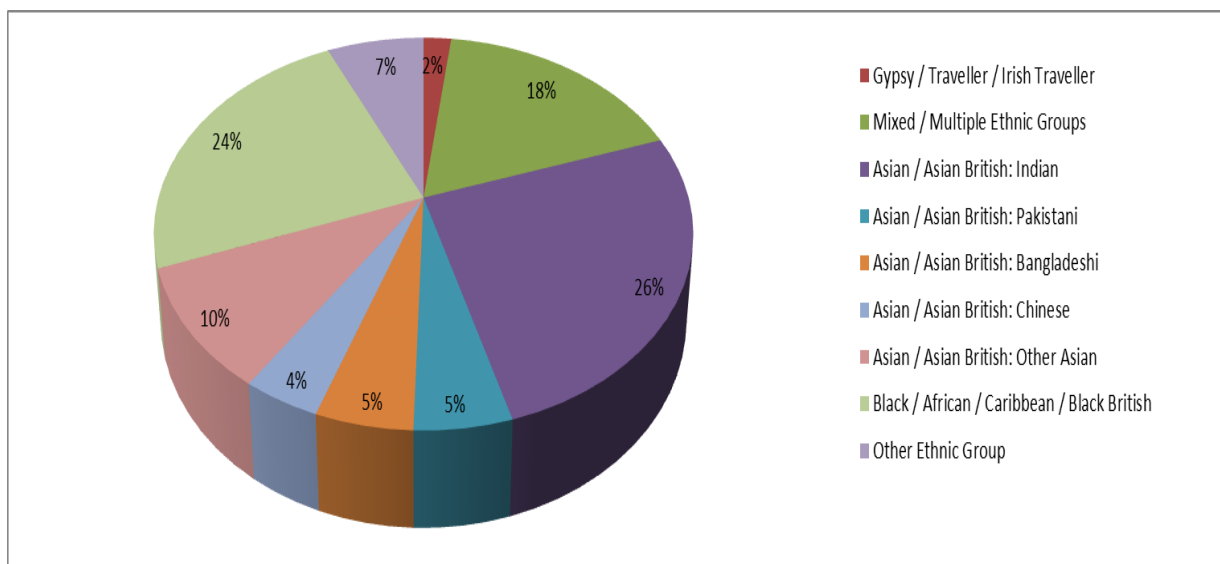
Source: Internal migration for local authorities in England and Wales, by gender and five-year age group, year ending June 2013, ONS

Flows into Medway are higher between the ages of 20-30years, and those with children, therefore reflecting families moving away from the capital to less busy environments. The report also highlighted that inward international migration has increased from 700 in 2006 to 1174 in 2012. Although outward international migration has increased from 600 in 2006 to 924 in 2012, net migration still reflects an increase in migration of +250 persons.

## ETHNIC PROFILE

Medway has always been a predominantly white community with a total population of about 264,000 persons of which the white population represents over 89% of the community (ONS, 2011). This is a slight decrease from the 2007 ONS data which specified 92.2 % of the population. However this also confirms that the percentage of ethnic minorities groups has been increasing. Indian-Asians are the highest represented minority group in Medway representing about 2.7% of the population, closely followed by the Black/African Caribbean at 2.5% of the community. There has been an increase in the migration of Black African/Caribbean families into Medway since 2006.

**Figure 13: Medway Ethnic Profile**



Source: Table KS201UK, 2011 Census: Ethnic group, local authorities in the UK, ONS

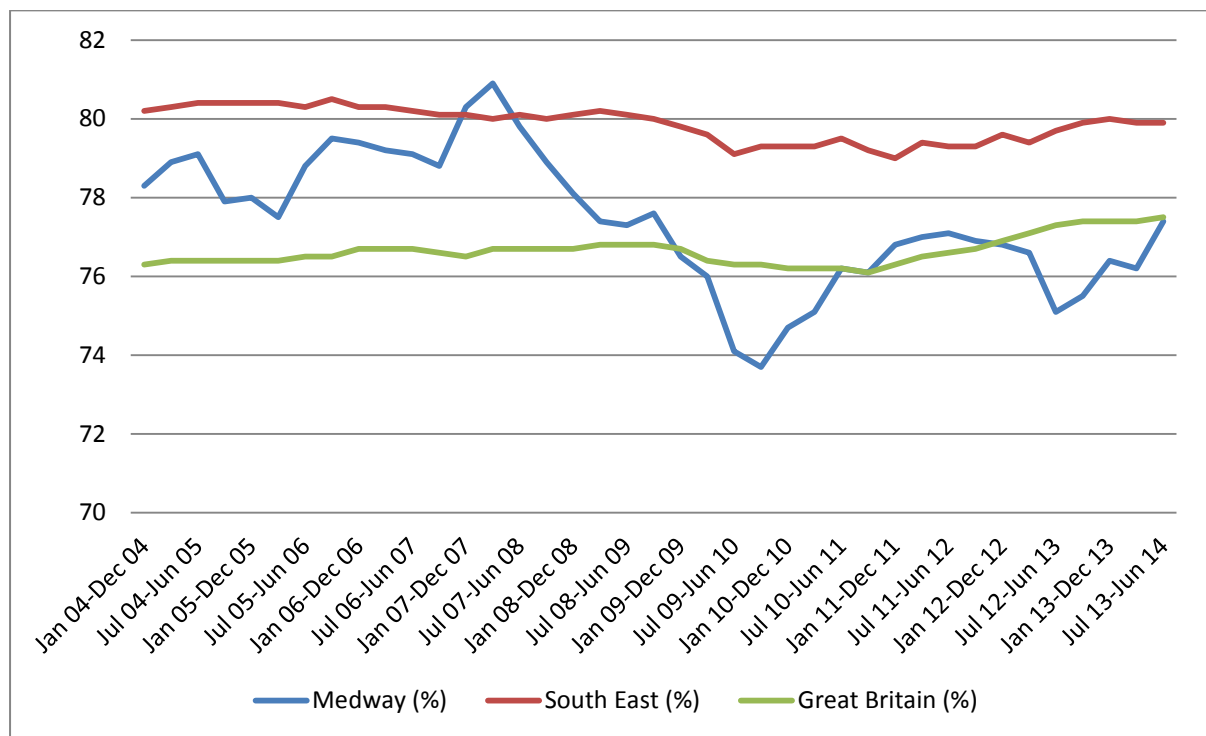
## INDICES OF DEPRIVATION

Medway is regarded as within the most deprived 43% of local authorities nationally. This overall generalisation masks extremes of deprivation in Medway, with some central super-output areas being extremely deprived and others being relatively affluent. About 3500 people in Medway are classified as Income deprived, while 13800 experience employment deprivation. Currently, eight super output areas in Medway are ranked within the most deprived 10% nationally, of which are – Gillingham North, Chatham Central, Luton & Wayfield and River wards. River ward is ranked among the 3% most deprived SOAs nationally.

## ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Economic activity in Medway has always been lower than South East averages but higher than England averages. The economic activity of the area since 2004 has been reported to fluctuate between 73% and 80.9%.

**Figure 14: Economic Activity 2004-2014**



Source – ONS Midyear Estimates, 2011

Increase in economic activity was recorded from April 2006 to March 2008, and then a steady decline to September 2010, where the lowest economic activity in Medway in over six years was recorded with figures lower than both South East and England averages, suggesting that Medway was hard hit by the recession in 2010. The area gradually recovered as economic activity increased until 2012. The area however suffered another dip between June 2012 and June 2013, but improved and now boasts similar economic activity averages nationally but slightly below South East averages.

## JOB MARKET, EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS

Public admin, education and health roles in Medway exceeds the South East and England averages, and so does Energy and water services, manufacturing and transport storage. Information and communication roles are lower than England and South East averages.

**Table 6: Proportion of all Employment by Role**

	<b>Medway (level)</b>	<b>Medway (%)</b>	<b>South East (%)</b>	<b>Great Britain (%)</b>
Managers, directors and senior officials	12,400	10.4	11.5	10.2
Professional occupations	17,600	14.6	21.7	19.9
Associate professional & technical	19,100	15.9	15.8	14.2
Administrative & secretarial	15,400	12.8	10.6	10.6
Skilled trades occupations	13,300	11.1	9.8	10.6
Caring, leisure and other service occupations	11,800	9.8	9.1	9.1
Sales and customer service occupations	7,500	6.3	7.1	7.8
Process plant & machine operatives	9,300	7.8	4.8	6.3
Elementary occupations	12,700	10.6	9.3	10.7

Source: ONS Population Survey (2013)

Professional occupations are significantly below England and South East averages even though this has increased over recent years. Process plant and machine operatives are higher in Medway than the South East and England averages. This could be due to the historical presence of the Chatham Dockyard in the area which has provided employment in the area over the years.

## EARNINGS

Gross weekly pay in Medway is higher than the England average, but below the South East average. The average weekly wage in 2011 was £518, which has now increased to £542 according to ONS 2013 survey. Similarly, the hourly pay is lower than the South East average at £13.3, but slightly higher than the England average.

**Table 7: Resident Analysis - Average Earnings by Gross Weekly Pay**

	<b>Medway £</b>	<b>South East £</b>	<b>Great Britain £</b>
<b>Gross weekly pay</b>			
Full-time workers	542	559.7	518.1
Male full-time workers	599.5	619.5	558.8
Female full-time workers	433.9	481.1	459.8
<b>Hourly pay - excluding overtime</b>			
Full-time workers	13.28	14.31	13.08
Male full-time workers	14.3	15.29	13.68
Female full-time workers	11.28	12.87	12.26

Source: ONS annual survey of hours and earnings - resident analysis, Nomis: Earnings by residence (2013)

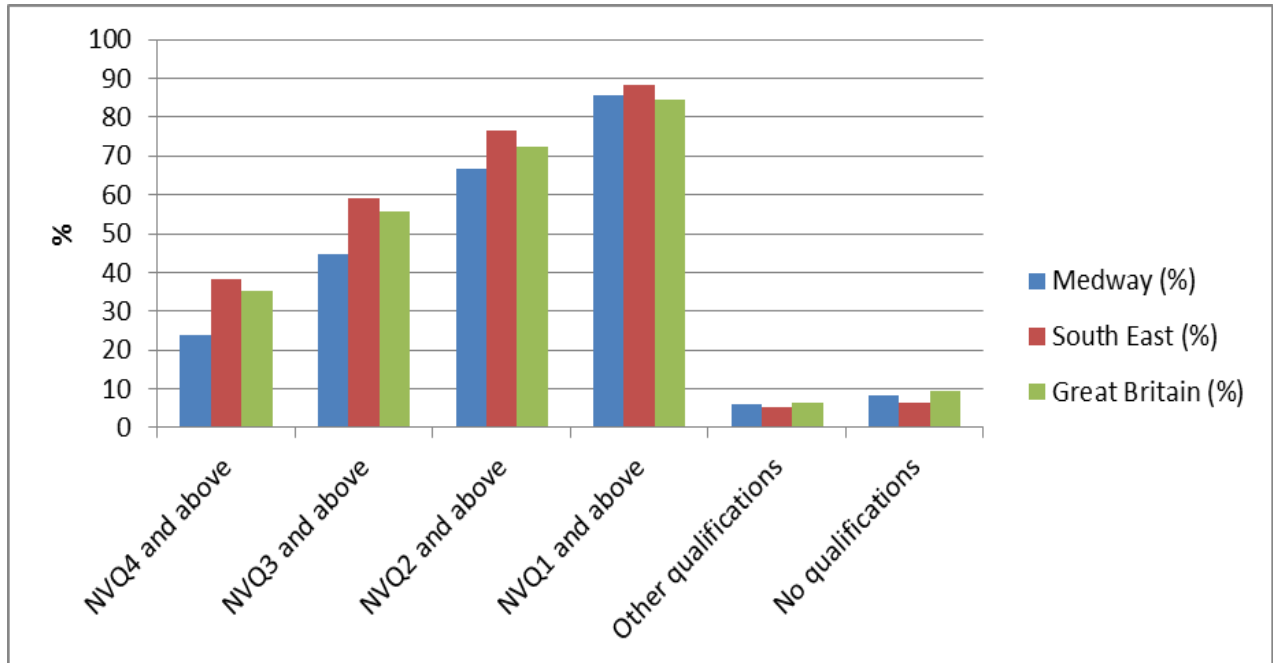
The disparity in gross weekly earnings and hourly pay of male and female full-time earners is evident across the country, with female workers earning less than men. In Medway, female earners earn £3.00 less than their male counterparts, whereas nationally women earn £1.42 less therefore suggesting that female earners in Medway are paid less than their counterparts nationally.

## SKILLS BASE

There has been a significant increase in the proportion of people with higher qualifications in Medway. ONS population survey data in 2009 reported that this cohort was 20.1% of the Medway population. However, there has been a 3.5% increase to 23.7% in 2013 survey data. The change is lower in comparison to South East and England average changes of about 5%. The proportion of people without qualification has also reduced significantly suggesting that there is substantial growth in improving the skills base of the Medway workforce. Whereas a 5% change is

recorded in Medway, the South East and England changes are reported at 3% therefore signifying a faster rate of improvement in Medway.

**Figure 15: Skills Base in Medway by Level of Qualifications**



Source: ONS annual population survey. Nomis, Qualifications (Jan 2013-Dec 2013). Numbers and % are for those aged 16-64. % is a proportion of resident population of area aged 16-64.

Another important that should be mentioned is that Benefit claimants across Medway is higher than average as shown in the figure below. This essentially suggests that economic activity in Medway is lower than the South East average, but a close representation of England national average. Economic inactivity suggests unemployment which could be due to a host of factors which may include childcare issues most especially for females married or single.

**Table 8: Total Job Seekers Allowance Claimants in Medway by Gender**

	Medway numbers	Medway (%)	South East (%)	Great Britain (%)
All people	4,237	2.4	1.3	2.2
Males	2,631	3	1.6	2.8
Females	1,606	1.8	1	1.6

Source: ONS Datasets, September 2014.

## GROWTH SECTORS

In broad terms, as is the case in the South East overall, the Medway economy is heavily skewed towards services with 83.0% of employees employed in the sector. Nevertheless, Medway has a higher proportion of employees in employment in the manufacturing sector than is the case in Kent or across the region.

Between 2008 and 2018, the biggest growth sectors in terms of employment are projected to be Other Personal Services and Health. The Other Personal Services sector is forecast to grow by 1,360 jobs or 18.5% over the period, whilst the Health sector is forecast to grow by 1,099 or 8.5%. The biggest growth sectors in terms of long-term employment trends {2008- 26} are projected to be Other Personal Services and Business Services. The Other Personal Services sector is forecast to grow by 2,280 or 31.0% over the period, whilst Business Services is forecast to grow by 2,353 jobs or 18.0%.

**Table 9: Future Growth Sectors in Medway**

Sectors	2008-13		2008-18		2008-26	
	New Jobs	%	New Jobs	%	New Jobs	%
<b>Other personal services</b>	664	9.0%	1360	18.5%	2280	31.0%
<b>Health</b>	665	5.2%	1099	8.5%	1805	14.0%
<b>Business Services</b>	89	0.7%	1019	7.8%	2353	18.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1417</b>		<b>3478</b>		<b>6438</b>	

Source: Medway Council (2012)

However, it should be noted that the above analysis does not take into account possible interventions by Medway Council/its partners. There is therefore significant scope to arrest decline/support development within sectors and thereby achieve more encouraging levels of growth in some sectors than is forecast.



## **SUMMARY: MEDWAY LOCAL CONTEXT**

Since the last Childcare Sufficiency Assessment in 2011, there has been an increase in the population of children, with predictions from the Office of National Statistics for steady increase until 2025. At ward level, the highest population of children and young people is found in Chatham Central, Gillingham South and Rainham South; and lowest populations are found in Cuxton & Halling, Rainham North and Hempstead & Wigmore.

Birth rates reveal that Medway has a higher conception rate than the South East average and a lower one compared to the England average. Recent trends also show that there has been a general decline in family size and fertility rate over the years in the UK. Net migration data from 2012 ONS estimates reflects an increase in migration into the area. Flows into Medway are generally higher for persons between age 20-30 years and those with younger families suggesting that families are moving away from the capital to areas with more affordable house prices.

Medway has historically been a predominantly white community; however there has been an increase in the diversity of the people moving into the local area. This suggests providers may have to make adjustments to accommodate different cultural needs and make their services appealing to all. Although Medway is ranked within the most deprived 43% of local authorities nationally, this over-generalisation masks extremes of deprivation and pockets of affluence within the area.

Economic activity is still lower in Medway than regional averages but higher than the national average and fluctuates between 73% and 80.9%. Lowest economic activity in six years was recorded during the recent economic recession in September 2010 at 73.8%, lower than the South East and England averages of 79.2% and 76.3% respectively. Despite another dip in 2013 at 75.9%, Medway's economy is improving at 77.4% and comparable to regional and national averages of 79.9% and 77.5% respectively. As both families and providers were affected by the recession, there was a significant impact on the childcare market. Some families lost their jobs which led to less demand for childcare. There has been a significant reduction in childcare

places since 2010 due to the impact of the recession as some providers had to close due to sustainability issues.

The Medway job market is currently dominated by public administration, education and health jobs. Professional occupations which are highly paid such as IT, Financial and Business services related jobs are significantly lower in Medway than in the South East or England. Although there has been an increase in the proportion of highly skilled professionals in the local area, Medway averages are still low in comparison to regional averages. This suggests that affordability of childcare costs may be an issue for parents, most especially those who work part time. It also suggests sustainability issues for providers which eventually could affect the quality of provision.

The proportion of benefit claimants in the area is higher than regional and national averages, with the highest percentage of claimants in Gillingham North, Luton & Wayfield and Chatham Central. This implies that there would be low demand for childcare in these areas and high vacancies in childcare settings unless more benefit claimants look for jobs or retrain to go back to work.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE LOCAL CONTEXT**

The social and demographic variables that influence a person's information behaviour include everything from one's personal, social, national and physical environment to one's gender, age, status, education, economic situation, experience and above all information (Lakshminarayanan, 2010). Information plays a significant role in our daily professional and personal lives and we are constantly challenged to take charge of the information that we need for work, fun and everyday decisions and tasks (Bruce, 2005). Therefore, childcare information needs and uses need to be examined within the work, organisational and social settings of the users. These needs vary according to users' membership or social groups, their demographic backgrounds and the specific requirements of the task they are performing (Choo and Auster (1993:284).

Dervin (1989) however, argues that categorisations along with demographic groupings are usually a function of market segmentation and the consumer or user's mentality that goes with it. Case (2008) purported that when people are 'clustered' into groups and 'labelled', the resulting categories come to be reified, and the researcher, policymakers and the general public begin to believe that such categories are real, rather than just convenient fictions for the purpose of analysis and planning. Case (2009) argues that the assumption that membership in an ethnic or racial minority predicts attitudes, beliefs and behaviours seem to underlie many studies.

Along with age and gender (the two most commonly measured variable), racial and ethnic backgrounds are usually recorded even when it is not particularly important to the investigation. The diverse individuals who make up these groups and their perspectives therefore tend to be lost in the result, and such analyses of user categories do not necessarily or automatically lead to improvements in services or systems (Case, 2008). For example, the poor use computers less than the rich' does not suggest a solution to that inequity but rather may lead to feelings of resignation or blame (Dervin, 1989).

Nevertheless, Case (2007) argues that when background characteristics such as a disability results in persistent situational differences, a study of that small segment of the population makes more sense. Therefore, the use of demographics in making sense and understanding the information seeking behaviour of parents presents the opportunity for everyday problems such as childcare to be resolved. Choo & Herson (1982) from their study of everyday problems, claim that over 50% of information situations are needs for information to solve day-to-day problems, with the rest spread across 18 different problem types and 6% not accounted for. Typical problems were categorised as finding product information, home and housing issues, buying a home or repairing cars or items around the home; and issues related to education such as identifying schools and courses; financing a degree or parenting children.

Case (2008) therefore argues that it is wrong to then assume that consumer research is exclusively product oriented, or that it says little about basic human

behaviour and that it is of no use to anyone other than profit-oriented companies. According to Lehmann (1999) businesses have now gone beyond consumer studies using experiments, surveys and descriptive focus groups aimed at marketing, to embracing qualitative methods which pursue more basic questions about human behaviour.

As more businesses now have less to do with sales and more to do with sense making, likewise childcare needs to be less focussed on the marketing or economic perspective, and seek to make more sense of parent's needs. Lehmann (1999) proposed that less emphasis should be placed on psychological and economic theory; and the focus should shift from viewing the customer as an emotional unfocussed learning human. Rather he argues that 'irrational' behaviour should not be identified as aberration, but modelled and explained as much as possible.

As already argued by Case (2008), this research shifts from micro-level focus on individual judgements, giving way to the study of how people set goals, make important decisions and are influenced by other people in their choices. However, moving in the positive dimension requires a change in methods, including increased use of qualitative and ethnographic methods, and less of the statistical significance for proving what Lehmann describes as trivial hypothesis. The next section discusses in detail the mixed methods research approach selected for this research and the justifications for choosing this methodology.

## Mixed Methods Research

Mixed methods has been defined as “research in which the investigator collects, analyses mixes and draws inferences from both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or program of inquiry” (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007 p 3). Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004) define mixed methods research as the act of combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study. Johnson et al (2007) also conducted a research of the various definitions of mixed methods and found that the definitions were quite varied and diverse depending on the terms of what was being mixed and at what stage of the research. Other definitions were based on how the mixing occurs, the purpose of the mixing and the reasoning behind the research.

A more comprehensive definition was however produced by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007, p5) who state that: “Mixed methods research is a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it involves philosophical assumptions that guide the direction of the collection and analysis of data and the mixture of qualitative and quantitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central purpose is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) also define mixed methods as a methodology that combines methods, a philosophy and a research methodology, and involves collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data in ways that are rigorous and framed both epistemologically and theoretically.

Cameron (2011) claims that mixed methods also known as the third methodological movement has its own research community which has not only witnessed a rapid rise in popularity in recent years, but has also developed its own philosophical, theoretical, methodological, analytical and practical foundations and constructs for the conduct of mixed methods research. Tashakkori & Teddlie (2010) refer to this community as one which has gone through a relatively rapid growth spurt and has acquired a methodology that did not exist before, and has become an emerging community of practitioners and methodologists across a variety of disciplines.

Amongst these practitioners are family scientists Plano Clark et al. (2008) referred to as researchers who conduct research in order to describe and explain the inherent complexity of families. Addressing these complexities require research that is 'multi-disciplinary, broad in scope and linked to the contexts in which people live (O'Brien, 2005). Sandelowski (2000) also buttressed the point by confirming there is the need for multi-disciplinary research that explore the complexity of human phenomena, which may require more complex research designs to capture them. With focus on external validation and transferability of issues, mixed methods are designed to address these complexities to expand the scope and deepen insights into studies by generating multiple samples dependent on the research strand, which will address research questions from a number of cases to a large number of units of analysis.

Bryman (2008) describes mixed method research as focussing on both depth and breadth of information across research strands with most sampling decisions made before the study starts but which could lead to the emergence of other samples as the study develops. With focus on representativeness and the need to seek out information-rich cases, selection is based on expert judgement across the sampling decisions, most especially since they interrelate with each other. Both formal and informal sample frames are normally used in mixed methods with both narrative and numeric data generated.

Castro et al. (2010) describe mixed methods approaches as offering the promise of bridging across both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Combining the strength of both approaches, mixed methods tap into the accurate operationalisation and measurement of concepts provided by the quantitative approach. It also utilises its capacity to construct group comparisons, examine the strength of association between variables of interest and the capacity for model specification and hypothesis testing. The missing link in the quantitative approach – which is the detachment of information from the real world, is gained by tapping into the strengths of the qualitative approach, which includes the examination of the whole person holistically, thus neutralising the effect of the de-contextualisation of the quantitative approach through the introduction of a fully contextualised approach (Castro et al 2010).

In light of the aforementioned definitions and descriptions, a sequential mixed method approach has been selected for the methodology of this research, as it allows for the exploration of the meaning of the construct of parents' information seeking behaviour from more than one perspective. According to Kingrey (2002, p2), "individuals constantly make and unmake their understanding and perspectives through the exploration of the wide and deep nexus of information that is life. This exploration occurs as a communicative process and an intersecting dialogue that extends beyond data to include emotions, idea, values, opinions, superstitions and beliefs on the personal and social level."

People's experience when seeking information was also described by Kuhlthau (1993) to be holistic, with interplay of thoughts, feelings and actions which take into cognisance the affective aspects or feelings of a person in a process of information seeking along with the cognitive and physical aspects. This research seeks to explore parents' experience, thoughts, feelings and affective actions when looking for childcare by utilising a methodology that allows for these to be adequately captured. An explanatory sequential mixed methods research design has been chosen to capture parents' experience when looking for childcare. Strauss & Corbin's (1998) grounded theory analytical approach has also been chosen to analyse the information gathered from the interviews to generate the explanation of parents' information seeking process, action and interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants. According to Charmaz 2006, grounded theory from a constructivist perspective lends the ability to learn about parents' experience within embedded networks, situations and relationships. The emphasis placed on views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions and ideologies of individuals would help to construct the experience of parents when looking for childcare.

### **Justification for mixed methods**

According to Leech & Onwuegbuzie (2006), an increasing number of researchers are utilising mixed methods in their research due to its logical and intuitive appeal, coupled with the fact that it provides a bridge between the qualitative and quantitative paradigms. Migiro (2011) posits that the ability to triangulate data and

assure its validity and level of variance is a very invaluable quality which makes mixed methods stand out among other research methods. He also shared the thoughts of Creswell (2009) on the benefits of the complementary relationship between qualitative and quantitative data, with one clarifying the other throughout his study.

Creswell (2009) noted that by using mixed methods we end up with an assumption that the combination of the methods provides a better understanding than either qualitative or quantitative method alone as mixed methods present an opportunity to explore both worlds by allowing in-depth discovery of indigenous patterns, practices and traditions while at the same time benefiting from the advantages of high generalisation through large scale empirical research.

A mixed method provides words, pictures and narrative, which can be used to add meaning to numbers. On the other hand, numbers are used to add precision to words, pictures and narratives. It has also been described as the 'strengthner' of qualitative and quantitative research (Gambarino 2009) and can be used to generate and test grounded theory (De Lisle, 2011). Researchers maintain that as mixed methods research is not confined to one single method or approach, it can be used to answer broader and complex range of research questions and produce stronger evidence for conclusion through convergence and collaboration of findings otherwise known as triangulation (Bryman, 2006). According to Plano Clark (2010) mixed methods adds insights and understanding that could have been missed if only a single method was used. Likewise, Russek & einberg (1993) claim that by using both quantitative and qualitative data, their study of technology-based materials for the elementary classroom gave insights that neither type of analysis could provide alone. When used together, qualitative and quantitative methods produce a complete knowledge to inform theory and practice (Plano Clark, 2010).

In addition to the above justifications, the mixed methods approach has been selected as the solution to capture parents' experiences and insights required to answer the research questions of this study. This is because it utilises both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, which would allow for large structural features of the family's social life to be discovered through quantitative methods



(questionnaire) and for small behavioural aspects to be investigated by qualitative research (interviews). The qualitative phase will capture in-depth information relating to values, behaviour and experiences of parents that could not have been captured through quantitative methods alone.

The multi-disciplinary nature of the research and the theories to be tested have also keenly guided the adoption of a mixed methods approach as the study seeks to investigate parents' affective thoughts, feelings and actions when looking for suitable care for their children. This cognitive behaviour will be considered in conjunction with the tenets of the attachment theory, which indicates the affective bond between parents (both mother and father) and child as highly significant and much needed for the development of children. This study will explore how this affective bond impacts on the decision of parents to either stay at home to look after their children until school age, or to use the services of a childcare provider.

The triangulation, convergence, corroboration and correspondence of results from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of this research will help to provide a greater validation of the results of the research as quantitative and quantitative methods on their own have strengths and weaknesses when they are considered independently. However, combining the two methods through a mixed methods approach allows the weaknesses of one to be offset by drawing on the strengths of both. For example, the quantitative research provides an account of structures of social life, whereas the qualitative research provides a sense of process. Combining the elements of both in the mixed methods approach therefore produces a comprehensive account of inquiry, and thus conveys completeness to the research. Mixed methods has been successfully utilised in information seeking behavioural studies (Green et al. 1989; Miles and Huberman 1994; Greene & Caracelli 1997; Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003; Ivankova et al. 2006; Mayoh et al. 2012). Despite the misgivings for combining quantitative and qualitative analyses in the same study (Howe 1998; Swale et al. 2002), it has been successfully utilised and advocated by other leading researchers (Greene et al. 1989; Morgan 1998; Creswell 2003; Morse 2003; Ivankova et al. 2006). In the field of information, there has been a move towards combining qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a richer, contextual basis for interpreting and validating results (Kaplan & Duchon, 1988).

Whilst some information behaviour studies utilising mixed methods were quantitatively led in the form of questionnaire survey with some open-ended questions included for qualitative analysis, others were qualitatively led, and some were equally integrated.

Kim (2009) utilised a quantitatively led mixed methods design that sought to provide confirmation and explanation in clarifying the reasons searchers had for the strategies and changes made as their searches progressed on various types of tasks. Xie & Joo (2010) also utilised a quantitatively mixed methods research to illuminated reasons for using or not using various Web searches. Mason and Robinson (2011) also used a similar approach of open-ended questions in an online survey of information behaviour of artists and designers, but the methods were integrated. Kwon (2008) in a study examining the relationships between critical thinking and library anxiety used a quantitatively led mixed methods approach whereby validated instruments were used for the quantitative component, and the student essays were analysed qualitatively to explain how the relationships between critical thinking and library anxiety developed; and how emotions affected the manner in which students coped with library anxiety.

The strengths of mixed methods in information seeking behaviour research have also been advocated by Creswell et al. (1996), Creswell (2003, 2005), Moghaddam et al. (2003), Ivankova, Creswell & Stick (2006). Morgan (2007) refers to mixed methods as pragmatic approach as during the design of research, data collection and data analysis it is impossible to operate in an exclusively theory or data driven fashion. The motivation for mixed methods is that, neither the quantitative method nor the qualitative method used individually or independently is sufficient and robust enough to provide insight and clarity to the research questions or theories that have been posed in this study. This research will adopt the mixed methods approach outlined in the study of online health information seeking experiences of adults by Mayoh et al. (2012). Adopting the mixed methods approach for this study introduces both testability and context into this research. Collecting different kinds of data by different methods from different sources provides a wider range of coverage that may result in a fuller picture of parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare than would have been achieved otherwise.

## **Philosophical Assumptions of Mixed Methods**

Philosophical or paradigmatic assumptions are important influences on research practice. The nature of these assumptions tends to influence research decisions and these vary widely across the paradigmatic spectrum as they share a centring of social research around our beliefs and assumptions (Hall, 2012). Hall argues that a researcher's views of the concepts he or she is studying are entangled with the researchers' philosophical understandings and beliefs. In this research these include the epistemological and ontological beliefs about parents' behaviour when seeking childcare. It is about the socially constructed or externally explicable nature of human meanings and motivations.

This involves three key understandings: (i) the difference between making inquiry decisions that would take into consideration philosophical assumptions and also enhance the understanding of a particular concept as related to the context in which it is being studied; (ii) the difference between making research decisions so as to minimise error variance due to differences across the study; (iii) to fully understand the complexities and contingencies of parents information seeking behaviour and to make better sense of their experiences. These philosophical understandings may incorporate a broader set of assumptions, which would necessitate the introduction of a more diverse set of methods to complement the research. As described by Hall (2012), this new belief system cannot necessarily be integrated into old dualism as they seek for something beyond the confinements of the old system and its immeasurability through the redefinition of social reality and knowledge. This essentially led to the paradigm wars of the 1970s and 80s where the positivist paradigm of quantitative research came under attack from social scientists supporting qualitative research and proposing constructivism as an alternative paradigm (Reichardt & Rallis, 1994).

Paradigm issues have always been controversial when applied in mixed methods, and the choice of an appropriate paradigm is a necessary step to justify the use of mixed methods in research. It is worth noting that the mixed methods approach has an age old problem. Basically, it is finding a rationale for combining qualitative and quantitative data which have been argued to have incompatible paradigms underpinning them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, in dealing with the issue,

researchers including Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003), Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) developed a range of alternative approaches that are not incompatible and can be combined under one single study or paradigm. This single paradigm would essentially end the paradigm wars and provide a justification for mixed methods. It would also enable the integration of research findings and disperse with the unhelpful conflict that has plagued social research (Hall, 2011).

Paradigms play an important role in mixed methods research, and Hall (2011) describes the paradigm issue as the sensibility of mixing paradigms while mixing methods. In defining paradigms, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) define a paradigm as a worldview, together with the various philosophical assumptions with that point of view. Morgan (2007) argues that paradigms could have four different meanings and has been identified as a worldview, an epistemological stance, shared beliefs and as model examples of research. In the same vein, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) as well as Greene (2007) also described paradigms as worldviews and the four commonly agreed worldviews among the authors are - Postpositivism, Constructivism, Transformative and Pragmatism. Out of all the four, only transformative and pragmatism are compatible with mixed methods whilst post-positivism and constructivism are closely identified with quantitative and qualitative research methods respectively (Hall, 2011).

Pragmatism and transformative paradigms have been identified as contenders for the single paradigm approach which encompasses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Mixed methods researchers such as Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) and Morgan (2007) are advocates of the pragmatism approach, while Mertens (2003) supported the transformative approach. According to Teddlie and Johnson (2009), the pragmatic approach of mixed methods embraces and synthesises ideas from both the quantitative and qualitative sides. Stokes and Urquhart (2013) in support claim that by using both quantitative and qualitative methods in a pragmatic approach, a deeper and richer understanding of the information seeking process could be attained. The multi-disciplinary and multi-theoretical nature of this study not only requires a pragmatic approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative elements of mixed methods by combining elements

of post-positivism in the quantitative phase and a constructivist approach in the qualitative phase. It also requires an approach that allows the combination of the two paradigms and embraces the views of values and making sense of our world. It involves an approach that would embrace and attest to Johnson et al. (2007) definition of mixed methods as 'a powerful third paradigm choice that often will provide the most informative, complete, balanced and useful research result' - which is adequately projected by a realist approach.

### **Towards a Realist Approach**

Although the tenets of this research would be well supported by the combination of the elements of positivism and constructivism, the realist approach seems much applicable as it reflects the mixing of both approaches in a manner which incorporates sense making of the information seeking behaviour and the values that may be impacting on parents' decision making. The idea of a realist approach was floated by Bergen (2011) and has been widely accepted in the field of social research, as it does not suffer from the limitations of the transformative and pragmatism approach. It also supports the use of mixed methods.

The realist method according to Bergen (2011) serves as the answer to a second generation of theoretical concepts, which considers the shape and reason for mixed methods research. Studying the information seeking behaviour of parents when looking for childcare, requires a paradigm that is not limited in the range of topics or methods that it can be used to conduct research, and also accommodates the mixing of the qualitative and quantitative methods. Henry et al (1998) identified the realist approach as "an emergent paradigm which recognises the complexity of social phenomena by enabling a role for values, and interpretive meaning as well as accepts explanation as a legitimate goal in social research." Fundamentally, this new realist *belief system* seeks to go beyond the confines of old dualisms and incommensurables as it redefines the nature of social reality and knowledge. According to Putnam (1990), the new common sense realism is one in which social reality is both causal and contextual, and social knowledge is both propositional and constructed; hence justifying its adoption for this mixed methodological study. The epistemological and ontological foundations of the realist paradigm in mixed

methods also provides a potential resolution of the paradigm wars, as naturalised epistemology requires that we understand how we should make sense of our world (Bergen, 2011).

Realism also recognises the contextual complexity and hierarchical structure of social phenomena that social researchers aim to understand and multiple/mixed methods can be used within this framework to discover underlying causal mechanisms elaborating our understanding of the childcare information seeking behaviour of parents through multilevel analysis and providing evidence for these activities (Julnes & Mark, 1998). An important stance of the new realist theory grounded in the tenets of common-sense realism is the sense-making evaluation theory, which corresponds to one of the underpinning theories for this study – Dervin's Sense making theory. The realist approach also includes the study of values therefore suggesting a dual focus between sense-making and valuing; which makes it even more suitable in studying how parents make sense of the childcare seeking process and how their judgement is influenced by values (Mark et al. 1998).

### **Realist-Pragmatic Approach**

In this research, the methods will not be mixed in accordance to or with a formula or foundational value. Rather, the concern is with selecting methods that meet particular requirements for identifying parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare. Citing Howe (1988), Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003) stated that "...the hallmark of the philosophical pragmatist is to eschew the "tyranny... of the epistemological over the practical, of the conceptual over the empirical," insisting instead on "a mutual adjustment between the two such that practice is neither static nor unreflective, nor subject to the one-way dictates of a wholly abstract paradigm."

The essential criteria for making design decisions for this study are practical, contextually responsive and reflexive therefore requiring that a pragmatic approach is also adopted. Methods mixing are not relatively new to pragmatists and indeed they are known to characteristically mix different kinds of methods because of the complexity of the context in which their work demands multiple methods. Adopting a pragmatic approach to this research requires a basis for what works and what does not, an understanding of the demands, opportunity and constraints in which the

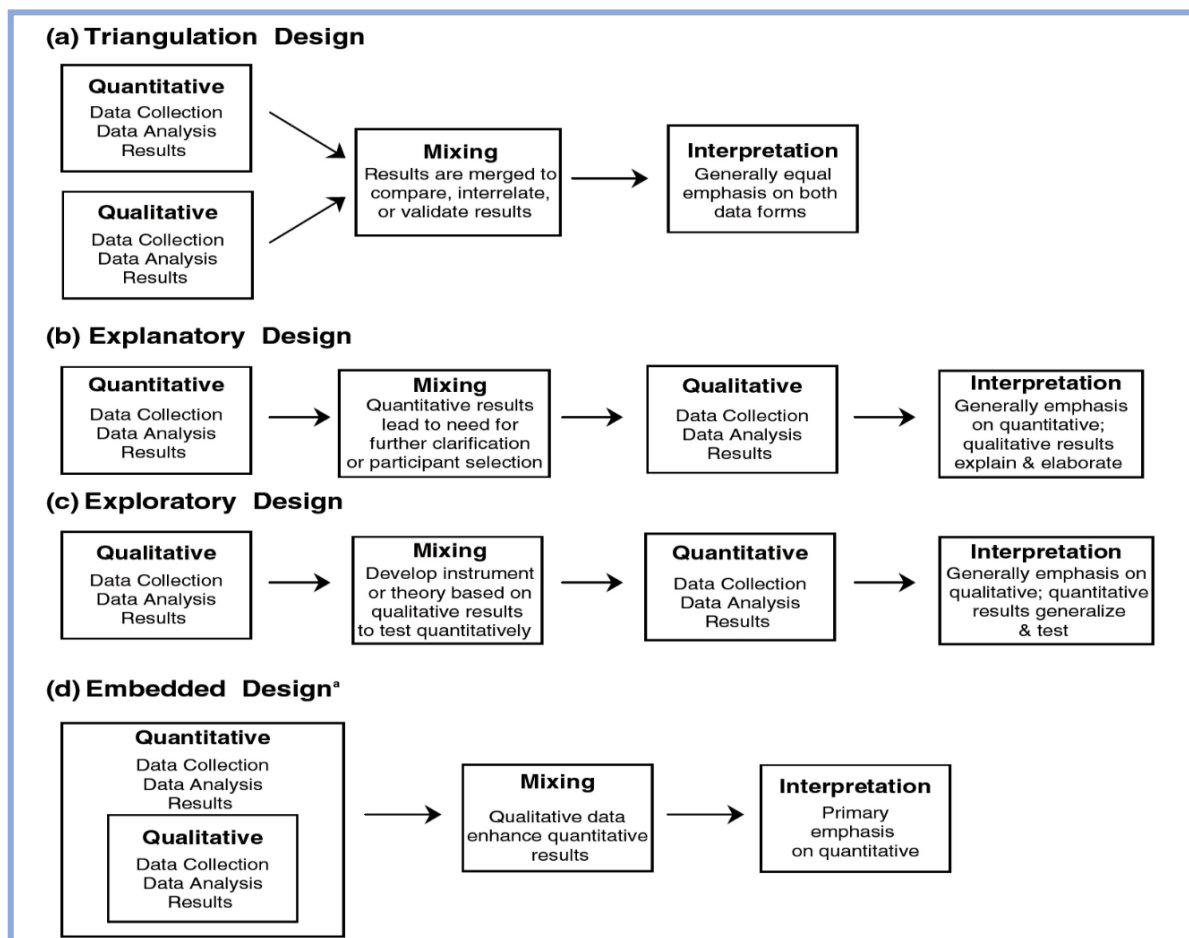
study would take place and the practical consequences and experiences in particular as highlighted by Howe (1988). This research therefore proposes to adopt a realist-pragmatist approach which supplants the coherence and correspondence of the pragmatist criteria such as accuracy, scope, simplicity, consistency and comprehensiveness with the realist perspective which considers the complexity of social phenomena by enabling a role for values and interpretive meaning as it encompasses nature and places emphasis on making sense of parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare and discover underlying causal mechanisms in elaborating our understanding.

## **Research Design**

According to Thurston (2006), the design is the overall approach to a study, which encompasses the aims, methods and the anticipated outcomes. The following sections describe the activities, procedures and processes involved in designing a model for parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare. The proposed timeframe for conducting the fieldwork is between five to six months. Data analysis will be conducted afterwards over three months. During this period, the study will investigate and explore information seeking behaviour of parents when looking for childcare to help them stay in work, or to study with the aim of joining the labour force. The behavioural characteristics surrounding the entire process of how parents construct, co-ordinate and eventually choose a childcare provider deemed suitable to look after their children during this period of 'uncertainty' as described by Kulkathau (1993) will be investigated. Essentially, this study is designed to capture the yet-to-be explored situational factors, variables and the interrelationships through the testing of the hypotheses outlined in the theoretical framework whilst using existing models of information seeking behaviour as guiding tools. In order to develop preliminary childcare information seeking behaviour model, four factors are important: (i) the overarching research question, which dovetails into (ii) the research objectives underpinning the research, (iii) the hypothetical framework and (iv) the anticipated outcomes of the research. These are the factors that would guide the research design and hopefully add value to existing knowledge.

Timing, weighting and mixing of quantitative and qualitative elements are the determining factors that distinguish mixed methods research from others. Timing in mixed methods research refers to not only when the data is collected, but also when it is analysed and integrated. Quite a few studies have investigated mixed methods design including Bazeley (2002); Clark et al. (2008); Castro et al. (2010), and Lawrence et al. (2011). They all discussed the element of timing as a variable in mixed designs. They all categorised studies using mixed methods designs as either exploratory, explanatory, triangulatory or integrated purely based on the timing and mixing of the elements and also on the nature of the research. Analysing this design, Castro et al. (2010) sought to categorise studies based on the designs utilised. Their report showed that out of eleven studies which declared triangulation as the main approach utilised, only two (19 per cent) of the studies allocated equal weighting to both qualitative and quantitative data, with over 70 per cent of the studies actually giving more weight to the qualitative data.

**Figure 16: Mixed Methods designs - Creswell and Plano Clark (2007).**





Approaches in family science research came to a similar conclusion as 8 out of 12 studies prioritised the quantitative data over the qualitative data. This essentially supports Bazeley (2002) who claims that some researchers who assert that they use mixed methods may not necessarily be mixing the elements equally. With more than 70 per cent of researches using the triangulatory design being described as giving more weight to the quantitative data, this suggests that majority of triangulatory mixed methods researches are more or less mostly quantitative in nature. Essentially, this relates to the conceptual and theoretical framework underpinning this research (discussed in Chapter 3 and 4) and how these theories will be tested in this study.

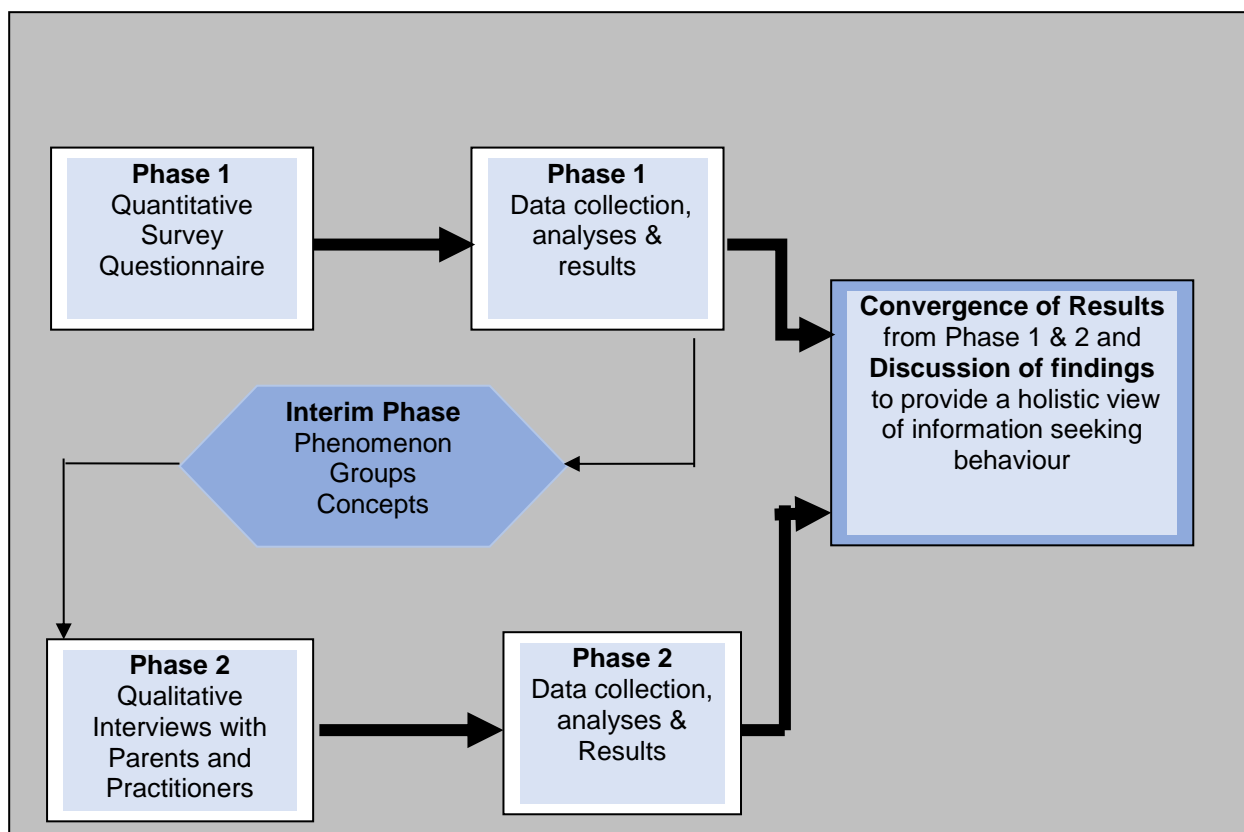
In light of the aforementioned, the design for this study adopts a sequential explanatory triangulation design which utilises the quantitative survey questionnaire instrument to select participants for a qualitative in-depth interview where parents' behaviour towards childcare and their experiences when seeking childcare are discussed in detail. Sequential triangulation involves the use of the results of one method of data collection to determine the implementation and direction of the other (Morgan, 1998; Morse 1991). Although triangulatory designs involve collecting and analysing quantitative data in parallel or about the same time, it has been known that some researchers have analysed their own data in combination with secondary quantitative data by transforming one data type to the other to facilitate relating data. The explanatory sequential mixed methods design chosen for this research is further discussed in the next section. Each phase and the research instrument used are also discussed in subsequent sections.

### **The Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design**

The explanatory sequential mixed method consists of the quantitative phase followed by the qualitative phase. In this study, the researcher will first collect and analyse the quantitative data. The next sequence is the qualitative phase, which elaborates on the first phase. Also known as the qualitative follow-up approach, the sequential approach to mixed methods has attracted design names such as sequential model (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2007), sequential triangulation (Morse, 1991) and the

iteration design (Greene, 2007). The explanatory design is a mixed method design in which the researcher begins by conducting the quantitative phase from which the results are used to select participants for the follow up qualitative phase. The second phase (qualitative) is implemented for the purpose of explaining the initial reports in more depth and this focusses on explaining results as reflected in the name of the design.

**Fig 17: Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Research Design for Parents Information Seeking Behaviour Study**



***Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Research Design for Parents Information Seeking Behaviour Study.***

The main tenet and purpose of the explanatory sequential design is to use a qualitative strand to explain the initial quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2003). The design is known to be most useful when the qualitative data is needed to explain quantitative significant and non-significant results, positive-performing examples, outlier or surmising results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). It is also advantageous for grouping results, assessing trends and relationships. Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) also confirmed that the sequential explanatory mixed method

should be used when the researcher wants to form groups based on quantitative results and follow up with the groups through subsequent qualitative research or to use quantitative results about participant characteristics to guide purposeful sampling for the qualitative phase. It will be useful in explaining the mechanisms or reasons behind the resultant trends in childcare accessibility. The explanatory design according to Bradley et al. (2003) is well suited essentially when the research requires qualitative data to explain quantitative significant (or non-significant) results, positive-performing exemplars, outlier results, or surprising results.

The philosophical assumptions behind the explanatory design suggest that the research problem requires greater emphasis to be placed on the quantitative aspects of the research. Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) advised that, rather than assuming a post-positivist orientation as dictated by the method, it is quite possible to shift to a constructivist assumption which values multiple perspectives and in-depth descriptions in the qualitative phase as required in this study.

The process typically is two-phased and sequential. The first stage involves the design and implementation of the quantitative strand including collection and analysis of the quantitative data. The next stage is the point of interface/connection for mixing elements of both phases, through identification of specific quantitative results that call for additional explanation and using these results to guide the development of the qualitative strand. Qualitative research questions are then developed and so are the purposeful sampling procedures and data collection protocols from the initial results generated from the quantitative data analysis.

Essentially, this suggests that the qualitative phase of this design is absolutely dependent on the quantitative results. The qualitative phase is implemented by collecting information from parents through in-depth interviews and analysing the information through coding and grouping of themes. Interpretation of the extent and ways in which the qualitative results explain and add insight into the quantitative results, and what overall is learned in response to the research questions and the study purpose will be established. One good benefit of the two-phase structure of the design is that it is straightforward to implement as the two methods are conducted in separate phases and collect only one data type at a time. The design also lends

itself to emergent approaches where the second phase can be designed based on what is learned from the initial quantitative phase. The structure of the design also allows for the report to be written sequentially as presented in subsequent sections.

Reiterating the discussions in this section, an explanatory sequential mixed methodological approach has been adopted to establish the behaviour and experience of parents when looking for childcare in England. The approach utilises both quantitative and qualitative methodologies which allows for large demographic and structural features of the families' social lives to be captured through the use of survey questionnaires in the quantitative phase and also for in-depth information relating to values, behaviour and experiences of parents to be captured through interviews in the qualitative phase. As suggested by Plano Clark (2010) when used together, qualitative and quantitative methods produce a complete knowledge to inform childcare theory and practice as the triangulation, convergence, corroboration and correspondence of results produces a comprehensive account of inquiry.

This research therefore leans towards a realist-pragmatic philosophical approach that however supplants the coherence of the pragmatist's qualities such as accuracy, scope and consistency with the realist perspective which considers and focuses on the complexity of social phenomenon by making allowance for values, experiences and interpretive meaning as it encompasses nature and places emphasis on making sense of parents information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare. In the next section, the phases of the research design are discussed extensively. Phase 1 looks into the administration of 500 survey questionnaires to parents of children aged between 0 and 16. The results are analysed to select parents for Phase 2 of the research, which explores in detail parents behaviour when looking for childcare through in-depth interviews.

## **Phase 1: Quantitative Research**

In this phase, four theoretical frameworks will be tested with the quantitative cross-sectional design using a social survey instrument in testing these hypotheses. These frameworks include the rational choice theory, role theory, information horizon theory and Dervin's (1983) sense making theory. Operationalisation measures will be devised for analysing these concepts and the cross-sectional research instrument to be used for this research would be through the distribution of self-completion questionnaires.

The first phase of this research predominantly involves the administering of quantitative questionnaires designed to gather broad data relating to the experiences of parents when looking for childcare as well as collecting information to help identify the barriers as perceived by parents. The core function of this phase within the overall methodological design is to contribute a breadth of data relating to the overall childcare seeking experience of parents and to help identify the relevant emerging phenomena within a relatively un-researched field. Once an appropriate focus has been identified, in-depth qualitative interviews will be conducted. Descriptive phenomenological data analysis will be used to explore, in relation to the identified focus, how searching for childcare became a meaningful exercise for parents.

### **Data Sampling**

Sampling for this study involves using a combination of sampling techniques, which involves using more than one sampling strategy in selecting people for the research strategy. According to Teddlie & Yu (2007), many qualitative studies reported in literature utilize two or more purposive sampling techniques due to the complexity of the issues being examined. This mostly involves combining well-established qualitative and quantitative techniques in creative ways to answer research questions posed by mixed methods research designs. Since it is impossible to justify a sample by knowing the size of the possible population, its variability and the sample according to variables; Dobbert (1982) suggests it is best to compromise by including a sample with reasonable variation in the phenomenon, settings and people.

According to Barbour (1998), as researchers use different methods, the object of the research could be viewed or construed in different ways as they play different roles, and have different relationships with the researched who are addressed or labelled as respondents, subjects, participants or informants. The objects of research in this study are parents and the terms “parents” and “participants” will be used interchangeably.

Probability sampling techniques will be used primarily in selecting parents to be surveyed in a random manner where the probability of inclusion for every member of the population is determinable (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Probability samples are usually used in quantitatively oriented studies to achieve a representation, which is the degree to which the sample accurately represents the entire population. Snowball sampling techniques will also be employed, as this is another practicable mode of tracing suitable participants for the study. Parents will be encouraged to introduce friends and family to complete the questionnaires.

### **Participant Selection Process**

The chosen methodology is based on the premise that each family is unique, each searching for relevant information that makes sense personally, and each expecting that their questions or problems when looking for childcare will be resolved within culturally appropriate and supportive systems, processes and settings. The research sample selection will seek to address the research questions through surveying parents in and around rural and urban areas. The sample would seek to incorporate gender, age, ethnicity, social economic status and family types.

In order to undertake this study adequately, it is important to locate a sample that suits the research, i.e. parents of children from birth to school age (0-16). This would include both single parents and two-parent families, parents who have children with disability or special educational needs families from ethnic minority groups, low-income and middle class families. Therefore, a sample of parents with the following criteria will be used as guidelines:

- Parents currently using informal childcare
- Parents currently using registered childcare
- Parents not working due to inability to find suitable childcare
- Parents who have used registered childcare in the past but no longer do
- Parents who look after their children

Lofland and Lofland (1984) believe that researchers are more likely to gain successful access to situations if they make use of contacts that can help remove barriers to entrance. Families using registered childcare will be sourced through family information services, childcare settings including preschools, nurseries, children centres, out of school clubs etc. The age range of birth to 16 (0-16) will be covered. Parents of children from birth to two year olds can be recruited from nurseries and toddler groups. Pre-schoolers' parents will be sourced through preschools and some day nurseries and parents of school-aged children will be sourced from schools and after-school clubs.

Families using informal care are sourced through health visitors, children centres, doctors' surgeries and supermarkets. Word of mouth will play a key role in this area as this category poses to be the most difficult to locate. However, for school aged children, school gates are places to find friends and families supporting each other. Survey questionnaires were sent to families using other forms of childcare including childminders.

For families not working due to their inability to find suitable childcare, Jobcentre Plus, Benefit Offices and Children Centres are strategic locations to meet these families. Word of mouth will also be crucial in recruiting this cohort, as some immigrants are not eligible to receive benefits and would not necessarily visit these centres. This suggests that unemployed parents from ethnic minority groups may have to be sourced through other avenues including engagement with community gatekeepers and networks.

Recruiting parents who no longer use registered childcare for different reasons can only be achieved through a selection process, which could be an interview, or

through the completion of the survey questionnaire. It is anticipated that the various reasons for no longer using childcare would be identified, and this in itself will demonstrate parents' childcare behaviour. This would also provide a platform to explore the various reasons identified, and how the decision has impacted on family circumstances.

The main ethos of the research is to understand the behaviour of parents when looking for childcare, their experiences, which would impact their attitude and behaviour towards childcare and the principles, or values, which determine their choices. Participants in this research will be families with children from birth to 16 years, since the official childcare age ends at age 16. Parents who have or are using childcare including those not using any form of childcare will be sourced to participate in this research. The aim is to be able to explore how parents seek the best solution for their families, the issues they had when seeking childcare, their experiences of childcare and how parental attachment to the child is affected when the parent has to leave their child with a childcare provider.

The research design commenced with recruitment letters sent out to parents through Jobcentre Plus, nurseries and preschools, schools, children centres, community centres interested in taking part in the research. At this stage, it is assumed that at least 500 questionnaires will be administered in order to validate the integrity of the research and have a broad understanding of parents' information seeking behaviour across the country. The letter will outline the aims and objectives of the research and parents will be invited to sign up as participants. Follow-up telephone calls will be made to those selected from the representative sample for interviews and selection will be by random purposive sampling. It is essential that those selected for interview would fit the profile of those identified as fitting the guidelines and sample criteria for this thesis.



## **Data Collection**

Data was collected quantitatively from surveys and qualitatively from interviews to ascertain parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare. Secondary data in the form of national childcare cost information will be sourced to enrich the study. The purpose of collecting data from three different sources is a data triangulation usually used to complement or validate data based on the findings (Arksey & Knight, 1999, Bloor, 1997; Holloway, 1997). In the first phase of this study, survey questionnaire is the main research instrument. This section discusses questionnaires as the research instrument and how this would be used in this research. Also reviewed are the known limitations of this research instrument and how the risks posed by these limitations could be mitigated.

### ***The Survey Questionnaire***

Although a common complaint to reviews of information seeking behaviour literature is that survey questionnaires are overused, their popularity springs from their strengths which includes their economy and standardisation of data and their potential for reaching reclusive audiences and also encouraging candid responses (Babbie, 2005). Questionnaires are regarded as one of the main instruments for gathering data using the survey design and are still an appropriate and valid approach to research problems that require the study of large populations (Bryman, 2008; Case, 2002). Therefore, questionnaires are used as the first stage in this research to gather information from parents about their use of childcare, attitude, seeking behaviours and choices.

Findings from the survey will be used as the basis for the selection of a purposive sample for in-depth semi-structured interviews to access more detailed information about behavioural issues impacting on the choice of childcare and the outcomes for the children, parents and the family. Self-completed questionnaires will be sent to 500 respondents to capture pertinent information about their childcare types, family types, ages, ethnicity, social economic status and other related information. In selecting the design of the research and the instrument to be utilised, the self-completed questionnaire was chosen as it is cheaper to administer across the geographical area being researched – which is fairly large and dispersed.

Reaching 500 respondents through a structured interview could be quite challenging and time-consuming, a challenge which could be surmounted by distributing questionnaires through various distribution points and local authority's Family Information Services. Self-completed questionnaires will be targeted to parents of all children from birth to 16 (0-16 years). Self-completed questionnaire has been known to be free of interviewer bias in relation to issues such as ethnicity, gender and the social background of the interviewer as these may bring bias to the answers respondents provide. In line with this opinion, Sudman and Bradburn (1982) suggested that respondents may want to exhibit social desirability when an interviewer is present, but a questionnaire would allow the respondents to express who they really are on paper. Although Bryman (2008) argues that self-disclosure is higher in questionnaires than interviews, this largely depends on how skilled the interviewer is in asking 'probing' questions without being seen to be intrusive. Self-completed questionnaires also tend not to suffer from interviewer variability in asking questions in different ways. Even if it is just one person interviewing respondents, consistency in the way and manner questions are asked could be difficult to achieve. In addition, questionnaires also have the added advantage of convenience to respondents as they can be completed whenever the respondents want and at their own pace (Bryman, 2008).

Like any other research instrument, self-completed questionnaire does have its own limitations. Assuming they are completed in isolation, there would be no one present to help respondents with understanding difficult questions, which is why the questions asked in this research would be clear, and unambiguous; all efforts would be made to ensure the questionnaire is easy to complete and self-explanatory.

The most damaging limitation to surveys is the typical low response rate often known with postal surveys – most of the reasons why has been highlighted in the previous paragraph. However, the implications of low response rate are of high importance as the validity and integrity of the research is determined by the significance of the sample population. According to Bryman (2008), response rates are quite important as the lower the response rate the more the questions likely to be raised about the representation of the achieved sample. The researcher also claims higher response rate can be guaranteed if the research issue is salient to the respondent, but if this is

not the case, questions may be perceived as boring and risk the questionnaire not been completed. The most logical way to avoid this would be to ensure that the questions asked are generally important and interesting to respondents.

Arguably, some parents who do not use childcare may not want to complete the questionnaire unless they are made to realise that their views are indeed important to this study and would contribute to policy and intellectual knowledge. Incentives are offered in the form of an automatic inclusion in a prize draw on completion of the prize draw and based on acceptance to participate in the next phase of the study. Ethical issues surrounding the use of incentives are further discussed in the Ethics section.

Questionnaires were piloted with five families (before sending them out to all respondents) in order to avoid omission of questions and to ensure all errors are corrected prior to roll out. It is also expected that the questionnaire will be seen as a tool for raising awareness and impacting knowledge, which is otherwise unavailable to respondents, therefore generating a higher response rate.

Further steps to be taken to improve response rate would be adopted from Bryman (2008) to include a good covering letter explaining the aims and objectives of the research, why it is important and why the respondents have been selected to participate. Follow up procedures would be in place to ensure non-respondents are sent reminders with another copy of the questionnaire wherever possible. Also, since it has been established that people's attention span does vary, the questions asked will be clear and straightforward, and repetition would be avoided so respondents do not lose interest.

Since it has been proven that design and layout of the questionnaire increase response rates, the questionnaire designed for this research would have clear instructions and an attractive layout. Obviously, easy questions and other questions that are likely to be of interest to respondents would be arranged at the beginning of the questionnaire which would have both closed and open questions so respondents can express themselves further should they wish to. Steps would also be made to ensure that completed questionnaires are confidentially protected and that this

information is passed on to respondents from the outset to dispel fears and counter the risk of bias.

The main issues facing this research would be how families whose first language is not English would be able to complete the questionnaires and effectively participate in the research. Options available include having an interpreter to support the respondents through the completion of the questionnaires and during in-depth interviews. Another option would be to translate the questionnaires to such respondents' languages. However, translating the questionnaires into different languages could be an expensive venture and would have to be justified. Realistically, the first option of using the services of an interpreter would be a better solution to engaging these families, but this presents issues of interpreter bias, which needs to be factored into the results of the research.

Closed and open questions will be used in this research in order to understand the behaviour behind parents' information seeking actions. According to Bryman (2008), open questions would encourage respondents to answer in their own words and expressions, and do not restrict them to the options provided by the researcher. Also, it allows for spontaneity on the part of the respondent and unusual responses not contemplated by the researcher could otherwise be lost without open questions (Vinten, 1995). Salient issues are explored through open questions as the research taps into respondents experience and knowledge of childcare, which could differ from practitioners' perspective or even the policy-making bodies. Open questions in questionnaires are known to serve as a trajectory for exploring new areas in which researchers have little knowledge or experience (Schuman & Presser, 1979), and it is hoped that this research will open up routes to better understanding of parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare. At this stage it would be beneficial to discuss briefly the benefits and limitations closed and open questions present to this research.

Open questions as already mentioned, allow for spontaneity and open the door for further exploration of knowledge and understanding. However Griffiths et al (1999) claims that if not properly managed they could be time consuming and could also present problems to coding as it would involve reading through all the answers and

developing various themes to suit different codes hence making data analysis very difficult (data analysis will be discussed in subsequent sections). Sometimes, respondents could be put off the idea of having to write extensively about a topic; but this depends largely on the topic of discussion, as people often want their opinion to be heard as long as the issue is salient to them. Therefore, open questions will be kept to a minimum, leaving further details to be addressed at the interview stage. But where used, the questions will capture salient issues that all parents would be able to identify with.

Regarding closed questions in this research, apart from the fact that these are easier to answer for respondents, they are actually also easier to code by the researcher as codes are mostly automatically generated from the selected answers. Closed questions would help to clarify the meaning of a question for respondents from the likely answers provided, hence nullifying the risk of not being able to interpret questions and potential bias (Schuman & Presser, 1979). The only downside to closed questions is the lack of spontaneity in respondents' answers as the answers are limited to those provided by the researcher.

In this research, much effort would be made to have very few open questions and more closed questions that would generate more information to inform the next stage of the research and potentially influence the selection of respondents chosen for the qualitative in-depth interviews. Essentially, the questionnaire and the quantitative methodology in itself would be used for tapping large structural features of social life interplaying with parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare.

### **Data Collection Technology**

In this section, a thorough evaluation of the technologies that used in collecting and recording data is discussed as well as the justification for using the collection method. The research instruments used for data collection are invariably linked to the forms of technologies utilised at the different phases of data collection. Questionnaires or surveys are the main research instruments for the first phase of this research and are completed by respondents themselves. Surveys are always used for their cost advantages and quick administration to collect information about a

large structural audience. The most common and traditional technology used for distributing questionnaires has been by mail but recent technologies now include web or online survey and email surveys. Researchers have been known to utilise more than one of these technologies in collecting data and sometimes the best way to contact people would be to use more of these methods. For this research, it has been decided that web surveys and mail surveys including post and email, will be used in distributing questionnaires to prospective participants.

As exemplified by Internet usages such as emailing and surfing, electronic surveys have become one of the most popular Internet applications. Kwak and Radler (2002) reported the results of a study which compared mail and web-based survey for which emails were used to send cover letter to respondents. The researchers confirmed that Internet based surveys via email or web has brought many important advantages including reduction in research costs and efficient survey administration in terms of time and resource management. Although one of the major limitations of using questionnaire surveys has been the response rate, Gutterbock et al. (2000), in assessing response patterns declared a higher response rate for web based surveys when compared to traditional mail survey.

Email and web based surveys fare better than mail surveys in terms of response speed or time required for the survey to be returned (Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). According to Kiesler and Sproull (1986), mail surveys suffer from low response rates as a result of other trivial and burdensome tasks which participants have to perform to return the questionnaire such as enveloping and mailing which ultimately may hinder a prompt response after completion; in comparison to their web counterpart who only have to click on the 'send' button.

The justification would have been to use the web/online surveys and emails only, however studies on new technology adoption reveal that adopters of computer technology and the Internet tend to be more affluent, better educated and younger than non-adopters (Atkins et al, 1998). This in itself suggests that demographic groups who are more likely to be early adopters of Internet technology are more willing to participate in a survey that is based on technology. In support, Couper et al. (1999) reported that males and those with more education are more likely to respond

by emails than by mail. Hence it is expected that those who are disposed towards adopting new technology such as men, young mothers and the more educated are more likely to use web survey than mail survey.

Kwak and Radler (2002) in their research tested for potential respondent technology-related uneasiness including computer anxiety or perceived difficulty in completing online questionnaires and concluded that this may be responsible for lower response rates in electronic surveys. This essentially suggests that those who are not very familiar with using the Internet may be unintentionally excluded from the research. Therefore, the research would aim to accommodate the need of all age groups by utilising both web/online survey and mail surveys.

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

Once the information from the questionnaires is collated, it will be transformed into quantifiable data. Closed questions such as people's ages, gender, incomes, ethnicity and other demographics will be quantified, whilst open questions will be coded through translation into numbers to facilitate the quantitative analysis of the data. Since answers to open questions are always received in an unstructured format, these need to be grouped and categorised in order to analyse the data and make sense of the information (Dohrenwend, 1965). Open questions are post-coded based on themes, whereas closed questions are pre-coded depending on the assigned categories to each questions

Data analysis for this mixed methods research involves analysing separately the quantitative data using quantitative methods and qualitative data using qualitative methods. It also involves analysing both sets of information using techniques that mix the quantitative and qualitative data to produce the mixed methods analysis. These analyses will be in response to the research questions and hypotheses already outlined in previous chapters. The six stages of data analysis to be discussed in this section include: Data Preparation, Data Exploration, Data Scrutiny, Data Representation, Data Interpretation and Data Validation.

### ***Data Preparation***

In this stage, quantitative data analysis commences with the conversion of raw data into a useful format by assigning numeric values to each response and creating special variables that will be needed for recoding and computing new variables. The coding and recoding are completed with SPSS a statistical computer programme. A code book as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2011) is developed to list the variables. The definitions and numbers associated with the response options for each variable will also be developed.

### ***Data Exploration***

This involves examining the data to develop broad trends and determine the shape of the distribution. Essentially, this includes reading through the data, making notes and developing an understanding of the data. For the quantitative phase data analysis, data will be inspected and descriptive analysis will be conducted to give the mean, standard deviation and variance. This will be used to determine the trend of the data and the distribution in order to select the right statistical approach for analysis. Quality of scores from the survey is used to assess reliability and validity (to be discussed in another section). Descriptive statistics will be generated from both dependent and independent variables. This process would basically help to organise data and facilitate agreement and consistency.

A series of measures are to provide scope for thoroughly analysing the data. Initially, frequencies will be gathered on each variable contained within the information seeking behaviour research. The data file is divided into two groups, namely: Childcare usage and Non-childcare usage. Maximal variation sampling strategy will be used to select one participant per group which would allow for the preservation of multiple perspectives based on critical demographics (Creswell, 2009). Participants who display different dimensions on the following demographic characteristics: age, gender, location and family status will be selected to participate in the next phase.



## Interim Phase: Instrument Development

The goal of this phase is to identify the potential predictive power of selected variables on parents' information seeking behaviour and to allow for purposefully selecting participants for the second phase of the study. The inferences and experiences highlighted in Phase 1 are further explored and investigated with in-depth interviews in Phase 2. The research methodology for this study is a sequential explanatory mixed methods approach, which essentially recruits participants for the next phase of the study from the results of the first phase. According to Hanson et al. (2005), in mixed methods sequential designs, the quantitative and qualitative phases are connected in the interim or intermediate stage when the results of the data analysis in the first phase of the study inform or guide the data collection in the second phase. Ivankova et al. (2009) in agreement with previous descriptions also describe this phase as where the researcher connects the two phases while selecting participants for the qualitative follow-up analysis based on the results of the first phase.

Case selection in the mixed methods sequential design includes exploring typical cases or following up with outlier or extreme cases (Morse, 1991). Although, Ivankova et al. (2009) claim there are no established guidelines as to how a researcher should proceed with selecting participants for the next phase, they suggested using the following as a basis: 1. significant results, 2. Non-significant results, 3. outliers and 4. group differences. Creswell & Plano Clark (2011) on the other hand claim that the first step after quantitative data analysis is to examine the results to see which ones are unclear, or unexpected and require further information as they believe it will help clarify a theory. They then suggested a somewhat similar set of results that might be worth following up, including: 1. Statistically significant results, 2. Statistically non-significant results 3. Key significant predictors, 4. Variables that distinguish between groups, 5. Outlier or extreme cases, or distinguishing demographic characteristics. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, strategies to be used to follow from the quantitative results will be based on Creswell and Plano Clark (2011)'s suggestion which in addition to what was suggested by Ivankova et al. (2009), also included another group: key significant predictors.

Apart from deciding what results to follow up, participants to be studied for the qualitative follow up phase are also selected in this interim stage. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) are of the opinion that the quantitative results, which become the focus of the qualitative strand, will suggest who these participants might be. Although the researchers are of the view that asking participants to volunteer for the next phase is a weak approach, they suggested a systemic approach which uses quantitative statistical results to direct the follow-up sampling procedure to select participants best able to explain the phenomenon. Essentially, results that need further information will be identified in this phase and these guides the design of the qualitative research questions, sample selection and data collection questions. More in-depth data was collected through 35 in-depth interviews in the second phase to answer the research questions raised in the theoretical framework underpinning this work. This information will be analysed using a grounded theory approach. Selection will be based on matching the sample criteria, unique family circumstances (e.g. disability), family structure and ethnicity as discussed in subsequent sections.

## Phase 2: Qualitative Research

Achieving an in-depth understanding of the experiences of parents when looking for childcare is possible by adopting an approach that allows for probing and seeing through the eyes and experiences of parents themselves. A rather more textured analysis of the dynamics of work, childcare and family; and the different impacts the seeking behaviour has on mothers, fathers and the family in general would be sought through this methodology. More descriptive details are evidently always available through qualitative research as such details captured and recorded, would be quite valuable in understanding parents' behaviour and will provide useful a context of parents' behaviour when looking for childcare.

Geertz (1973) recommends the qualitative approach because of its ability to capture minute details of information including provision of descriptions of social settings, events and even individuals through probing. It is based on this emphasis on details that the interactions between the people and their social environment can be rationalised and discussed within a research setting. This essentially translates that we cannot understand the behaviour of members of a social group other than in terms of the social environment in which they operate. Behaviour, which may seem irrational or odd can make perfect sense when understood in the context of the environment in which it occurred. In this milieu, choosing random purposive sampling of parents from different localities confirms Bryman (2008)'s perspective in conducting qualitative research in more than one setting as it supports the identification of significance of context and the way it influences behaviour and ways of thinking when looking for childcare. Closely related to the aforementioned is the ability of qualitative research to view social life in terms of processes. Its capability to show how events and patterns unfold overtime conveys a strong sense of change and flux. This is quite crucial for this research as the semi-structured interview is expected to support participants in reflecting on the processes leading up to and following the event of choosing childcare. Unlike survey interview, which is more or less a one-way process of the interviewer extracting information from the interviewee, the qualitative interview facilitates a high level of rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee through face-to-face contact which is quite important to achieving the objectives of this research (Oakley, 1981).

The level of interaction is also higher in comparison to participant observation method which interviewees sometimes find intrusive. The flexibility offered by this approach cannot be overemphasised as its limited structure lends itself to research that require seeing things from the people's perspectives and allows for genuinely adopting the world view of the parents being studied without much restriction. The fact that highly specific research questions are not deemed necessary makes the methodology appealing for researches requiring some flexibility as it would allow the researcher to immerse themselves into the family social setting with a fairly general research focus of childcare in mind and gradually formulating a narrower emphasis on the parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare. This flexible approach makes it possible for changes to be made to the methodology as required. This does not however suggest a lack of commitment or consistency to the methods already chosen, but proposes that should the need arise to adjust the framework to suit the desired outcomes; the flexibility to achieve this is already integrated.

### **Data Sampling**

Sampling for the second phase of the research is mainly by purposive sampling as the findings of the survey will influence the basis for selecting participants. In defining purposive sampling, Maxwell (1997) describes it as a type of sampling in which the units or cases of study are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that could not have been achieved through other choices. In any given research, individuals or groups of individuals are selected based on specific purposes associated with answering one or more research questions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). During the first phase of the research, participants were asked if they were prepared to be part of the next phase of the research and if they would be happy to be contacted and interviewed by telephone to allow the researcher probe into the phenomenon under study more deeply; and for other questions which could not be asked in the survey to be addressed. Participants for this phase are selected purposively to reflect a variety of orientations to childcare use and behaviour; and are to be interviewed by telephone using a semi structured approach. Poorman (2002) adopted a similar approach by utilising a multiple qualitative techniques in the

same study, where participants were selected using four different types of purposive sampling in combination with one another.

The combination of both probability and purposive sampling techniques (from the quantitative and qualitative phases) basically confers mixed methods strategies on this study as the techniques uniquely increase both external validity and transferability despite their differences. According to Teddlie & Yu (2007), although both designed to provide a sample that will answer the research questions under investigation, utilising purposive sampling in this study design allows for a small number of individual interviews to yield the most information about a parent's information seeking behaviour whereas the probability sample is planned to select a large number of parents that are collectively representative of the population of interest thereby neutralising the issue of generalizability.

As Patton (2002) stated, the classic methodological trade-off between both techniques is that purposive sampling would lead to a greater depth of information from a smaller number of carefully selected cases, whereas probability sampling would lead to a greater breadth of information from a larger number of units selected to be representative of the population. Combining both orientations basically allows the generation of complementary databases that can include information that has both depth and breadth regarding parents' childcare seeking behaviour.

### **Participant Selection**

According to Giorgi (2009), the selection of participants is the initial step in the data gathering process and Boyd (2001) regards 2-10 participants as sufficient for a phenomenological study. This view is supported by Creswell (1998) who suggested long interviews with up to 10 people. However, Englander (2012) believes that the different purposes of the research (being quantitative or qualitative phenomenological) also determines the differences in procedures for evaluating the generality of the results in relation to how many participants are needed for a study. Therefore, if a researcher has a qualitative purpose and a qualitative research question, he or she seeks knowledge of the content of the experience, often in depth, to seek the meaning of a phenomenon, not "how many" people who have

experienced such phenomena, as generalisability is not the issue with qualitative research. In the same vein, Giorgi (2009:198-199) points out that: “Research based upon depth strategies should not be confused with research based upon sampling strategies” and therefore suggested “5-20 participants based on the notion that may most likely result in more work for the researcher and better appreciation for variation of the phenomenon, rather than better generality of the results.” Based on these facts, and the demographics of the areas to be researched, 35 semi-structured interviews will be conducted in the qualitative phase of this study.

In order to ensure an ethical research, informed consent was sought from all participants (Holloway 1997; Kvale, 1996). To this effect, a specific informed consent agreement will be developed to gain consent from participants at the onset of participation. This is based on the recommendation by Bailey (1996) for an informed consent to include the following:

- That they are participating in the research
- The purpose of the research
- The procedures of the research
- The risks and benefits of the research
- The voluntary nature of research participation
- The participants right to stop the research at any time
- The procedures used to protect confidentiality

The informed consent is explained to participants at the beginning of each interview, and those not willing to sign the form are not pressurised to participate in the study. The interview methods are discussed in the next section.

### **The Interview Method – Phenomenological Interviews**

The purpose of the qualitative research interview is to contribute to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical and is based on the meanings that life experiences hold for the interviewees. Michler (1979:10) argues that these meanings must be viewed within the social context in which it occurs. For the purpose of this

study in-depth interview techniques will be critical to capturing parent's experiences when looking for childcare and their information seeking behaviour. Essentially, individual in-depth interviews would allow the interviewer to delve deeply into social and personal matters.

Qualitative interviews have been categorised in a variety of ways, with many contemporary texts loosely differentiating qualitative interviews as unstructured, semi-structured and structured. Although researchers try to create distinction between unstructured and semi-structured interviews, the differentiation seems vague and could be classified as artificial as it combines strategies that historically have emerged from very different disciplines and traditions. According to DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006), semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research and can occur either with an individual or in groups. They are generally organised around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewees. Gordon (1998) in an exploration of the interview process highlights the need for a co-creation of meaning between the researcher and the researched through a reflexive and joint authored approach that essentially typifies a phenomenological interview approach.

While all interviews are used to get to know the interviewee better, the purpose of the research varies according to the research question and the disciplinary perspective of the researcher. Whereas, some types of research are designed to test a priori hypotheses, often using a very structured interviewing format in which the stimulus (questions) and analyses are standardised, other types seek to explore meaning and perceptions to gain a better understanding and/or generate hypotheses. The hypotheses testing research describes the first phase of this research using survey questionnaires as the research instrument. The second phase will explore parent's perceptions of childcare and also seek to give a better understanding of their childcare seeking behaviour.

The research instrument will be through conducting phenomenological semi-structured qualitative interviewing which encourages the interviewee to share rich descriptions of a phenomenon while leaving the interpretation or analysis to the

investigators (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). As postulated by Marshall & Rossman (2011 p 91) - '*Human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to them is understood*'. Studies focussing on individuals' lived experiences require the need to understand the deeper perspectives of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and assumptions involved, which are better captured through face-to-face interaction and sometimes observation in the natural setting.

The nature of this study can be described as phenomenological as it seeks "to understand an experience from the participants' point of view" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). The focus is on the parents' perceptions of the process of looking for childcare or the situation and this study tries to answer the question of the experience. The essence of this type of study is the search for "the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the *intentionality of consciousness* where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on the memory, image, and meaning" (Creswell 1998:52).

The interview is considered the main method of data collection in a phenomenological research as it provides a situation where the participants descriptions can be explored, illuminated and gently probed (Kvale, 1996). As with most phenomenological studies, the researcher's connection, experience, or stake in the situation needs to be *bracketed* with all prejudgements set aside from the research (Creswell, 1998). However, Polit and Hungler (1991) believe that the subjective judgement of the researcher is actually valuable and should not be separated from the research as this gives a deeper context to the research. Jasper (1994:331) also believes that the use of reflection, clarification, requests for examples, gentle probing and conveyance of interest through listening techniques are essential to the effectiveness of interviews.

Creswell (1998) suggests the procedural format for this type of study is writing the research questions that explore the meaning of the experience, conducting the interviews, analysing the data to find the *clusters of meanings*, and ending with a report that furthers the readers understanding of the essential structure of the experience. Therefore, as a phenomenological study, this research collects data that lead to identifying common themes in people's behaviour and perceptions of their



experiences when looking for childcare. For this study, data is collected through in-depth interviews in order to understand patterns of behaviour and interpret parents' perception of the meaning of childcare, and their experience when seeking childcare.

According to Welman and Kruger (1999), phenomenological studies are more or less concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the people involved. Similarly, this research is more concerned with the lived experiences of parents currently using childcare, or who have used childcare in the past and the way we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. Derived from the German philosophy of phenomenology, this approach atypically would involve several long, in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest, which in this case is childcare.

In describing people's lived experiences, Husserl (1970) argues that people can be certain about how things appear in or present themselves in their consciousness, and to arrive at certainty, anything outside the immediate experience must be ignored. In this way, the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness (Eagleton, 1983; Fouche, 1993). According to Marshall & Rossman (2011) the primary advantage of phenomenological interviewing is that it permits an explicit focus on the researcher's personal experience in combination with that of the participant. As part of the ongoing person, the researcher would have written a full description of his or her own experience thereby bracketing off their experience from those of the interviewees, but also enabling the researcher to gain clarity from his or her own perspective without being judgemental (Patton, 1990) as discussed in the positionality section.

Holloway (1997) believes the researcher's epistemology is literally her theory of knowledge, which serves to decide how the social phenomena will be studied. In this instance, the belief is that data is contained in the perspectives and experiences of parents when looking for childcare information, and it is beneficial for the researcher to adopt a phenomenologist non-prescriptive techniques and reluctance to focus on specific steps (Holloway, 1997; Hycner, 1999); and be more interested in the nuances of the experiences of the parents under study. Therefore the interview technique will more or less focus on the deep lived meanings that looking for childcare have for

parents individually assuming that these meanings would guide actions and interactions with using childcare in the future. As elaborated by Patton (2002), this approach seeks to explore, describe and analyse the meaning of individual lived experience: how they perceive it, describe it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it to others.

Selecting the in-depth interview method for data collection research was down to quite a few reasons. The methodology has always advocated for seeing issues through the eyes of the people being studied (Bryman, 2008). Lofland and Lofland (1995) also supports research that views events and the social world through the eyes of the people being studied. Bryman argues that the social world should be interpreted from the perspective of the people being studied rather than as though the subjects were incapable of their own reflection on their social world. Previous government assessment on information provision for parents has been based on process and systems ignoring the user's experience and human perspectives.

According to Lofland and Lofland (1995), face-to-face interaction is the fullest condition in the mind of another human being, and researchers must participate in the mind of another human being to acquire such knowledge. Bryman (2008) in support claims that the empathetic stance of seeing through the eyes of research participants is very much in tune with interpretivism and also demonstrates the epistemological links with phenomenology and symbolic interactions. Mishna (2004) made a strong argument for qualitative study while conducting interviews with children and parents about bullying. She posits that such research needs a qualitative methodology to capture context, personal interpretation and experience. She further establishes that qualitative data privileges individuals lived experiences and will increase our understanding of the views of parents as key to developing effective information and childcare interventions. As very little is known about the dynamics of parents' information seeking behaviour this study seeks to explore through interviews, parents' perspectives and personal interpretation of their experiences when trying to identify the problematic issues ensuing when looking for childcare.

## **Interview design**

The research design centres on an interview-based research of the experience of thirty-five (35) parents when looking for childcare in England. In-depth semi-structured interviews will be conducted with parents to capture their childcare information seeking behaviours, their experiences, the emotive feelings involved and behaviour. The mixed method approach has been selected purely on the basis of the fact that it utilises both qualitative and quantitative methodologies that would allow for large structural features of social life to be tapped by quantitative methods (questionnaire) and for small behavioural aspects such as emotions to be addressed by qualitative research.

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) in their study on qualitative research, note that individual in-depth interviews are widely used by researchers to co-create meaning with interviewees by reconstructing perceptions of events and experience. Most commonly, they are only conducted once for an individual or a group, and take between thirty minutes to several hours to complete depending on the complexity of the questions and nature of the project.

To capture parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare and their perceptions and experience during the process, individual in-depth interviews will be arranged by telephone and respondents will be allowed the flexibility to choose when and where would be convenient for them to be interviewed. Ideally, it would be best to use children centres or Jobcentre Plus offices, but choosing neutral location or somewhere natural and relaxing for the participant will remove barriers and unwanted bias. Therefore, home, workplace or any other convenient location will be suggested to participants.

Besides traditional face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews are gaining popularity. The use of telephony technology and computer-assisted telephone interviewing to record interviews has also been on the increase their cost-effectiveness and ease of accessibility (Bryman 2008; Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Although a further advantage is that the remoteness of the interviewer in telephone interviews removes personal bias in terms of class or ethnicity which may influence interviewee's responses, the same remoteness could however be a

limitation as the interviewer cannot effectively engage in observation of the participant see or sense body language (Winther, 2008). Furthermore, as Frey (2004) noted, the length of telephone interviews is also a barrier as it is not sustainable beyond 20-25minutes, whereas face-to-face interviews can last much longer. It is mainly for reasons of harnessing in-depth information from parents and distance issues and practicalities that this research would focus mainly on telephone interview. Bryman (2008) cited the example of conducting telephone interviews and alluded to its success. However, emails and social media will be used for raising awareness and recruiting respondents for the snowball and purposive sampling.

Recorded semi-structured interviews lasting no longer than one hour will be scheduled with each parent. Parents will be interviewed to assess behaviour, perceptions and experiences from male and female perspectives, how decisions are made and how gender impacts on the decision making process. All participants receive a letter explaining the aims of the research, data protection guidelines that will be reiterated at the beginning and end of the interview. Each interview will begin and conclude with a standard script. At the end of the interview participants will be asked if they have any questions, which will be answered as honestly as possible. A 'thank-you' letter will be sent to participants following the interview. Confidentiality of the interviews will be reiterated, and contact details of the researcher are shared with the participants to make contact should they have any questions or concerns about the study.

### **Nature of the Interview**

Questions are directed to the participants' experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about childcare (Wellman & Krueger, 1979). Although the enquiry is conducted from the researcher's perspective, phenomenologists believe that the researcher cannot be detached from his or her own presuppositions and should not pretend otherwise therefore nullifying issues of researcher bias. The aim of this study is to focus on what goes on within the participants and get them to describe their lived experiences of childcare with words that best describes their experiences, reflecting how they perceived the situation and circumstances. Milner and Crabtree

(1992) also suggested that researchers 'bracket' misconceptions and enter into the individuals' life-world and use the self as an experiencing interpreter.

As elaborated by Bailey (1996), the interview is a conscious attempt by the researcher to find out more information about the setting and environment of the person. It is intended that the interviews in this study will be reciprocal with researcher and participants engaging in dialogue. Kvale (1996) describes this act (interview) as an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest, where the researcher attempts to understand the world from the participants' viewpoint to unfold meaning of people's experiences.

### **Interview Process**

The in-depth interview is meant to be a personal and intimate encounter in which open, direct, and verbal questions are used to elicit detailed narratives and stories (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006). Hence, the first stage of the interview process is to build a positive relationship and rapport with the interviewee. This involves building respect and trust for the interviewee as they are volunteering information about their life, experiences and behaviour. It also means providing a safe and comfortable environment for the interviewee to share their experiences (Bryman, 2008). It is very important that rapport is built early on at the outset of the interview as this would facilitate a 'free-flow' of information between both parties. Spradley (1979) divided the stages of rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee into four including apprehension, exploration, co-operation and participation. These are further discussed in the subsequent sub-sections:

#### ***Apprehension Stage***

Each interview begins with an explanation of the aims of the research and an assurance of data protection. At the onset of the interview the format of the interview is discussed with participants and basic and easier questions about themselves and family life are asked first. The strategy is aimed at two main things: to help relax the respondents, and also to aid the memory of the researcher. This essentially would help alleviate the initial apprehension phase as described by DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) which is characterised by uncertainty stemming from the strangeness of a context in which the interviewer and interviewee are new. The main

goal of this phase is to get the interviewee talking and the first question should be broad and open-ended, reflecting the nature of the research and should be non-threatening (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Hoepfl (1997) suggested that prior to any interview, the researcher should have a guide or interview schedule. She described this interview guide or "schedule" as a list of questions or general topics that the interviewer wants to explore during each interview. This will be prepared to insure that basically the same information is obtained from each person, even though no predetermined responses are expected. According to Hoepfl, "interview guides ensure good use of limited interview time; they make interviewing multiple subjects more systematic and comprehensive; and they help to keep interactions focused". In analysing the versatility of interview guides, (Lofland & Lofland, 1984) indicated these can be modified over time to focus attention on areas of particular importance, or to exclude questions the researcher has found to be unproductive for the goals of the research.

Therefore, for this research in-depth interview commences with a set of pre-determine questions to cover childcare strategies, options and experiences, work-life balance, attitudes towards childcare, costs, attitude towards new technology and other information sharing channels, social networks and family lifestyle. Questions are arranged in a logical sequence order proceeding from simple and straightforward questions to more complex, in-depth questions. Throughout the interview, the goal of the interviewer is to encourage the interviewee to share as much information as possible, unselfconsciously and in their own words.

### ***Exploratory***

The next stage of the interview is characterised by learning, listening, and testing which engenders a sense of bonding and sharing between the interviewer and interviewee. This is described as the exploratory stage by DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006). This bonding progresses to a cooperative phase whereby both parties develop a common ground for information sharing.

### ***Co-operatory***

In this phase, a level of relationship has been developed which allows for questions to be asked freely without the fear of offence (Bryman, 2008). In this stage, interviewees have been known to ask questions which allow them to further make sense of the researcher's world, reasons behind the research and sometimes personal questions about the researcher. Spradley (1979) describes this stage as the best stage to ask the interviewee the sensitive questions that would have seemed awkward to ask at the beginning of the interview.

### ***Participatory***

The last stage of rapport is the participatory stage in which the interviewee takes on the role of a guide to the interviewer and is the highest level of the process. Although the structure of in-depth interview traditionally expects the interviewer to be in control of the interaction but with the interviewer's co-operation, in this stage, there could be a role reversal, whereby the interviewee takes control without inhibition and, with co-operation from the interviewer, takes the researcher through his/her experience and sometimes provides more insights for the research which may not have been thought of by the researcher. This essentially is where the choice of a flexible methodological approach is beneficial as it allows the researcher to incorporate new findings without deviating from the methodology or compromising the integrity and robustness of the research.

### **Data Recording**

One of the main focal points for an interview process is how to record data. Data recording strategies that fit the setting and the participants' sensitivities are utilised with the participants consent. Hoepfl (1997) believes that although this largely depends on researcher preference, it is essential for the strategy adopted to ensure that the focus should be on capturing data and for the researcher to concentrate on the interview. The main methods for capturing information during an interview are by written notes or recordings. Hoepfl (1997) claims the use of either is down to personal preferences. Some researchers including Patton (1990) believe the tape recorder is invaluable to any interview as it fully captures the interview. Others including Lincoln & Guba (1985) simply would not recommend the use of recordings as they find it intrusive and the possibility of a technical failure poses a significant

threat to the research. However, Hoepfl (1997) believes recordings have the advantage of capturing data more faithfully than hurriedly written notes might, and can make it easier for the researcher to focus on the interview.

With reference to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), the most commonly used technology for interviews is a recorder to capture the interview for transcription purposes. Voice capture and recording software and computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) are examples of technologies used for interviewing. In person interviews can also make use of PDA, laptops and tablet computers for guidance as well as to record information. According to Bryman (2008) the growing use of computer assisted personal interviews (CAPI) has been due to increased portability and affordability of laptop computers and the growth in the number and quality of software packages that provide a platform for devising interview schedules, thereby providing greater opportunity for them to be used in connection with face-to-face interviews. However, Couper and Hansen (2002) argue that there is very little evidence that the quality of data deriving from computer-assisted interviews is superior to paper and pencil interviews. The use of computer-assisted personal interviews is not ruled out of this research as it enhances a degree of control over the interview process and standardisation of the asking and recording of questions.

With the permission of interviewees, all interviews are recorded (Arkley & Knightly, 1999). Each interview is recorded separately and carefully titled for easy identification by researcher. All efforts will be made to listen to the recording as soon as possible after the interview. Keywords, phrases and statements will be transcribed in order to allow the voices of research participants to be heard. Precautions will be taken prior to the interviews to ensure recording instruments function well and the environment is conducive for interviewing. All efforts will be made to ensure the interview setting is free from background noise and interruptions. This cautious approach was suggested by Easton et al, (2000) who advised that equipment failure and environmental conditions might seriously threaten the research undertaken.



## **Memos**

Memos and field notes are useful instruments and secondary data storage methods in conducting qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Greenwald, 2004). Because the human mind tends to forget quickly, notes taken during the interview are crucial in qualitative research in order to retain the data and information gathered (Lofland & Lofland, 1999) and these will be written not later than the day following the interviewing to ensure no crucial information is forgotten. Memos are the researcher's field notes for recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting data and when reflecting on the interview process (Olfen, 2004). Olfen also observed that it is quite easy to get absorbed in the data collection process and fail to reflect on what is happening around oneself. Nevertheless, there needs to be a balance in maintaining descriptive or reflexive notes on issues such as hunches, impressions and feelings.

Groenewald (2004) advised that researchers must be disciplined to record subsequent to each interview and as comprehensively as possible, but without pre-judgemental evaluation, what happened, who was involved, where the activities occurred and how the interview happened. In addition to the aforementioned, notes taken in this research will be dated to facilitate easy correlation of data. For this study, the note-taking method is borrowed from the model used by Groenewald (2004) who described four note-taking methods: observation notes, theoretical notes, methodological notes and analytical notes. Observation notes are used to describe what happened and about occurrences that are deemed important enough to capture. Theoretical notes will be the researcher's first attempt at deriving meaning as he/she makes sense of the interview and reflects on experiences. Methodological notes are reminders, instructions or critique to oneself on the process, whilst analytical notes are end-of-a-field-day summary or progress review. All together, these notes will support the research process and enhance the researcher's reflections on each interview setting (Caelli, 2001). All the information and data gathered from audio recording, field notes, memos, and hard copy documentations, including informed consent, agreement, survey forms, any notes or sketches offered by the participant during the interview, notes made during data analysis or grouping of themes, and draft transcripts will be stored electronically and securely.

## **Data Analysis – Grounded Theory**

Until the inception of this research no theory has been formulated or postulated to explain parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare which is why grounded theory has been chosen as the analytical approach for this research. Although much work has been done in the area of information seeking behaviour and several models of the information seeking process are available, these have all been developed and tested on other samples and populations including doctors, students, nurses, farmers but none specifically has been developed for parents' childcare information seeking behaviour.

Grounded theory was introduced and developed by American Sociologist Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, in 1967 to describe the qualitative research method they used in their research awareness of dying. They decided to adopt a methodology which has no preconceived theoretical framework or hypothesis but with an intent to generate theory through continuous comparative analysis of data. They believed that the theory produced through this method is really grounded in data and would explain how a worldview or a social aspect of the world works. The goal was to develop a theory that emerges from a phenomenon and is therefore connected to the very reality that the theory is developed to explain. Similarly, this research seeks to develop a theory, which is grounded in data to provide a worldview on parents' information seeking when looking for childcare.

In defining grounded theory, Cresswell (2009) claims it is a qualitative strategy of inquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants of the study. Corbin & Straus (1990) describes the approach as “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively deduced theory about a phenomenon”. There are different versions of ground theory – Glaser & Strauss (1967); Glaserian grounded theory; Straussian grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998b) and Charmaz (2006) constructivist grounded theory.

According to Strauss & Corbin (1998), grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed. It

is a qualitative research design in which the enquirer generates a general explanation of a process, action or interaction shaped by the view of a large number of participants. Theories may be generated initially from the data or if existing theories seem appropriate to the area of investigation, these may indeed be elaborated and modified as they are constantly compared against incoming data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) postulates that the central feature of grounded theory is the general method of constant comparative analysis, and Strauss and Corbin (1998) confirms that during actual research, theory tends to evolve and there is a continuous interplay between analysis and data collection.

### **Why Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory has been identified as ideal for exploring integral social relationships and the behaviour of groups where there has been little exploration of the contextual factors that affect individual's lives (Crooks, 2001). Glaser also describes it as a means to get through and beyond conjecture and preconception to exactly the underlying processes of what is going on, so that professionals can intervene with confidence to help resolve the participant's main concerns' (Glaser, 1978:5).

Grounded theory has been recommended when investigating social problems or situations to which people must adapt (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Shreiber, 2001; Benoliel, 1996); and childcare may be classified as one of these situations. The goal is to explain how social circumstances such as gender, ethnicity, education or disability could account for the interactions, behaviours and experiences of parents when looking for childcare. Grounded theory has been known to facilitate the move from the description of what is happening to an understanding of the process by which it is happening (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and therefore would lend itself to facilitating an understanding of parents' information seeking behaviour and the process involved. Adopting a grounded theory analytical approach would permit the development of a substantive theory which will increase the understanding of parents' childcare information seeking behaviour and to what extent this impacts on family life (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The Straussian grounded theory as described by Strauss & Corbin (1998) was chosen for this study as it is compatible with contemporary thinking and reflects a shift towards social constructivist ontology and postmodernism. It pays more attention to broader environmental and contextual factors including worldviews and values, which may influence parents' childcare information seeking behaviours. The Straussian approach also produces not just a theory but also a model that is both relevant and able to guide actions and practice. Essentially, it aims to produce a theory that fits the situation, aids understanding and guides actions and practice, which essentially fits the broad goal of all grounded theory approaches. Its guide for data analysis was also described as 'explicit' by Cooney (2011) therefore lending a straightforward analytical approach to this research.

Bound (2011) however argues that due to its limitations grounded theory is best used in conjunction with one of the other forms of qualitative research as opposed to a standalone method. He also suggested that it should be introduced at the coding/analytical stage rather than at the beginning of the data collection process. For this reason, the interviews for the qualitative phase of this research are constructed and carried out using a phenomenological approach, but analysed using the Grounded theory analytical method. The Strauss and Corbin (1990) model, complements this research as the model does not dismiss the researcher's previous experience (as is the case in phenomenological research), but actually acknowledges that it could be the source of a research problem or interest. In addition to this, Dunne (2011) posits that it is commonly argued that grounded theory is an effective research strategy for topics which have been subject to relatively little research and about which there is a paucity of knowledge.

### **Analytical Approach**

The research questions in the qualitative phase will focus on understanding how parents experience the childcare process and identify the information seeking process. Basically this looks into analysing what was the process and how did it unfold using the Grounded theory approach. According to Cresswell and Plano-Clark (2011), researchers go through six steps of data analysis: Data Preparation, Data Exploration, Data Scrutiny, Data Representation, Data Interpretation and Data

Validation, but with less emphasis on data scrutiny and data validation. These steps as applied to this research are described below.

### ***Data Preparation***

Data preparation for qualitative analysis involves organising the documents for transcribing text from interviews into word processing files for analysis. All efforts will be made to ensure accuracy of the information and transcription before it was analysed with NVivo (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

### ***Data Exploration***

This involved examining the data to develop broad themes. Essentially, this included reading through the data, making notes and developing an understanding of the information being shared by the parents when looking for childcare. In addition, it involved recording the interview to ensure that the researcher is fully participating in the interview, writing memos, notes and transcribing the script afterwards. Once the notes were transcribed, the researcher collated all interviews for each question together to identify themes in the experiences shared by parents. All interviews were coded immediately after the interview which is an essential element of grounded theory. This helped the researcher to identify early findings and guide the structure of subsequent interviews. For example, the researcher noted earlier on in the interviews, that childcare and quality meant different things to parents based on their circumstances, perceptions and needs. Consequently, the researcher introduced two questions to the interviews asking the participants to describe their definition of both entities and how this affected their childcare behaviour and information seeking. Prompts were also used to understand meaning of words such as 'attachment' when parents refer to them, instead of making assumptions. The interview questions are presented in Appendix 7.

Memos were used all through the process to make notes and reflect on the similarities and differences in the codes and the parent's individual experiences when looking for childcare. Memos formed the foundation on which broader categories of information such as codes and themes were built. The researcher made note of keywords, short phrases and ideas as suggested by Creswell and

Plano Clark (2011). This process would basically help to organise data and facilitate agreement and consistency. According to Wolcott (1994), writing notes, reflective memos, thoughts and intuitions is invaluable to generating unusual insights that move the analysis from mundane and obvious to the creative. In this study, much writing was undertaken as this is expected to facilitate the identification of categories that subsume a number of initial codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). It would also help to recognise potential linkages among coded data. It is expected that gaps and questions in data will be easily detected and would serve as guided thoughts for the analytical process.

Notes of what worked or did not work have been reported to give an account of design decisions made in the field. Authors have described various forms of memos in research. Schatzman and Strauss (1973) suggested four classic types of memos – observational notes, methodological notes, theoretical notes and analytical notes. This is similar to Rossman & Rallis's (2003) classification into three groups – methodological memos, thematic memos and theoretical memos. Marshall & Rossman (2011) described both classification as similar in strategies but with different names, the difference relies on the researchers' emphasis. Schatzman & Strauss (1973) description focuses on observations of what happened in the field and inferences derived, whereas Rossman and Rallis (2003) place more emphasis on the thematic – which assembles thoughts, story of events, behaviours or sentiments which could be used as building blocks in analysis. In this research, theoretical memos will be useful in revealing the interplay of how theories and related literature do or do not explain and lend meaning to emerging data (Rallis & Rossman, 2011).

Rossman and Rallis's (2011) classification has been chosen as the best fit for this study for the reason that it places more value on the variables that are being captured and also offers to lay more emphasis on the importance of understanding the phenomenon of parent's behaviour when looking for childcare. The multi-disciplinary and multi-theoretical nature of the research, coupled with the mixed methodological approach requires indigenous typologies to be generated as patterns, themes and categories are discovered through inductive analysis. Therefore, analyst constructed typologies would also be generated from the analytic

categories generated beforehand and grounded in data even though Patton (2002) argues against generating categories beforehand as it runs the risk of imposing a world of meaning on the participant that best reflects the researcher's world than the world of the participant.

### **Data Coding**

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), coding is the formal representation of analytic thinking, which involves generating categories and themes. The codes for this research are taken from the literature review, actual words used by the parents and their behaviours in the data, and from the insights of the researcher. It is expected that as coding progresses, the ways data and codes group or cluster together will become evident and the behaviours and sentiments will appear. Subsequently, concomitant patterned sequences will be discovered (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Pictorial analysis of these clusters are presented in Figures 21, 22 and 23. Codes taken from literature review included phrases commonly used in information seeking studies to describe behaviours including information knowledge, information poverty and information environment. Words used by parents include experience, quality, happy children, gut instinct and needs. From the researcher's perspective words derived from insight included culture, values, flexibility and parental attachment.

There are two ways of obtaining independent coding of the same material. The first method requires, a person codes the material once and without looking at the results re-codes the same material to see whether the first and second coding agree. The other method requires two independent coders identifying the materials. The independent-coder method, with two different people code the same material independently was used for this research. Previous research have identified that in both methods, it is not possible to obtain a high degree of agreement unless the coders are qualified. The assistance of a childcare advisor was sought in the manual coding process and there was no significant variance in the results. Perfect independence of the coding was much easier to attain as the coding was done independently by two experienced coders. The coders did not discuss results until the coding process was completed. However, category definitions were agreed

before the commencement of the process. Reliability of the results was tested by systemic comparison of the two independent coding to discover the amount of agreement or disagreement in the results. The results revealed that there was deviation in only two out of the thirty sub-categories identified. Moreover, the researcher independently used NVivo to code the results to validate the results and also to triangulate the process. Similar results were also achieved. After the initial exploration, more detailed questions were asked to shape the coding phase:

- What was central to the process of childcare information seeking behaviour
- What influenced, caused or triggered the information seeking process and behaviour
- What strategies did parents employ during the information seeking process
- What effect, impact, outcome or consequences occurred

These questions shaped the structure of the semi-structured in-depth interview, and other forms of data collection including observations, documents or other audio-visual materials will be used. The aim is to gather enough information to fully develop the childcare information-seeking model.

### ***Open Coding***

Segmenting the information received from participants will generate categories of information about parents' information seeking behaviour. Within each category, properties or sub-categories will be identified and dimensionalised to show the extreme possibilities on a continuum of property. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language and patterns of belief that link people and settings together, is the most intellectually challenging phase of data analysis. The process of questioning data whilst reflecting on the conceptual framework in this research would facilitate the engagement of ideas and data in significant intellectual work. Therefore the first step in data analysis as described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) is open coding. This is the constant comparison of codes of events, behaviour and words, which leads to the generation of the theoretical properties of a category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).



### ***Axial Coding***

The next stage is what Fielding and Lee (1998) described as the axial coding, whereby codes are grouped according to conceptual categories that reflect commonalities among codes, which are clustered around points of intersections or axis. Category generation involves noting patterns evident in the setting and expressed by participants. As meaningful categories of patterns emerge, Guba (1978) suggests that those that have internal convergence and external convergence but are distinct from each other should be identified. For this reason, this research would seek to identify exclusive but salient and grounded categories as they emerge through logical classification of themes, which are crossed with one another to generate new insights. Gradually through engagement with data, expanded dimensions of the categories can be seen. This then could demonstrate the need to comprehend the complexity of the information seeking behaviour of parents, so that future researchers, practitioners and policymakers would avoid simplistic assumptions that could affect parents' labour participation. In this research, computer software NVivo was utilised for the open and axial coding, clustering and writing of analytic memos. According to Marshall & Rossman (2011), no mechanism can actually replace the human mind and creativity. Therefore the abbreviations of keywords for coding are predetermined by the researcher. Flexibility would however be built into the data coding system to accommodate new understandings as they emerge as shown in Figure 19a and 19b. Therefore, a visual model also known as Coding Paradigm or Logic diagram for the study is presented as follows:

- A central category about parents' information seeking behaviour is identified.
- Causal conditions i.e conditions that influence the childcare seeking behaviour are explored
- The actions and interactions that result from the information seeking experience are specified
- The strategies adopted during the information seeking process are identified
- The context and intervening conditions that influence the strategies are identified
- The outcomes and consequences of parents' information seeking behaviour are defined, outlined or described.

**Figure 18: Coding Structure by Nodes**

### Nodes

Name	Sources	References	Created On
Childcare Information Behaviour	38	986	19/07/2015 15:04
Childcare Choice Factors	38	723	19/07/2015 14:31
Information Behaviour	10	125	19/07/2015 15:38
Information Avoidance	8	18	19/07/2015 14:37
Information knowledge	9	71	19/07/2015 14:37
Information Trust	7	20	19/07/2015 18:29
Satisficing	0	0	19/07/2015 15:15
Search Feelings & Behaviour	3	16	20/07/2015 06:14
Setting Visit	2	19	21/07/2015 20:54
Information Channels	10	125	19/07/2015 14:11
Friends and family or word of mouth	2	10	20/07/2015 14:49
Information Advisor	2	2	19/07/2015 16:24
Internet	6	28	19/07/2015 16:21
Local Advertising	2	9	20/07/2015 14:50
Local authority	10	30	20/07/2015 14:42
Practitioners	6	13	19/07/2015 16:23
Social Media	8	25	19/07/2015 16:20
Information Environment	6	13	19/07/2015 14:36
Health Practitioners	5	11	19/07/2015 16:10
Schools	2	2	19/07/2015 16:08
Social Network	4	13	19/07/2015 14:38
Surveys	0	0	19/07/2015 14:28

**Figure 19: Coding Structure by Nodes (Childcare Choice Factors)**

## Nodes

Name	Sources	References	Created On
Childcare Information Behaviour	38	986	19/07/2015 15:04
Childcare Choice Factors	38	723	19/07/2015 14:31
Child's Need	6	16	20/07/2015 00:35
Cost	10	73	19/07/2015 14:51
Culture and Values	10	39	19/07/2015 14:43
Family decision	6	17	20/07/2015 06:30
Flexibility	6	15	19/07/2015 14:51
Friends and Families Endorsements	8	27	19/07/2015 14:58
Gut Instinct	3	13	19/07/2015 14:41
Learning environment	6	19	19/07/2015 14:41
Location	4	17	19/07/2015 14:51
Ofsted Report	7	23	19/07/2015 15:04
Own experience	1	1	19/07/2015 14:55
Parental Attachment	1	1	19/07/2015 14:54
Parental fears and concerns	6	38	19/07/2015 18:57
Quality	8	52	19/07/2015 14:51
Relationships	4	18	20/07/2015 12:36
Safety	4	9	19/07/2015 16:11
Staff	38	267	19/07/2015 02:48
Time and Availability	8	22	20/07/2015 12:42
Trust	6	26	19/07/2015 14:52
Unique Selling Point	1	29	20/07/2015 19:03
Information Behaviour	10	125	19/07/2015 15:38
Information Channels	10	125	19/07/2015 14:11
Information Environment	6	13	19/07/2015 14:36
Surveys	0	0	19/07/2015 14:28

## **Categorisation and Interpretations**

The next stage after categories and themes have been developed is the integrative interpretation of the findings and this will be presented and discussed in Chapter 6. At this stage, all the information generated above will be utilised in putting together a 'story line' which connects the categories and proposes specified patterns of predicted relationships in the data. As described by Marshall and Rossman (2011), interpretation brings meaning and coherence to the themes, patterns and categories. It develops linkages and a storyline that makes sense and is engaging. Patton (2002) elaborated on these by claiming that interpretation means attaching significance to what is found, making sense of the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings and imposing order.

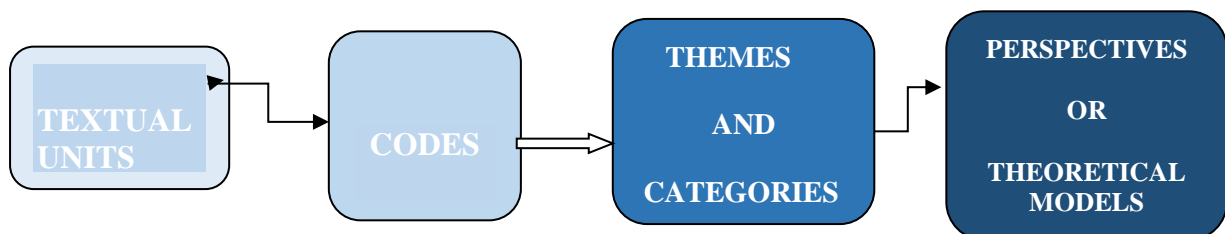
Data analysis and interpretation essentially is the process of assigning meaning to the collected information and determining the conclusions, significance and implications of the findings. The data collected in this research will be evaluated for their usefulness and centrality in order to search for meaning and guide against descriptions, inferences and interpretations that are not useful for the research or potentially out of scope.

As categories and themes develop, constant evaluation of the developing understandings and constant challenging of explanations and interpretations being put forward will occur. Emerging themes will be compared and linked with those in literature review for correlation or deviations. The conceptual framework and guiding theories will also be reviewed against new data for fits and misfits. Themes, typologies and patterns will be tested for negative instances of the patterns, which could lead to data refinement or even more data collection. As suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2011), as categories and themes are discovered, emerging patterns will be critically challenged and plausible explanations and potential linkages in the data will be censoriously sought.

## Analysing the data/Interpretation

This essentially involves examining the database to address the research questions and theories. For the quantitative element of the research, descriptive analysis is the first stage; and data is analysed based on the research questions and theories. Appropriate statistical tests will be determined by the questions being asked including the description of trends, comparison of groups and the relationship between them. Evidence of practical results will be sought and reported as effect sizes or confidence intervals. Inferential analyses are then drawn from the results obtained to produce a refined analysis. For qualitative data analysis, the core of analysing the data is the coding process which involves coding the data, dividing text into small units of sentences, phrases and diagrams; and assigning each one a label. These labels are then grouped into codes and themes. The grouping and labelling idea allows further and broader perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A visual representation of the groupings and generation of patterns and models is presented below.

**Figure 20: Development of Parents' Childcare Information Seeking Models**



Creswell and Marietta (2002) suggested using qualitative data analysis software programs to store data/text documents; block and label text documents with codes for easy retrieval; organise codes into a visual representation of the relationships and linkages between the variables. Finally, a conditional matrix will be developed and visually portrayed to elucidate the social, historical and economic conditions influencing parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare. Consequently, the result of the data collection process and analysis would be a substantive level theory which may be tested for the empirical verification with quantitative data to determine if it can be generalised to a sample or population. However, since this study utilises a mixed methodological design already, it will end at the point of theory generation

## **Data Gathering**

As highlighted in chapter 4 (Methodology) a mixed approach has been utilised to gather and analyse the data. Between May and June 2014 the researcher administered 500 questionnaires (henceforth called Q<sup>1</sup>) across Medway and conducted 35 structured qualitative survey / interviews (henceforth called Q<sup>2</sup>) with parents and 8 structured qualitative interviews with key stakeholders (henceforth called QS). In total 43 structured qualitative survey/interviews were conducted. Basic statistical analysis has been used to present the results of Q<sup>1</sup> and where applicable, the qualitative inferences from all our interviews (Q<sup>2</sup>) through the software adopted for coding (see section below on Text and Content Analysis).

The demographics of the sample population for Q<sup>1</sup> were 82.8% White – British; 1.3% White – Irish; 3% White – other white background; 1% Mixed – white & black Caribbean; 0.3% Mixed – white & black Asian; 1.5% Mixed – other mixed background; 1.5% Asian or Asian British – Indian; 0.3% Asian or Asian British – Pakistani; 0.5% Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi; 2.5% Black or Black British – African; 0.3% Black or Black British – other Black background; 0.3% Other ethnic group – Gypsy/Romany/Traveller or Irish descent; 0.3% Other ethnic group – Heritage; 1.3% Other ethnic group – other background. While we had no representation from (1) Mixed – white & black African; Asian – Other Asian background; (2) Black or Black British Caribbean or (3) Other ethnic group – Arab, the researcher was able to compensate for Asian – other background in Q<sup>2</sup> parents but not the two others. The data analysis will have limited interpretation and application to the two underrepresented ethnic groups (Mixed – white & black African and Other ethnic group – Arab), which will form the basis for future research.

The data analysis is split into three sections:

- Identifying and categorising childcare information seeking behaviours
- Investigating any link between behaviour, choice and socio-economic factors
- Analytical model for childcare information seeking behaviour

### Text & Content Analysis

According to Shapiro & Markoff (1989), text analysis or content analysis is a general term that describes methodical measurement applied to a text. The process of extracting and representing the relationships between concepts of texts creates a visual map of each text. Map analysis allows the researcher to compare the networks of ties between concepts by systematically reducing their content. Automated analysis of texts can provide information broadly consistent with the results of human coding, and the concept would allow a researcher to make meaningful conclusions about the emerging themes in the data. NVivo was used to analyse the interviews held with parents, stakeholders and the information advisors.

Figure 21: Wordcloud Analysis from NVivo

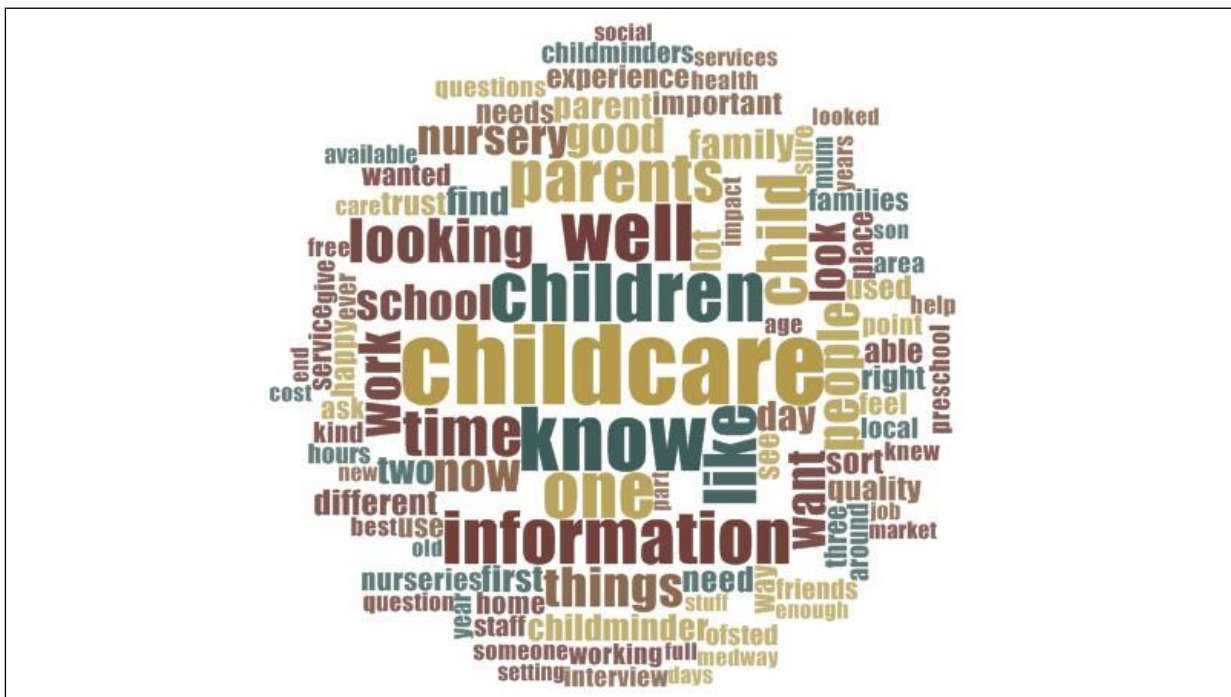


Figure 21 above is a ‘Wordcloud’ analysis of the word frequencies generated by survey results with NVivo, revealing the most frequently used words in the interviews with parents and stakeholders. Two types of text and content analysis were performed to produce a concept map after filtering has been applied to the words. Particular words were grouped together thus presenting relationships via the concept map. The closeness of words in the map refers to extent to which two or more concepts appear frequently in similar contexts. The centrality of a concept also

reflects the extent to which it co-occurs with other concepts. The size of the word represents its prominence in the text. Fig 18 and 19 represent maps of the most commonly found phrases or words. In Fig 21 the map's central concept is "childcare" as expected for this research and is closely connected to other similar concepts. In the tree maps almost all the behaviours reflect similar traits and relationships with few anomalies which may need to be further investigated.

Figure 22 below is an example of a graphical representation of coding by nodes for an interviewee and the percentage coverage/response to interview questions.

**Figure 22: Graphical representation of Coding by Nodes**

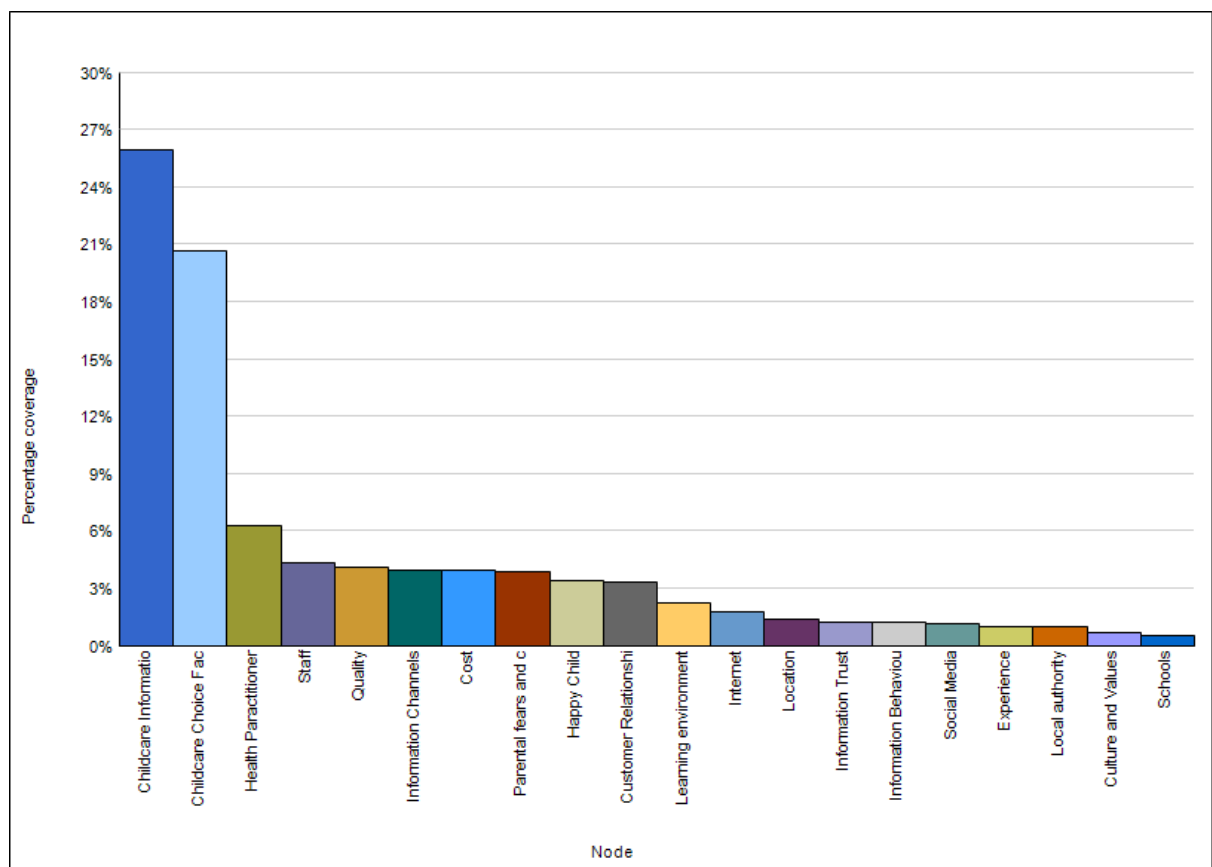
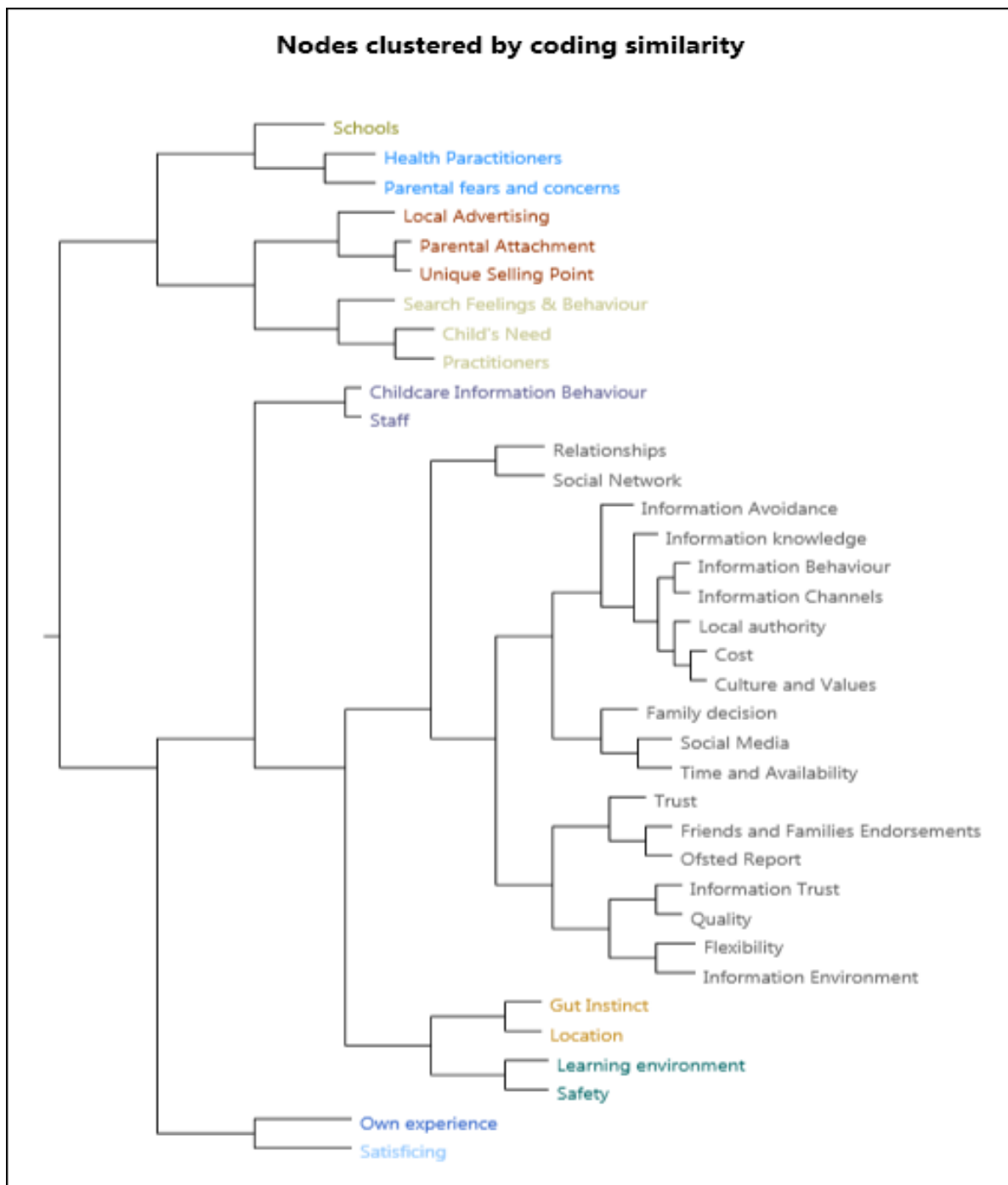
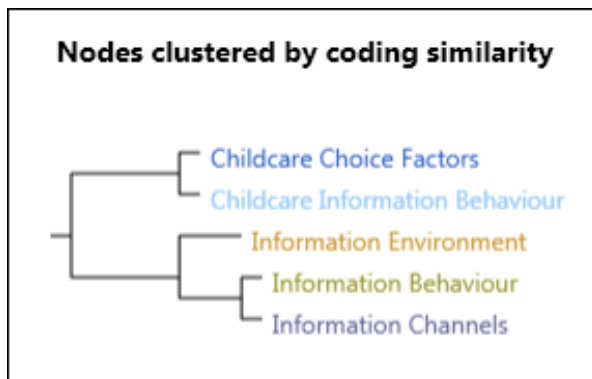


Figure 23 overleaf shows a cluster analysis of nodes and the similarities in how the nodes were coded to reflect patterns and emergent themes. Central to this categorisation is Childcare Choice Factors, the Information Ground, Behaviour and the Childcare environment.



**Figure 23: Cluster Analysis of Nodes**



## **Establishing the quality of the study**

The establishment of trustworthiness is an important consideration in all qualitative data analysis. For the purpose of this research, this has been separated into three major aspects – validity, credibility and transferability.

### ***Validity***

Validity relates to the integrity of the conclusions drawn from this research (Bryman, 2008). It serves the purpose of checking on the quality of the data, the results and the interpretation. It also entails certifying the quantitative and qualitative components of the research. Although differing in approach, validation in quantitative and qualitative studies serves the same purpose of ensuring the quality of the data, results and interpretation. For the quantitative aspect of this research, validity means that the information received from participants through the survey questionnaire are meaningful indicators of the construct being measured –ethnicity, gender, disability, social economic status etc. Also known as measurement validity, the goal in quantitative validity is to determine if the measure that is devised of a concept really does reflect the concept. For example, in validating the concept that needs to be measured in order to test the theories, a query arises: ‘do the measures really represent the concept that they are supposed to be testing?’ To assess validity of the study, there is the need to consider validity for the instruments through content validity procedures. Validity can also be drawn from the conclusions of the results. Therefore, as suggested by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), threats to internal and external validity need to be reduced during the design of the studies.

### ***Credibility***

In this research the internal validity of the investigation is the extent to which it can be concluded that there is a cause and effect relationship among variables. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) noted that, correct cause and effect inferences can only be drawn if threats such as participant attrition, selection bias and maturation of participants are accounted for in the design. In the qualitative phase, respondent validation and triangulation are used to confirm the internal validity or credibility of the research. According to Bryman (2008), respondent validation is a process whereby the researcher provides the participants with an account of the findings of

the research. Guba and Lincoln (1985) describes respondent validation as the act of determining if the account provided by the researcher and the participants are accurate, can be trusted and is credible. The aim of the exercise is to seek corroboration, or otherwise, of the account that the researcher has arrived at. It will confirm that there is good correspondence between the researcher's findings and the perspectives and experiences of the participants. The intention is to seek confirmation that the findings and impressions are congruent with the views of the participants and to seek out areas in which there is lack of correspondence and the reasons for it (Bryman, 2008). In this study, respondent validation will be used to find out if the summaries of the findings are accurate by taking these findings to key participants and asking them if it is an accurate reflection of their experiences. Triangulation has already been built into the research design of this study to build evidence for a code or theme from several sources or from several individuals.

### ***Transferability/Generalisation***

The transferability of this mixed methods research is the extent to which the results can be generalised and applied to a larger population or sample size. Essentially, this means that correct inferences from this research can only be drawn to other persons, settings, past and future situations if a representative sample had been selected in the quantitative aspect of the research. Closely related to transferability is reliability, which questions whether the results of the study are repeatable. This relates more to the quantitative component of the research as it seeks to question if the measures are stable or not. As qualitative research is more interested in depth rather than breadth, findings are more oriented to the contextual uniqueness of the social world. Lincoln and Guba (1973) argue that thick description of the experiences, values and culture captured in the qualitative design would provide others with a database of information for making judgements about the transferability of the findings of the research to similar environments both in childcare and information seeking behaviour studies.

## Potential Ethical Issues

Research ethics can be described as codes which address individuals' right to dignity, privacy and confidentiality; and avoidance of harm (Brosler,1995). According to Bodgan and Biklen(1992), it also represents the principles of right and wrong that a particular group accepts.

*“Given human failings and motivations, it should come at no surprise that ethical considerations loom large in social research as ethics reflect our beliefs about what is just and right behaviour versus what we judge to be unjust and wrong even though it is often difficult to agree on the justification of what is right or wrong Researchers are people, people have values and attitudes; and sometimes these predispositions inevitably creep into investigations of other people” (Case, 2008:185).*

Hesse-Beiber (2010) argues that research projects often ignore or do not fully address the problems of ethics in social research, yet in order to ensure validity and accuracy it is important to discuss the ethical implications of a research and remain conscious of the moral integrity of the study. In this light, Hesser-Biber and Levy (2006) suggest that researchers should consider the moral principles, ethical issues relating to the selection of a research problem, how it affects conducting the research, the design and sampling procedure.

For this project, ethical research practice is grounded in the moral principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice. Respect for persons receives the most attention and typically captures the notion that the people participating in this research are not to be used as means to an end and their privacy will be respected. Their anonymity will be secured and their right whether to participate or not will be freely consented to (Marshal & Rossman, 2011). Beneficence addresses the 'do no harm' concept and this basically asks that the researcher have the responsibility of ensuring that participating in the research does not harm participants physically or emotionally. In terms of justice, the distributive considerations of who benefits from the research include parents, families, childcare providers, practitioners and policy makers.

Explicitly valuing participants in this study and recognising the potential interpersonal impact of the inquiry demonstrates that the researcher will be ethical. More often than not, consent to participate in a study is thought to be sufficient criteria to carry out research on human subjects. However, the researcher recognises that ethical practice is an ongoing exercise in research and obtaining a signature as an informed consent is merely one observable indicator of the researcher's sensitivity (Bhattacharga, 2007).

Mixed methods designs harbour specific ethical dilemmas related to the integration of methods at various stages of the research and an exquisite sensitivity to both the procedural and the everyday issues inherent in the research is highly essential (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Issues associated with mixed methods were described by Hesse-Beiber (2010) as 'dilemmas' that are particularly pronounced when methods are being integrated at various stages of the study. In relevance to this study, Hesse-Beiber argues that a sequential mixed methods design that requires personal quantitative data collected from a survey in order to obtain a sample for an in-depth qualitative study may result in inadvertently compromising a respondents originally informed consent and prior confidentiality agreements.

This essentially suggests that the research may violate a prior informed consent by taking information from one study and using it as an input for a qualitative component of another study without getting direct permission from the respondent to have their details used in the sampling pool for the second part of the research. In some instances, this could be regarded as a direct invasion and violation of their privacy. In order to avoid such situation in this study, participants' permissions will be sought during the quantitative phase for access to their personal questionnaire data from the first study in order to conduct a follow-up interview if required.

Although this research seeks to comply with the six ethics principles set out in the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (2010), it is sometimes difficult to comply with these principles due to circumstances beyond the control of the researcher, or inability to agree on the justification of what is right and what is wrong. The potential ethical issues identified in this research are basically:

1. how psychological harm would be prevented; 2. anonymity and confidentiality issues; 3. ensuring voluntary participation of participants; 4. independence and impartiality of the investigator and 5. fully informing participants about the purpose of the research.

Although it is obvious that physical harm to a research participant is not allowed and forbidden, there is a potential risk of unintentionally causing psychological harm or discomfort to a participant. This could be in form of an embarrassment that might occur when certain information is revealed (Case, 2008), or when a particular question is asked which might have psychological impact on the participant based on a past experience. Disclosure of sensitive information usually occurs especially during interviews when rapport and trust have been built between participant and investigator and it could also occur with research surveys. Preventing potential psychological harm could be difficult as it is not easy to identify when this might occur during the data collection stage. However, through extra vigilance it is possible to sense some discomfort or signs of distress.

Nevertheless, participants will be assured at every stage of the research that they do not have to answer a question if they do not want to, and they can withdraw their participation totally at any stage of the research. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), participants should be able to disengage from a research study at any time, and by asking for consent at different stages of the research, this actuality is reinforced and provides the opportunity to reconsider participation (Cresswell, 1998). With hindsight, prevention could be as easy as protecting the privacy of all participants through confidentiality and anonymity and reassuring participants.

Ideally the research survey information should be anonymous to protect the identity of participants, however due to the sequential nature and the research design of the research it is required that some participants are identified for selection purposes to participate in the next stage of the research which is the in-depth interview. Participants will be asked to provide contact details only if they wish to participate in the next stage of the research. Nevertheless, privacy and confidentiality will still be maintained and participants will continually be reassured throughout their involvement in the study. According to the ESRC, this may not be possible in small

sample sizes where basic demographic information deductions could reveal the identity of a participant and the information divulged during the research. Case (2008) also had the same concerns by claiming that in some situations it is sometimes possible to make an informed guess about some quotations or opinions and advised that the investigator exercises caution in reporting any expression that might be controversial or potentially embarrassing so that it cannot come back to haunt the participant. This could be a potential risk in this research as gatekeepers in form of nursery staff or supervisors supporting the distribution and collation of questions could have access to completed survey questionnaires. As a safeguard measure, sealed boxes will be provided at each collection centre for parents to drop their questionnaires in order to ensure confidentiality. Online completion of the survey would also minimise this risk and parents will be informed about this option.

It is important to reiterate at this stage that although the third principle of the ESRC ethics states that “the confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected,” there could be a breach to this rule in situations where a duty of care concerning someone at risk of harm is involved. This may arise when the participant divulges information that constitutes an illegal activity or causes significant concern about someone’s welfare. According to the ESRC framework, study participants should not be misled or deceived in any way as to the nature and purpose of the research.

It is important to note that the right research ethics have been built into the design of this research right from the beginning and the intention is to duly inform participants of the nature, purpose and objectives of the study, the nature of the questions and what the results of the research would be used for. However, it should be acknowledged that a fine line needs to be trodden in disclosing fully what the interest of the study is so as to allow room for potentially unexpected themes that could add value to the research to be developed. Although the intention is not to deceive participants, it may not be possible to disclose possible interpretations of what has not been heard from the participants during the recruitment stage.

Another ethical issue arising is linked to selecting samples of people to study. In order to maintain the integrity and quality of the research, it is quite crucial that the

sample selection is fit for the purpose of the research and the question of inclusion or exclusion from the research is addressed. The challenge in this instance is ensuring that parents who do not have English as their first language are fully informed about their participation. This research seeks to ensure that all participants are fully informed about the project, have sufficient understanding of the project to make a reasoned choice to participate and have the autonomy to make firm personal judgements based on long-term views.

Voluntary participation will be encouraged all though this research and all efforts will be made to ensure that it is coercion-free. Consent is the central tenet in research ethics, and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration stipulates that consent is properly informed and freely given without pressures such as coercion, threats or persuasion. Achieving this may be quite difficult especially with quantitative phase of this research where a statistically significant response is required and money incentives through a prize draw is being offered. The issue of using incentives to increase participation could be viewed as coercion but in this instance it is regarded as a means of encouraging participation in order to ensure the validity of the results of the first phase of the research. However, the research acknowledges the ESRC's framework of respect for people's consent or refusal which helps prevent harm and abuse such as feeling deceived, exploited, shamed or otherwise wronged.

The use of payment of money as an incentive to participation in research studies has been a controversial issue. Alderson and Morrow (2004) claim that no persuasion or pressure of any kind should be put on participants; and Chambers (2001) claims compensation transforms participants into commodities thereby nullifying the moral act of volunteerism. Grady (2001) on the other hand, expresses concerns regarding the possibility that offering money for research participation can constitute coercion or undue influence capable of distorting the judgement of potential research subjects thereby compromising the voluntariness of their informed consent. Grady believes an amount of money that is not excessive and calculated on the basis of time or contribution could be an indication of respect for participant's time and contribution.

However, Resnick (2001) argues that motivation and commitment by participants to fulfil their end of the bargain may hinge more on the appreciation of the participants as a valued member of the research team than as a hired hand. Nevertheless, Guy



et al (2003) concluded that, individuals are significantly attracted by incentives. They reported positive incentive effect among prospective participants with less education and identified this group as less likely to participate in research. The researchers claim that monetary incentives can be useful for increasing participation rates and may help reduce sampling bias most strongly among individuals who are typically less likely to take part in research projects.

It is on this proviso that free prize draws was offered to prospective participants who were clearly informed before participating of the following:

- The closing date for entering the prize draws was fixed and it was made clear to all that it will not be extended unless there was a valid reason.
- The nature of the prizes
- How and when results will be announced.

Another ethical issue that needs to be addressed is the effect of gatekeepers. Even though participants are expected to be participating voluntarily, Case (2008) reveals it is not unusual for certain communities or organisations (especially in the education sector) to pre-select certain individuals to participate in research studies. These communities or organisations serve as 'Gatekeepers' who control access to participants and this has ethical implications because of the power that such gatekeepers can exercise over those individuals. They can control the level of access granted to such individuals, coerce them into taking part in the research and sometimes influence the nature of participants' responses.

This essentially may affect the level of consent that a participant gives or is believed to have given to the researcher, therefore posing problems for the general representation of the sample. Issues of reliability or dependability associated with gatekeepers may affect qualitative designs using probability samples. This could present a particular ethical challenge when striving to obtain a full picture as some parents may envisage or imagine dire consequences for either participating or even not participating. Refusal of some parents not to participate may make conclusions less valid because it is quite difficult to understand if they would have presented a different perspective to those who willingly and of their own freewill agreed to

participate. In some instances, using probability sampling where gatekeepers are coercing participants could result in the responses being skewed.

To mitigate this risk, all participants will be informed and assured that it is not compulsory that they participate and that it is voluntary. It will also be reiterated that the information shared in the questionnaire will not be available to anyone, and their identity is safe. Authority figures will be adequately briefed about the voluntary nature of participation so that they do not put pressure on potential participants. Similarly, the wording of the questions would be in a manner that is non-threatening to any childcare setting. Rather, it would seek to present the research as a ground breaking research that would inform practice and benefit parents, childcare providers and other practitioners without misleading or deceiving anyone.

Other ethical factors regarding the researcher's positionality and dual role as a researcher, insider and parent; and the bearing these have on the interdependence and impartiality of this research are discussed extensively in the positionality and reflexivity section below.

### **Bias Limitation and Researcher Reflexivity**

According to Jones (2001), the issue of *bias* in qualitative and cross-cultural studies is crucial to the research, and the adoption of a reflective-reflexive approach can be considered as complimentary to the conventional forms of research in an attempt to enhance the overall quality of the research process. Jones (2001) further notes that "reflexive accounts" can provide a legitimate strategy to be employed with the aim to offer further perspectives and help the reader to reflect critically upon the methodology used. This wider, open-ended approach is particularly appropriate for this study as it can accommodate elements of unpredictability, individuality and subjectivity, including the researcher's biographical data, experiences and biases.

My role as an employee and researcher in an environment that influences and shapes childcare policies set the background for this research. This has given me an insight not only into the demand and supply dynamics of childcare but also into the support, incentives and resources extensively provided by the government towards

childcare so that parents can work and stay employed. Bracketing my personal childcare experiences, parents seem to have more access to information not only due to technological advancements, but also because the government has incentivised the childcare sector significantly over the years. However, despite the incentives and technological advancements, it is a concern that many families are still unaware of what is available locally. Childcare is still considered not to be readily accessible, and is still referred to as the biggest barrier to parents seeking employment. A review of literature over the past 15 years in leading academic journals, and government policy documents has highlighted a gap in the UK on the issue of accessibility to childcare (as presented in Chapter 1 & 2). Previous researchers have identified that parents reported lack of childcare (Cain & Hofferth, 1989; Hofferth & Brandon, 2003; Heymann & Ruiz, 2007). Parents who have disabled children also cited lack of information as a major barrier (Parish et al., 2005).

Wolcott (1995) postulates that a certain amount of interest in a group or people is a prerequisite to generate the energy needed for a research activity. However objective a researcher approaches a study, he/she will have a certain 'interest', a 'curiosity', which is "the impulse behind all research." (Stenhouse, 1979) This 'interest' can be expressed in the form of a proposition, a problem to investigate or a question to be answered or, in Wolcott's term, a "bias". It is on this proviso that I embark on a research journey to find out why parents are not able to find childcare to meet their individual needs, which in my opinion may be critically linked to factors related to their childcare and information seeking behaviour, as will be empirically explored in this research.

In terms of limiting my personal bias to the research, Wolcott (1995) described bias as "entry-level theorising, a thought-about position from which the researcher as inquirer feels drawn to an issue or problem and seeks to construct a firmer basis in both knowledge and understanding." In this sense 'bias' provides relevant information about the researcher's orientation and intentions related to the study in question and should not be confused with 'prejudice', which originates from irrational, out of context judgements, which have nothing in common with a systematic, objective process of inquiry (Jones, 2001). "Bias' should stimulate inquiry without

interfering in the investigation” (Wolcott, 1995). Hence in this research, the question would not be whether total objectivity can be achieved, as any bias I may harbour as a parent who has previously experienced childcare issues or as a researcher familiar with government policies will be made explicit. It is assumed that as long as the purpose of the research and my assumptions are clear, this kind of bias will contribute to the meaningful interpretation of the study (Jones, 2001).

### ***Insider/Outsider reflexivity***

As a black African mother of two children, I joined my husband in the UK in 1996. Prior to conducting this research upon which this reflective work is based, I have had the privilege of working in the childcare sector for over twelve years across Bexley and Medway in the provision of childcare information, advice and guidance to families. My experience as an immigrant mother, who had to grapple with understanding new processes, systems and culture; and at the same time raising a young family must have ultimately led to my interest in conducting this research to learn more about experiences of mothers when looking for childcare to suit their family when planning to re-join the labour workforce. Through conversations with other parents, I heard about their struggles navigating the systems despite the support and incentives provided by the government. I entered into the research originally with the hope of developing an understanding of parents’ behaviours when it comes to childcare decisions and how they go about seeking this information.

Having been on both sides of the debate as an immigrant mother and a researcher, there is a sense in which I consider myself as an ‘insider’ through integration and adaptation strategies as a practitioner within the childcare sector, but still an ‘outsider’ based not only on her role as a researcher and a mother, but also on values and bi-cultural heritage (LaFrombiose et al., 1993; Hanley, 2000). Identifying with Jones (2001) and Troyna & Carrington (1993)’s question, ‘Whose side are we on?’ - is highly relevant to this research and as a researcher, I seek to act objectively despite my dual-role as a mother and a childcare practitioner. Jones (2001) believes this kind of ‘double perspective’ enables a researcher to engage in critical reflection by stepping back from the research process, adopting the detached viewpoint of the

external observer from which to evaluate 'bias' critically and relate relevant and detailed information about orientation and intentions to the study in question. This view he corroborated with Lofland (1971) who claims the outsider/insider position is a vantage point, by asserting that 'marginality stimulates the actual 'seeing' of the setting and its aspects as problematic topics'. This generates a critical spirit, which can then be translated into 'reflexive' action when the researcher re-enters the research process in the role of 'manager' and/or active participant. Reflecting on my experience of the research process, I had to ask myself the following questions about the experience – what role did my positionality as a black mother studying childcare in England play and how did my positionality as a mother influence the interactions that I had with the participants. In the next section, I answer these questions in the context of the role of values, beliefs and how objectivity will be achieved in this research.

### **Values, beliefs and objectivity in research**

As a mixed methodology is assumed in this research, the nature of qualitative research which sets the researcher as the data collection instrument, makes it reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process. This concept of self as a research instrument reflects the possibility that the researcher's subjectivity will influence the research and any subsequent reporting of findings (Bourke, 2014:1).

Kingrey (2002) claims that individuals constantly make and unmake their understanding and perspectives through the exploration of the wide and deep nexus of information that is life; and interpretation has two related concepts of the way in which the researcher reports the experiences of the subjects and the ways in which the subjects themselves make sense of their experiences (Bourke, 2014). This exploration occurs as a communicative process, an intersecting dialogue that extends beyond data to include emotions, ideas, values, opinions, superstitions and beliefs on the personal and social level. In this research critical self-evaluation is a priority and a constructive approach to subjectivity has been adopted. The constant

consciousness of the beliefs and assumptions I have held in relation to childcare experiences as an outsider (mother) and as an insider (practitioner) serve as a guide in designing the methodology for this research, the behaviour towards the respondents and the interpretation of the findings.

According to Bryman (2008), values reflect either the personal beliefs or the feelings of a researcher, and even though researchers are expected to be free from values, objective and free from personal biases, the values and views of the researcher are now being embraced as critical to understanding the context in which the research has been done. Jones (2001) argued that these views should not be suppressed even as it seems quite impossible to actually separate these individual biases as they actually enrich the research through the exhibition of reflexivity.

This suggests why Miers (1993) argues that, rather than disagree with the postulation of a value-free research of neutrality and indifference towards research objects, research has to be replaced by conscious partiality which is only achieved through partial identification with the research objectives. Even though the aim of this piece of work is to achieve an objective and bias free research, Troyna (1995) claims that however hard we strive to achieve the ideal of objectivity and neutrality, all research is coloured by a 'partisanship, which derives from the social identity and values of the researcher'.

In agreement with Jones (2001), rather than trying to exclude bias from this research process, the intention is to achieve a balance of biases in order to enhance the 'internal validity' of data. This Jones (2001) was able to achieve by employing the strategy of 'respondent triangulation', which accommodates the perspectives of all participants, including the researcher's perspective. In this sense, the 'reflective' voice of the researcher represented yet another dimension interfacing with all the others (Burgess, 1995).

## **Methodological challenges and limitations**

Although there is no research methodology without challenges and limitations but essentially, the mixed methods approach utilised in this research presents quite a few advantageous options to a study of this kind, but with some challenges, which are further discussed in this section. However, holistic points of view confirm that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages (Creswell, 2003; Morse, 2003 and Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The complexities of combining 'arts' with 'science' – that is, qualitative and quantitative methods respectively were noted by Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003). According to the researchers, these trigger a complicated mix of words from the data collated and analysed in mixed methods from the diverse worlds they represent.

Howe (1998) developed the incompatibility thesis for mixing methods as qualitative and quantitative methods were based on different paradigms (i.e. interpretivist/constructivist and positivity scientific paradigms respectively) and assumptions (on ontology and epistemology). However, most mixed methods studies have adopted approaches that enable them to safeguard and mitigate the emerging risks by honouring paradigm differences when combining quantitative and qualitative methods as will be adopted in this study.

Challenges in mixed methods mostly emanate from the manipulation or reduction of the data; combining the two types of data; the time and resources required; and the compromises made in sample size, money needed, and duration of study (Driscoll, 2007). Bazeley (2004) also argues that one of the main disadvantages of this design is that flexibility and depth are lost when qualitative data is quantified. This occurs because qualitative codes are multidimensional while quantitative codes are one-dimensional and fixed. Basically, changing rich qualitative data to dichotomous variables produces one dimensional immutable data (Driscoll et al., 2007). However, it is possible for a researcher to avoid quantifying qualitative data, except that it can become a very time-consuming and complex process as it requires analysing, coding and integrating data from unstructured to structured data (Driscoll et al., 2007).

Another problem associated with mixed methods design is the possible statistical measurement limitations of qualitative data when it has been quantified as quantified qualitative data is very vulnerable to co-linearity (Roberts, 2000). Researchers having to collect and analyse quantitative data may reduce their sample size for the design to be less time-consuming and doing so can affect statistical procedures. Both issues and problems have been eliminated, in this study, in two ways.

Firstly, the survey and interview questions are clearly linked to the quantitative and qualitative methods. A decision was also made to concentrate on basic statistical analysis to avoid the effects of tests and analysis that may be problematic for the research. This minimises the need to quantify qualitative data.

Secondly, the design framework has been designed to split the data collation and analysis into two phases with the data collated informing the key experiences that dovetails into the next phase where research questions and objectives are explored through in-depth interviews in the qualitative research phase. The sampling technique deployed to gather responses to the questionnaire also enables the study to overcome the potential difficulty posed by a reduced sample size.

Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2004) indicated that mixed methods research is time consuming and expensive. Depending on the design of the study, especially if it is sequential, it could take longer to complete the study, as one stage needs to be concluded before the next can commence. Cash prize draws was offered to incentivise respondents to complete the questionnaire. Respondents who provide a valid email address or telephone number were entered into a prize draw for 1<sup>st</sup> prize - £100; 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize - £75 and 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize - £30. How this was managed ethically is discussed in the previous section.

It has been claimed that it is difficult to find a researcher with experience in both qualitative and quantitative research, and that a researcher wishing to use mixed methods research had to learn multiple methods; be able to know how to mix each method effectively; know how to interpret conflicting results and have knowledge of analysing quantitative data qualitatively. Daunting as it may seem, all efforts have



been made by the researcher to learn and articulate the concepts and analysis of mixed methods research in order to produce robust findings from this research.

Generalisability has also been a major issue with mixed methods and a few researchers including, have argued that there are issues of credibility, trustworthiness and validity that have an impact on mixed methods (Bazeley 2004; Onwuegbuzie & Johnson 2006; Driscoll 2007; Lieber 2009 and De Lisle 2011). According to Lieber (2009:222) "...perhaps the most unresolved challenges to mixed methods research relates to questions of data management, processes and analysis". Driscoll (2007) mentioned the timing of the sampling, as well as the difficulty in compiling and analysing data as real challenges. In the light of this, Bazeley (2004) and De Lisle (2011) noted that trustworthiness and credibility must be assured through the application of rules, procedures and attention to quality criteria. This has been addressed by the rules, procedures and attention to quality criteria that have been embedded in the phasing of the data collection and analysis of this research.

Most of the methodological challenges highlighted by previous researchers (as above) could be grouped under representation issues, integration issues and generalisation issues. Representation is the difficulty of representing and capturing lived experiences, which in the case of this study relates to the experience parents had when looking for childcare and using childcare (Bazeley, 2004). Interviewing skills are critical to exploring lived experiences of parents when looking for childcare. This would vary for each individual, as some would be more recent than others. The researcher will ensure adequate efforts are made to support respondents in articulating their experiences and contextualising these experiences. Research instruments including memos and notes will be essential tools in ensuring that the information provided are well captured.

Validity issues refer to the trustworthiness of inferences, which could be interpreted as the generalisation of the study. According to De Lisle (2011), some methods are fundamentally flawed from the start because they combine and multiply threats to validity and trustworthiness with each methodological approach. The choice of a mixed methods approach in itself seeks not only to legitimise the trustworthiness of

the study, but it also seeks to approach the research from different views. It also provides inferences and information that are robust and can be generalised to similar researches in information seeking behaviour.

Yin (2006) also claims that a critical question for any mixed methods research is whether the methodologies are conducted in parallel, or integration is attempted at one or more stages, with Bryman (2006) and Linn & Curzon (2005) suggesting that very few mixed methods studies actually achieve high levels of integration. However, as suggested by De Lisle (2011), in his support of a qualitatively-led mixed methods research, the issue of poorly designed mixed methods of the past should not prevent the utilisation of both the qualitative and quantitative paradigms in seeking out the benefits of using high quality mixed methods for initiation, expansion and triangulation in this research.

The use of mixed methods research in seeking the information behaviour of parents when looking for childcare provides a unique way of seeing and investigating parent's behaviour and it is an approach which is congruent with philosophies used in a naturalistic inquiry (De lisle, 2011). Utilising mixed methods would also allow working on complex and multi-complex social issues involved when looking for childcare to add both qualitative and quantitative qualities to the repertoires of the research, which then enables the research to achieve important legitimisation goals, such as greater transferability.

In relation to this research, the use of mixed methods will also enhance the quality, impact and meaning of childcare research in England. Results and findings of the survey questionnaires and interviews are presented in the next chapter.

## **SUMMARY: METHODOLOGY**

An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Method which collects, analyses, mixes and draws inferences from both quantitative and qualitative data in one study was chosen for this study as it focuses on depth as well as breath of information across research strands (Bryman 2008). This utilises the quantitative survey questionnaire instrument to select participants for the qualitative in-depth interview; and the qualitative follow-up approach seeks to elucidate on the results presented in the previous phase, by explaining the initial reports in more depth. When used together, a mixed methods approach produces a complete knowledge to inform childcare theory, and the triangulation, convergence, corroboration and correspondence of results produces a comprehensive account of inquiry.

Medway a unitary local authority within Kent was selected as the location for this research for pragmatic reasons. The area is characterised by a mixture of village, urban, affluent areas and some pockets of deprivation. Medway has embraced central government programmes (and funding) over the years which have led to the rapid and effective expansion of local early years and childcare services with the development of 19 children centres serving families. The position of Medway as a Unitary area within the larger and generally more affluent Kent County, meant that swift improvements could be delivered.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with 35 parents selected from the first phase of the research which involved survey questionnaire administered to 550 parents. Participants for the interview phase were selected based on outlier answers, unique characteristics, use of childcare, family type, social economic status, gender and ethnicity. To capture parents experience when looking for childcare and their perceptions and experience during and after the process, individual in-depth interviews were arranged by telephone and respondents were allowed the flexibility to choose when and where would be convenient for them to be interviewed.

To ascertain strategic steer from policy makers, 8 stakeholders and practitioners working with children and families were selected for interviews. This list included Early Years & Childcare service managers, Childcare Providers, Children's Centre managers, Family and Childcare Trust manager, representative of Disabled Parents forum, a Health Practitioner and a Social Worker. Informed consent was sought from all participants at the onset of participation in the research so as to ensure an ethical

research. The objectives of the interviews was to determine the dynamics between the childcare market and parents' childcare information seeking behaviour; explore the impact of government policies on childcare and families and the implications of recent policies on families and the childcare market; identify policy implications of parents childcare information seeking behaviour and potential intervention strategies.

### **Data analysis**

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss (1967) was used to analyse the information. GT was identified as ideal for exploring integral social relationships and the behaviour of groups where there has been little exploration of the contextual factors that affect individual's lives; and a means to get through/beyond conjecture and preconception to exactly the underlying processes of what is going on, so that professionals can intervene with confidence to help resolve the participant's main concerns.

Data analysis and interpretation process involved assigning meaning to the collected information and determining the conclusions, significance and implications of the findings. The data collected in this research was evaluated for their usefulness and centrality in order to search for meaning and guide against descriptions, inferences and interpretations that are not useful for the research or potentially out of scope.

NVivo was used to analyse the interviews held with parents, stakeholders and the information advisors. The codes for the research were taken from the literature review, actual words used by the parents and their behaviours in the data, and from the insights of the researcher. Data coding was carried out by researcher and a childcare advisor to triangulate and corroborate information. As coding progressed, the ways data and codes group or cluster together becomes evident even as behaviours and sentiments appear. Subsequently, concomitant patterned sequences, categories and themes are discovered through open and axial coding processes. Automated analysis of texts also provided information broadly consistent with the results of human coding, and the concept allows the researcher to make meaningful conclusions about the emerging themes in the data. Establishing quality is quite important to this research. Rather than try to exclude bias from the process, the intention is to achieve a balance of biases in order to enhance the 'internal validity' of data. This was possible using 'respondent triangulation', which accommodates the perspectives of all participants, including the researcher's perspective. In this sense, the 'reflective' voice of the researcher represented yet another dimension interfacing with all the others (Jones, 2001).

## CHAPTER 5

# RESULTS & FINDINGS

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### Introduction

The findings from the quantitative survey comprising 500 parents (Q1) and the qualitative interviews held with 35 parents (Q2), including eight men and twenty-seven women, are presented in this chapter. The parents interviewed in Q2 were selected based on outlier results from the quantitative analysis conducted during the first phase of research. Other criteria used in the selection process included employment status, ethnicity, social economic status, childcare option, and disability. Findings from interviews with key stakeholders (QS) are also presented. Interviews were conducted with early years' practitioners, social workers, teachers, and information advisors. Representatives from the Kids Parent Partnership, the National Childcare Trust, the Childminding Co-ordinator (Prospects), Disability Parents, and the Carers Forum were also interviewed, along with a children's centre manager and a general practitioner.

### Parents' childcare information seeking behaviour

Childcare seems to mean different things to parents depending on their families' needs. Parents were asked to describe what childcare means for them and for their family. In broad terms, parents regarded childcare as a place where children can be looked after and cared for, enabling parents to manage work commitments. Parents described childcare in context of needs, physical development, welfare, and emotional support. Some simply described childcare as a safe place for children when parents are not available. A few others seemed sceptical about the definition of childcare and preferred to focus on its social and educational aspects, with the notion in mind that a childcare environment is more about learning and developing social skills with a degree of care also being involved.

*'For me I suppose it's looking after the children when either of the parents aren't available.'* **Sam, employed Dad**

*'...aided me to carry on working...'* **Employed Mum**

*'Childcare is your trip up that you've got in place so that you can manage your work commitments and obviously the child is cared for when you aren't able to.'* **Stay-at-home Dad**

Some parents simply view childcare as a backup for when neither parent are available to look after their children. Others see childcare as a respite and a break from their daily activities. Parents of children with disability see childcare in a dual context of meeting the needs of the child as well as providing a break for them. The levels of need, support required, and expectations of parents of Special Educational Needs (SEN) children are higher than what was described by other parents.

*'Well it gives me a break in the mornings, it gives me a few hours to do what I need, it gets my children out and socialising with other children and learning things before they go to 'big school' I call it.'* **Unemployed lone parent**

*'It also takes the pressure off me a bit, sounds awful, but sometimes you need to step away from it yourself. You need a break yourself so it's really important I think, incredibly important.'* **Older New Mum**

*'...it gives me a break in the morning...'* – **Stay-at-home, lone parent**

However, for one set of adoptive parents, childcare served a different purpose. As new parents, they wanted continuity of care for their son who used to attend nursery at his previous placement. They wanted minimal disruption to his routine and wanted to understand him through the process. Essentially, for these parents, childcare was not about finding somewhere to leave their child whilst they worked. It was more about the welfare and well-being of the child.

*'For us it was important to carry on with something he had been doing in his foster placement... so we wanted to continue with the structure and also socialisation with other children, because obviously I am actually off on adoption leave at the moment so childcare for us wasn't about taking the heat off of us as parents whilst we go to work - it was doing that other job that's equally as important.'* **Adoptive parent**

Parents also described childcare as an environment that not only stimulated the child, but also supplied skills the parents may not necessarily be able to give the child. This group of parents are not just interested in the care of the child or security; they want an environment that stimulates and supports the development of the child emotionally, socially, physically, and mentally. These parents also see childcare as comprising preparatory classes for starting school and getting used to routine and the structure of a school setting. If the child is within an environment for almost three hours, such parents believe that the child should be learning.

*'To me, childcare was about helping to build my son's environment given that he was in his late three's and would be going to school in September which he's now done.'* **Employed Mum**

One parent admits she may not be able to meet all her child's needs on her own; and describes childcare as '*supplying the things I can't give her*'. These include learning, the opportunity to make friends, and developing the child's socialisation skills. Taking a broader perspective, some parents see childcare as meeting their child's needs – ensuring they are clothed, washed, clean, eating well, sleeping well – essentially encapsulating all the physical needs of the child.

*'...it's completely her needs, looking after her, making sure she's clothed, washed, she's clean, make sure she cleans her teeth because I keep on about that, actually she looks all right before she walks out the door, putting food on the table, making sure she's eating enough, vegetables or whatever and bedding, making sure she has enough sleep. Everything really in childcare, it is making sure her whole needs are supervised.'* - **Mother of disabled child**

*'Instil structure [to] cover all areas... child's welfare and emotional support...'* **Adopting Mum**

*'...education side...making friends, socialisation'* **Stay-at-home Mum**

Generally, parents regard childcare as involving a setting or person that supports the needs of the child and provides care using the child's home as a baseline and benchmark. This could be formal or informal, through a childcare provider, partner, grandparents, or someone paid for their services such as nannies, people who come and pick up children from school, or a childcare establishment.

*'Somebody else caring for your child in as near a way as possible to the way that you care for them.'* **Unemployed mother**

*'Well it covers all areas doesn't it down to the child's welfare, emotional support just everything really.'* **Unemployed dad**

*'For me childcare would be if I was going back to work and I used a childminder or a nursery.'* **Stay-at-home mum**

*'In my view childcare is someone who takes care of children from all aspects, takes care of children, they feed them, they take them to school, take them to visiting areas.'* **Bangladeshi mum**

*'Somebody you pay to look after your children.'* **Employed Mum, mother of twins**

According to a parent, childcare is 'a personal thing' that is 'unique' to each child. This suggests that what works for one child may not necessarily work for another child, and that parents need to determine what suits each of their children.

*'I think childcare is a very personal thing, childcare that is correct for one child won't be correct for another child so it's a very personal thing.'* **Employed dad**

## Childcare: who is responsible?

Respondents were asked whose responsibility it is in their family to organise childcare. The question was asked to gauge gender participation in childcare in the family. Answers varied by household type, work participation, and patterns in the family. Single parents had sole responsibility for sorting childcare arrangements, although they sometimes received help from family members, friends, and neighbours. Although two-parent families have the added advantage of being able to share childcare responsibilities, 95% of the mothers interviewed claimed sole responsibility whilst the rest confirmed that responsibility was shared. However, childcare was mostly arranged around the mother's working pattern rather than the father's. Even when both genders were involved in the same career, such as teaching, the approach to childcare responsibility still reflected the traditional role of the mother being responsible for the child. This is consistent with the socio-cultural approach in Role Theory (Stark, 2007). That is, society expects the mother to look after the child or children, and also expects the mother to seek childcare provision information and make most of the decisions regarding childcare arrangements. This is consistent with the normative expectations associated with the position of mothers in the UK social system (Allen & Van de Vliert (1984)).

*'My wife she is actually a teacher so most of the time she is dealing with my kid but we are sharing the responsibilities. I think it's more like 50/40.'* **Romanian employed Dad, new to area**

*'Mine. I'm not saying he doesn't help at all, he does help, but I organise it. The thing is he's a teacher so he might be at home but he won't be available because he's working. So it's trying to think of... 25%'* – **Stay-at-home mother of twins.**

Survey and interview findings show that it is expected that wives adjust to their husbands' work patterns. Furthermore, when men adjust to their partner's work pattern, this is viewed as 'outside the norm'. The women surveyed and interviewed admitted that their husbands do help, when they are around, mostly for school drop-offs or occasionally with childcare during school holidays, but the main responsibility for arranging childcare and ensuring it works for the family still falls on the mother.

*'I'm the one who oversees the arrangements in that I'm the one who makes sure we've got something for the week...'* **Part-time teacher**



Economic changes to working patterns and globalisation have led to changes from the nine-to-five atypical working hours to a 24/7 economy. This has had an impact on how childcare responsibilities are shared in the families surveyed. As more men work further away from home, they are not available to participate in childcare. Even though flexible work/life lifestyles and working patterns are being offered to parents by the government through legislation, there is evidence that the women surveyed have taken up these options more than men. There is no evidence that government policies have facilitated or constrained gender roles, as has been suggested by Stark (2006). Rather, economic conditions and family circumstances have influenced and driven gender roles in childcare.

*'Well he works full time and he quite often his job takes him, although he is based locally, his job takes him to London a lot so during the week he will most certainly not be around to provide childcare or hunt for it if it's required. I'm a stay-at-home Mum so that responsibility falls to me.'* **Stay-at-home mother of twins**

*'Some weeks he does work virtually all week because that's the way his work pattern is for that week, then other weeks he does absolutely zero because he's in another country, so I would say if you averaged it out it's probably about 70/30.'* - **Part-time teacher**

Recent changes to women's traditional roles as homemakers and men's as breadwinners has brought about shifts to responsibilities in the family and has resulted in men taking more active responsibility in the home and participating more fully in household chores and childcare. Two 'house husbands' in the survey were of the opinion that the decision to stay at home to look after children while their partners work was based on their low earnings, which made it easy for them to give up work to look after the home and their children. The men described this choice as 'a bit different to the norm' and more challenging for them, even though they confirmed that they do enjoy looking after their children and felt it worth the sacrifice.

*'It is much harder now... She's doing more hours. She's doing full time, she got [a] promotion in her job so she's now, doing more hours and I'm doing more of the household chores if you can call it.'* **Stay-at-home Dad**

*'I think in comparison to single parents and stuff like that, our challenges were minor. It's just one of the things you have to do really, when you've got a child, you make some sacrifices and places like I can't go out socially. But then there's the joys as well, so there was challenges don't get me wrong but there were times when you were thinking you know, it was always unfortunately if it came down to who had to give up their work for things it was always going to be her...'* **Stay-at-home Dad**

On the other hand, mothers who have given up their work to look after the family appear to take pride in being able to take charge of childcare responsibilities in the family. Some mothers actually viewed this as a privilege that not everyone could afford. One of the mothers interviewed described her role as ‘giving up work so [that] she can be a mother’.

*‘Mine... Not really, he works full time you know, my jobs being the Mummy at the moment as I’ve given up my career so I can be a Mum.’ – Stay-at-home Mum*

It also appears that women would rather be responsible in this area of childcare. This is probably due to maternal instinct and attachment, or the inability to entrust responsibility to men as they are not traditionally or naturally expected to be experts in childcare.

*‘...he’s not very organised, and he’s not very good at sorting things out.’ New to the area, employed Mum*

Overall, 80% of parents interviewed indicated a 70:30 ratio of childcare participation of mothers and fathers, 15% admitted a 50:50 sharing and 5% claimed sole responsibility. However, when it came to choosing the right childcare, both parties seemed to be involved in the decision-making process, with parents visiting childcare providers together. From the survey, it appears that childcare arrangements for the families surveyed fall into the categories below, depending upon the parents’ values and circumstances:

- **Traditional Approach:** Mum stays at home to look after the children and family (based on value systems)
- **Non-traditional Approach:** Dad stays at home to look after children (determined by the higher earnings factor)
- **Synergistic Approach:** Both partners work and contribute to childcare by arranging and sharing childcare responsibilities around their work patterns (based on modern egalitarian values)
- **Formal Contractual Approach:** Registered childcare provider is contracted to provide childcare support (both partners work, but are not able to juggle childcare due to strict working arrangements)
- **Informal Flexible Approach:** Both partners work, but use informal childcare provided by friends or family members.

## **Childcare Information-seeking behaviour: When is it triggered?**

The lifecycle of information-seeking behaviour begins when parents commence the search for information about childcare, and varies by respondent's outlook and perception of the availability of quality childcare in the area where they live and work. For some, the search starts during the pregnancy (i.e., as early as 3 months) and lasts up to three or more years after birth. In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q2), 77% of parents had used childcare in the past and 11% of parents had a child with disabilities. The 22.5% of parents that had not used childcare in the past provided the following reasons: 'My partner / family look after my children' (23.3%); 'I do not use childcare' (8.9%); 'Difficulty in finding childcare available at the times that I need it' (5.6%); 'My child / children are old enough to look after themselves' (4.3%).

A number of respondents acknowledged that service quality (1.3%), a suitable location (2.8%), suitability for child disability and special needs (1.8%), and the need for short-term childcare only, were factors explaining why childcare was not being used. This has policy implications for information seeking; that is, when do expectant parents commence information searches during their child's early years? The inferences the researcher has drawn from Q<sup>1</sup> and Q<sup>2</sup> is that childcare information provision needs to be made available as early as possible for the 'early adopters/seekers' of childcare via multiple contact points and channels, ranging from the Internet to antenatal clinics, postnatal clinics and GP surgeries.

The information horizon, in line, with Fisher et al. (2005) and Sonnenwald (1999), demonstrates that, for childcare, when, where, and how parents decide to act and seek information varies based on their social network, situation, and context. The key levers and milestones for parents surveyed were: returning to work; the need for respite; initiating the transition to formal education; and increasing the child's success rate and chances of being accepted into oversubscribed settings and schools.

## Childcare Information Seeking: How is it triggered?

In Q<sup>2</sup> (Q4a), parents were asked to describe how they looked for childcare, i.e., to identify their pattern and search steps. A number of respondents noted that at the commencement of their search they were confused or perplexed as to where and how to start:

*'It was really difficult because there's not much to look at...'* **Stay-at-home Mum**

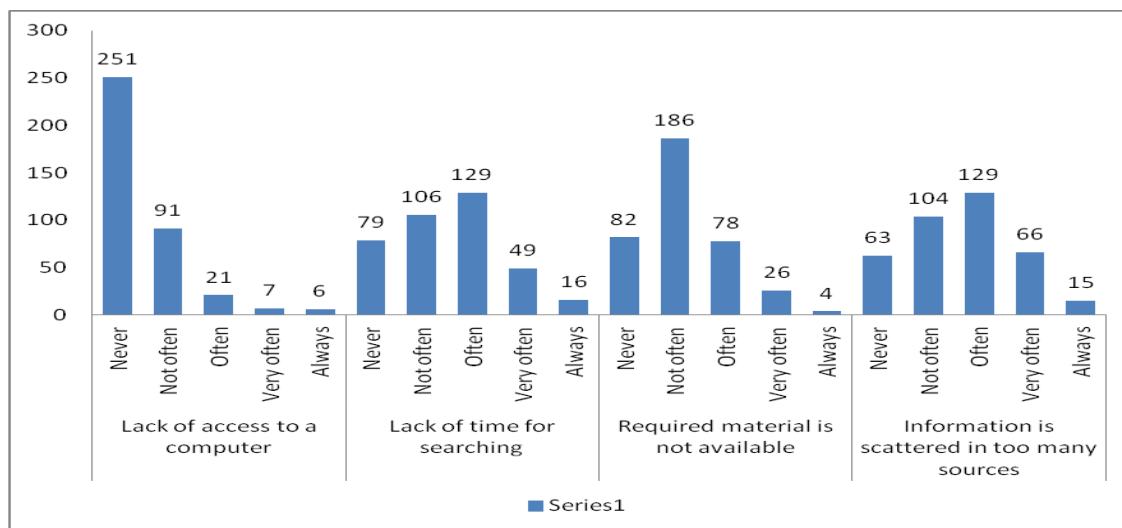
*'I didn't know where to start...'* **Lone parent, part-time employed Mum**

*'When we were moving into the area, we phoned. Because we're a service family, my husband is in the military... we obviously made various calls to schools and read the Ofsted reports... it was from the school website that we realised there was a preschool on site.'* **Military-employed Mum**

However, in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q14), when the researcher asked parents to confirm whether the time they spend trying to find the right information had been a barrier to accessing childcare or childcare information, 72 parents opined that it was (18.2%) while 305 parents (77.2%) denied it. While there is some level of uncertainty at the onset of the search process, this is not as significant as suggested in the theory; see Kuhlthau (1993) and Fisher et al. (2005). In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q7a), parents were asked to rate their overall experience when looking for childcare. The expectation was that the overall rating would be significantly negative due to initial confusion or anxiety, but this was not the case. Seventy-two (18.2%) of parents had a 'Very good' experience, 162 (41%) had a 'Good' experience, 107 (27.1%) had a 'Fair' experience, while 21 parents (5.3%) had a 'Poor' experience and 7 (1.8%) had a 'Very poor' experience.

In essence, parents surveyed had the proven ability to make sense of childcare information and the unambiguous situation of information needs and the decision-making process. This fact was reconfirmed in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q24) when parents were asked: 'How often do you face problems while seeking information for childcare? The key pressure points are that information is spread out over too many sources (53.2%); that there is insufficient time for searching (49.2%); and that required material is not available (27.3%). This implies that even though information was spread across too many sources, parents were able to develop a mental construct and model to achieve projected outcomes and a satisfactory experience.

**Figure 24: Q<sup>1</sup> (Q24) - Barriers when seeking childcare information**



This may be attributable to different sources and channels of information available to parents as reflected in Q<sup>2</sup> (Q4a).

### Local advertisements

A number of parents in Q<sup>2</sup> (Q4a) noted that they commenced their information search through local advertisements, i.e., ‘local advertising and just reading reviews’.

‘They were local to the school’ ***Mother of two sets of twins***

‘I looked at the notice board in my local children’s centre... then I just looked online...’ ***Full-time employed lone parent***

In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q9), parents were asked to confirm how they found out about childcare. Ten (2.5%) saw adverts at a medical practice, health clinic, or through a presentation or leaflet provided by a health visitor. Three parents (0.8%) viewed advertisements at their local libraries; 1 respondent (0.3%) found childcare through a job centre; and 17.5% (69 parents) of parents found childcare through advertisements placed in schools. Sixty-six parents (16.7%) selected ‘Other’ as their source of childcare information. The following categories were selected in the following proportions: the Family Information Service (20%); Friend/relatives (41%); the Internet (24.3%); and Parent and toddler groups (10.1%). Physical advertisements placed in varying locations were effective information channels for 21.1% of parents. However, the level of effectiveness and utilisation rates varied significantly depending on the

channel, i.e., from schools to the local library. The results will help decision makers evaluate and prioritise resource allocation on marketing spending and investment. It also highlights the fact that 'hard-to-reach' parents can be served through these channels, if targeted appropriately. In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q19), parents were asked which organisations/channels they would use in the future for childcare information. The following proportions were indicated: Children's centres (82%), Family information services (81.3%), Friends and family (90.9%), Local council offices (59%), Schools (82.3%), Public libraries (48.4%), Faith and voluntary groups (25.8%), and Healthcare practitioners (61.8%) in Medway. This illustrates that faith and voluntary groups are not seen as viable options or channels for information seeking by parents in the childcare sector. This has policy implications for the 'Big Society' programme of the current administration promoting and encouraging faith and voluntary organisations to step up and deliver local services such as childcare information, advisory, and guidance services.

### **Online reviews**

As indicated above, 24.3% of Q<sup>1</sup> respondent used an online search in their childcare information-seeking process. A number of parents in Q<sup>2</sup> (Q4a) noted that they commenced their search through online reviews and Internet searches:

*'I found her through Facebook... I was ringing a lot of people from the Family Information Service website'*  
**Student mother**

*'The childminder that we used was a friend in the village... My wife used to play darts with her...'* **Stay-at-home father**

*'I went onto medway.gov and found the Family Information Service...'* **Part-time working mother**

*'I phoned the Council... the website's terrible... they sent me an email with the list of childminders in my area and I just went through them...'* – **Full-time employed mother**

*'Online. Well, I did put in nurseries or play schools around... eventually, in the end, I just asked friends and family. And I think they were the best word of mouth I think anyway...'* **Stay-at-home mother**

*'I looked online, I asked social workers... just looking online mostly...'* **Adopting parent**

*'[I] went online, [called the setting], picked four of the best phone conversations, went to 4 different nurseries [and] had interviews with them [and] we went for the one we felt was the best'* **Croatian mother**

*'...went to the website... called childcare.co.uk... phoned lots of them [and] then went and interviewed them all'*  
**Asian mother**

*'I find them [via the] Internet... [using] my postcode [got] six preschools [and went to the one] most nearest [to us]'*  
**Student mother**

*'I looked in the area that we were moving to... then I visited three different nurseries in the area... yeah it was from Google and the Family Information Service.'*  
**Employed, new-to-area mother**

In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q20), parents were asked to indicate their favourite three methods of obtaining childcare information: 47.3% (187 parents) noted that searching on the Internet was their first preference. This was followed closely by talking face-to-face with an advisor (41%), talking on the telephone with an advisor (14.7%), reading a leaflet or pamphlet (5.8%), writing a letter (2.5%), and through television and radio (0.5%). These findings show that information-seeking behaviour can be shaped through the digital transformation of service offerings and provisions. Parents like the choice of independent research confirmed or quality assured with recommendations from family and friends, alongside face-to-face interactions and discussions with advisors. Their information search preferences show that service delivery policies need to harness existing platforms and transform the ease of use, availability, and content relevance of digital services (including social media coverage).

The findings also confirm that physical advertisements through the TV and radio are not as effective as previously thought in the childcare sector. Since 1998, a considerable amount of resources have been allocated to advertisements in magazines, leaflets, public transport (e.g., local buses), pamphlets, and posters in various locations. Overall, the findings suggest that parents value independent Internet searches and face-to-face discussion with advisors (from the Family Information Services and health visitors, etc.).

To explore this further, Q<sup>1</sup> (Q16) evaluated parents' trust levels in the quality of childcare information sources. Parents were asked: 'Do you trust childcare information sources?' Two hundred and seventeen parents (54.9%) responded in the affirmative with reference to childcare information on the Internet. Three hundred and forty-one (86.3%) trusted information provided by the Family Information Service; 32.7% trusted information provided by Faith groups; 51.4% trusted information provided by Voluntary organisations. Local councils had a 75.9% information trust

rating while local newspapers had a 29.6% rating. Other trust ratings were as follows: Radio and TV (27.8%); Health practitioners (79.5%); Children's centres (84.8%); Schools (87.8%); and Government publications (66.3%). While the level of trust for schools, and faith and voluntary organisations was higher than that for local newspapers and TV/radio, actual utilisation rates (in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q9)) were rather low.

This suggests that there is an inverse relationship between level of trust and utilisation rates. This is very important, because the key factors considered when looking for childcare are Trust (71.4%); Experience (55.9%); Values (45.6%); Time (33.2%); Culture (9.9%); and Beliefs (7.1%). For more information, see Q<sup>1</sup> (Q28). However, there are positive correlations between the level of trust and utilisation rates on for Internet searches, Family Information Services, and Children's centres. This suggests that these are significant channels for childcare information-seeking behaviours.

### **Through friends and family**

A number of parents in Q<sup>2</sup> (Q4a) responded that they commenced their information search through friends and family:

*'I asked friends if they'd heard if there were any good (childcare) ones... and went on their recommendations.'*

**Older mother**

*'No, well, I didn't know anywhere... but their Nan (ex-partner's Mum) runs a playschool... perfect opportunity to go there.'* **Lone parent**

*'...through people and stuff...'* **Unemployed, lone parent**

*'[A] friend's recommendation. That was why I went along with them, but obviously each child is different.'*  
**Employed father**

*'...word of mouth from other people, other parents...'* **Part-time employed lone parent**

The childcare options parents used varied within the sample population in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q6), from Pre-school (54.9%) to Home alone (1.5%). The survey demonstrates that the top three childcare options are Pre-schools, Grandparents, and Day nurseries. This was followed by Childminders, Neighbours/friends, After-school clubs, other relatives, and Holiday schemes. This mirrors the observations from Q<sup>2</sup>. Together, the



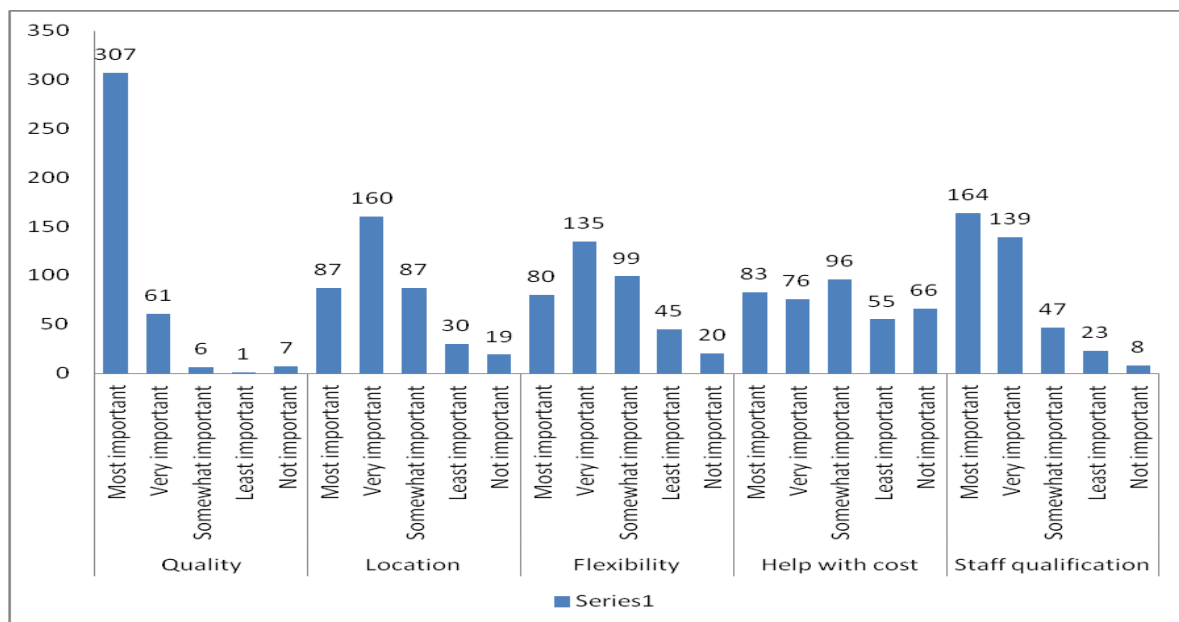
results suggest that there is a high level of dependence on grandparents, neighbours/friends, and other relatives i.e., friends and family. However, the key drivers for choosing a childcare provider, in order of priority, are as follows: Quality, Staff qualification, Flexibility, Location, and Help with Cost.

In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q28), parents were able to provide an indication of some of the underlying factors they took into consideration when looking for childcare, ranging from Trust (282 parents), Experience (221 parents), Values (180 parents), Time (131 parents), Culture (39 parents), and Beliefs (28 parents). The initial trust that parents have come, for the most part, from the validation or recommendations of friends and families, who have used certain service providers or conveyed feedback from other parents who have used or not used certain services.

This result dovetails with Q<sup>1</sup> (Q12), which evaluates the value parents place on the unique selling points (USPs) of childcare providers. In order of priority, the USPs are: Quality, Staff qualifications, Location, Flexibility, and Help with cost, as shown in Figure 25 below. In Q<sup>2</sup> (Q4a), parents note that ‘the premises, the safety of our child was the top priority, the second was the ratio of staff... to each child... because sometimes schools are... understaffed.’

This demonstrates that supply side factors are still significant in terms of securing and increasing the quality of childcare provision, the number of childcare providers with adequate staff qualifications, and the location of appropriate childcare providers where services are most required. While current and past government initiatives have focused on helping with the cost of childcare provision through tax credits and other incentives (including the provision of early education funding for 2, 3, and 4 year olds), the focus now needs to target supply side factors.

**Figure 25: {Q<sup>1</sup> (Q12)} - Childcare Choice Factors**



### Assessing childcare information-seeking experiences

In assessing overall experience in childcare information seeking, most parents rated their experience as ‘Very good’ (18.2%) and ‘Good’ (41%), with 27.1% of parents (107 people) noting their experience as ‘Fair’ in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q7a). The description of their experiences varied among parents in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q7b). Those who struggled with finding childcare described their information-seeking experience as below:

*‘Mine field.’ Student mother*

*‘[L]ack of information about options was biggest problem.’ Unemployed lone parent (looking for work)*

These assertions suggest that some parents do struggle to make sense of childcare and that information knowledge could be an issue for others who struggle with choosing the best option to suit their families. In both instances, parents may require extra support and guidance to make sense of the various childcare options available and make an optimal choice.

*‘...I found it difficult to find childcare suitable for both. Many holiday schemes... seem to stop at 11 years’ Part-time employed mother*

*'It was hard to find a good childminder. It took many months...'* **Part-time employed mother (high-income family)**

For some families, finding a particular childcare type, i.e., childminders, was frustrating, not necessarily because the information was not available, but rather due to the non-availability of provision. This information gap may lead to families who would have been best supported by childminders (due to their flexible nature), not being able to work or being forced to look after their children part time.

*'Finding a great preschool was no problem but finding a childminder to return to work now that the children are at school has been ridiculously stressful'* **Part-time employed mother (high-income)**

*'Difficulty in matching childminders with Ofsted reports'* **New-to-area mother**

As Ofsted does not provide a provider's name online, but merely displays the unique reference number, parents find it difficult to match the Ofsted report unless they ask the provider for the information. This in itself is a barrier for parents who would like to use the Ofsted report for verification. Ofsted's policy to not present a unique reference number and a provider's name on the same webpage online is an age-old strategy for preventing fraudulent tax credit claims. The government therefore needs to consider how to provide this information online, and find a better means for detecting fraudulent claims.

*'Hard to search very thoroughly to find what I wanted...'* **Mother of disabled child (full-time employed)**

*'Hard to identify provision for disabled young adults'* **Mother of disabled child**

Parents of disabled children said that they find it particularly 'hard' to search or identify provision suitable for their children. According to the parents, the time that would be required to search thoroughly, given the level of care required by the child, is simply unavailable. Identifying provision for disabled young adults correlates with Dervin's (1983) sense-making theory: parents struggle to make sense of the information available to suit their childcare needs. However, identification of provision may improve with the introduction of local offer information for children with disabilities and special educational needs. This group of parents are classified as 'information poor' due to their inability to search or utilise information available based on their circumstances and information horizon.

*'I found it difficult to find one she liked but the information provided was good'* **Stay-at-home mother**

*'Limited local knowledge as new to Kent, made looking difficult, as did knowing any people for recommendations'*  
**New-to-area mother**

Some of the comments made by parents who have had a good experience in their information seeking and search for childcare reflected the use of various channels for finding childcare. It would seem that those who can make sense of the options available are versatile in the use of technology, and that those with good social networks or information horizons have a better search experience.

*'Good overall, I know what I was looking for and used various forms (IT, talking to mums) to find a childcare situation/carer that suited'* **Full-time employed mother**

*'Used Google maps to identify geographical fits visited all possible 4 and on the basis of visits was torn between two...'* **Part-time employed mother**

*'There are various websites I found very helpful'* **Part-time employed mother**

*'Found quite a bit of info online, using Google search'* **Lone parent in full-time employment**

*'Searched on the internet'* **Full-time employed mother**

A military family mother also highlighted the importance of word of mouth. As these families move around a lot, they rely on other families in the military for recommendation: This is their social network, information environment, and readily available means of verifying a childcare provider that may have been discovered through online searches.

*'In the military, we rely heavily on the Internet and others in the military to make recommendations...'* **Military full-time employed mother**

Whilst some rely on the Internet, others confirm a simple call to the council was the answer to their childcare search. As the Family Information Service is within the council, it is very likely that parents will be signposted to this team for childcare and still classify this as the council. This in itself confirms the fact that parents have a tendency to use channels of communication that they are used to, comfortable with, or trusting of.

*'Very easy, one phone to the council and got all the information I needed straight away'* **Full-time employed mother**

*'I used the family information service to gather information...'* **Full-time employed mother**

*'The Family Information Service was very helpful'* **Part-time employed mother (with part-time employed partner)**

*'[I]t was quite quick and simple, I found the nearest nursery and managed to get a place immediately'*  
**Unemployed lone parent**

*'I was given a choice of childcare and was able to receive a placement'* **Unemployed lone parent**

*'I received a list of registered childminders from the council and then visited a few nurseries and childminders before making my decision'* **White, Irish part-time employed mother**

Parents described their experience as simple, straightforward, and reasonable, based on the various options they chose to look for childcare. Parents not only liked to 'mix and match' childcare options, they also appeared to prefer mixing the choices of channels through which they sought childcare for validation and verification.

*'No problem'* **Part-time employed mother**

*'Only looked for pre-school and looking was okay'* **Part-time mother (low-income family)**

*'Reasonable – asked other parents and health visitors for advice'* **Full-time employed mother (white other)**

*'Simple choice of local pre-school combined with grandparents'* **Part-time employed mother (also looking after home)**

*'The experience I have has been brilliant'* **Stay-at-home, self-employed mother (low income)**

*'Positive, we had hoped for a village nursery and ours fits the bill'* **Part-time employed mother**

*'I had no problem in finding childcare'* **Stay-at-home mother**

The experience of finding childcare varied across the parents interviewed and was largely dependent on family circumstance and parenthood stage. First-time parents may struggle more than second-time or third-time parents, as they are not yet familiar with the systems and processes. Similarly, those new to the area may find it more difficult to find childcare than those who have lived in the area, are familiar with local services, and have access to local reviews and recommendations. Interviews also revealed that the current order in which parents search for childcare is as

follows: (1) Internet search; (2) Contact provider; (3) Friends and family recommendations; (4) Ofsted validation; (5) Setting visits to observe the environment, meet the staff, and ask questions.

*'I asked family and friends for recommendations.'* **Full-time employed mother**

*'[I] used word of mouth.'* **White, full-time employed mother**

*'Internet very easily found.'* **Stay-at-home mother of disabled child**

*'I researched and visited the day nursery'* **Full-time employed mother**

*'I used Google and word-of-mouth'* **Self-employed mother (with self-employed partner)**

In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q10), parents confirmed that they were satisfied with the information provided in terms of being Easy to understand (87.3%), Relevant (83.5%), Accurate (75.9%), Up to date (72.9%), Comprehensive (73.9%), and in a readily comprehensible physical form (72.7%). In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q11), 81% of parents confirmed that the information they received met all their needs.

To understand the drivers for information-seeking behaviours, the researcher assessed the value parents placed in how and where they sourced their information needs. Q<sup>1</sup> (Q17) examined the order of priority parents placed on what they valued as 'Extremely important' as follows: Information being up to date (66.8%); Reliability of information (62.5%); Quality of information (61.3%); Previous experience of use (36.5%); Ease of understanding (34.4%); Accessibility (31.1%); Ease of Use (27.8%); Frequency of use (22.3%) and Preference (22%). This is not surprising as it dovetails and aligns with the findings of Q<sup>1</sup> (Q20), which determined the top favourite methods of obtaining childcare information to be: searching the Internet (47.3%); talking face-to-face with an advisor (41%); talking on the telephone with an advisor (14.7%); reading a leaflet or pamphlet (5.8%); writing a letter (2.5%); reading a magazine or newspaper (1.8%) and access through the television or radio (0.5%). This demonstrates why reliance on friends and family is also prominent: parents value unbiased information and advice from advisors over the phone or through face-to-face interactions. This extends the model of information seeking for childcare from the generic presentation.

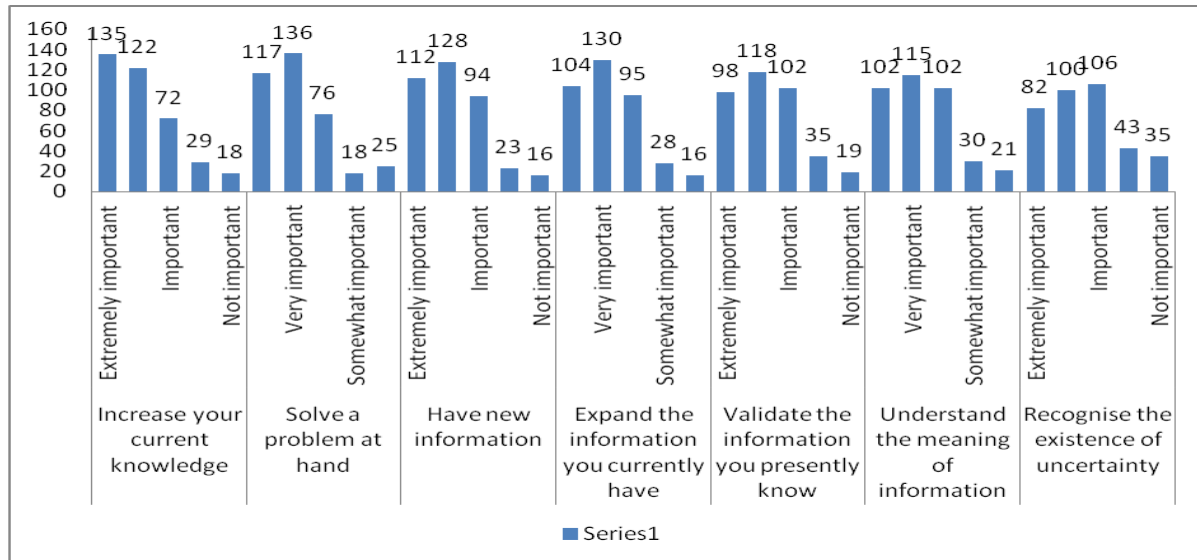
In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q13), the researcher validated the value parents placed in access to accurate and unbiased information for making childcare decisions, opining that this was 'Most important' (21.8%) and 'Very important' (58.2%). While it is interesting to note 15.4% (61 parents) said that such information was 'Somewhat important', only 10 parents (out of 387 parents) believed that it was either least important or unimportant to them. This has significant policy implications for the local authorities and central government, in suggesting that they provide an enabling environment and level playing field in information provision through the Family Information Service.

The research also explored how public access to computers could be effectively and efficiently enabled across different locations to meet the needs of parents (including hard-to-reach parents) and digitally-deprived citizens. In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q22), the study assessed whether parents preferred to have public access to computers. Findings show that the top 3 locations were computers in public libraries and community hubs (44.1%); in Children's Centres (38.5%); and in GP surgeries or healthy living centres. The least favoured were computers in faith and voluntary organisations (11.1%). To explore these further, parents were asked in In Q<sup>1</sup> (Q24) to assess how often they faced problems while seeking information. The focus here was on rating preferences of parents for 'Often to always'. The researchers discovered that the greatest problems faced by parents were lack of time for searching (61.6%); information being spread out over too many sources (53.2%); required material being unavailable (27.3%); and lack of access to a computer (8.6%). This helps to explain that, while lack of access to a computer was not a significant barrier, improvements made to broaden the availability of computers in community hubs could nonetheless be expected to yield significant benefits for parents.

To define the model of information-seeking behaviour, the research focused on exploring parents' preferences in terms of the format, channel, and future use of information to inform future seeking behaviour. Parents prefer electronic/digital material (62%) to printed material (34.9%) and audio/visual materials (4.1%). This reflects a consistent pattern in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q27), where parents indicated that they preferred to receive information by email (63.8%), post (35.9%), text (5.3%) and other channels (0.8%). While in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q25), parents predominantly wanted their information

in English (97.2%), future requirements are extremely important for increasing current knowledge (34.2%) in recognising the existence of uncertainty (20.8%).

**Figure 26: {Q<sup>1</sup> (Q23)}- Parents' Information Needs**



Overall in Q<sup>2</sup> (Q15), parents were asked if they could have done things differently and responded as follows

*'I don't think so.'* **Employed father**

*'I don't know how I would have done.'* **Part-time employed nurse**

*'I thought it will be easier to find about childcare and in retrospect I would have probably looked sooner.'* **Stay-at-home mother**

*'There's always room for improvement but I guess its difficult now even on hindsight, probably nothing, no. Everything went pretty smoothly.'* **Employed father**

*'I think I stuck to the one childminder provider because they could provide the hours that I needed, in hindsight, I don't know if I could have changed that.'* **Mother of two sets of twins**

*'I don't think we would have done anything differently.'* **Croatian mother**

*'I probably would have looked at a few more settings to put the children in.'* **Employed mother (using informal childcare – grandmother)**

*'I think probably a bit more research of the nursery instead of just going by one friend.'* **Employed mother**

*'No not really.'* **Asian mother**

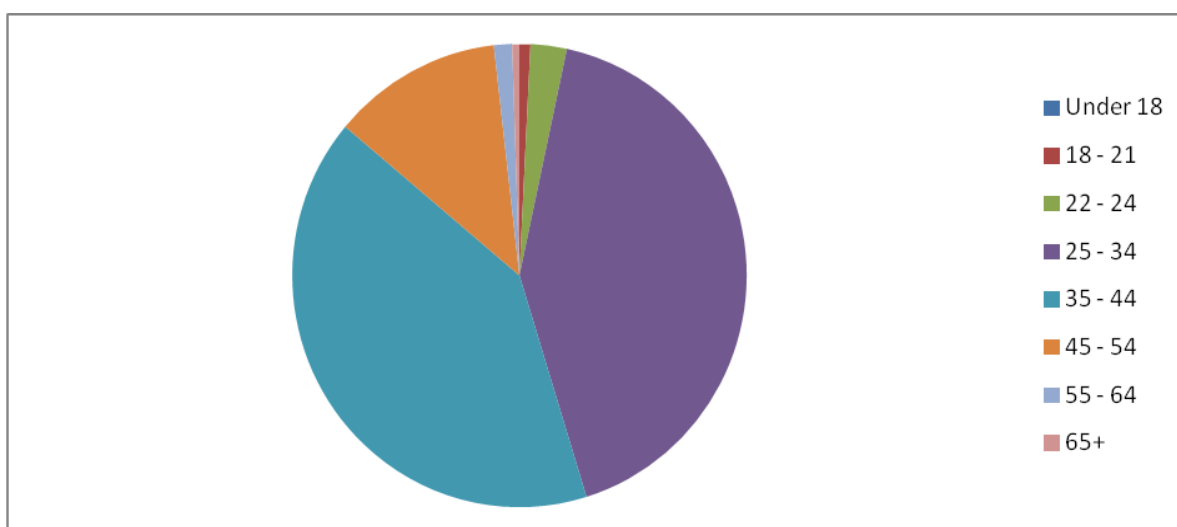


*'No I think it has worked for us.'* **Employed mother (using informal care – mother-in-law)**

*'Maybe looking back I would have said what I thought more [to the childcare provider] instead of being worried about rocking the boat.'* **New- to-area mother**

This demonstrates that, even on reflection, parents viewed their information-seeking behaviour as predictable, as demonstrated in the responses they provided to support the model of information seeking behaviour presented and proposed in section 5.3. The research explored the links between demographics and social economic behaviours, with 77% (304 parents) of respondents having used childcare in the past and 11.1% (85 parents) with a child with disabilities or Special Educational Needs (SEN). The sample population had a significant number of parents aged between 25 and 44.

**Figure 27: {Q1 (Q34)} - Parents' Age Distribution**



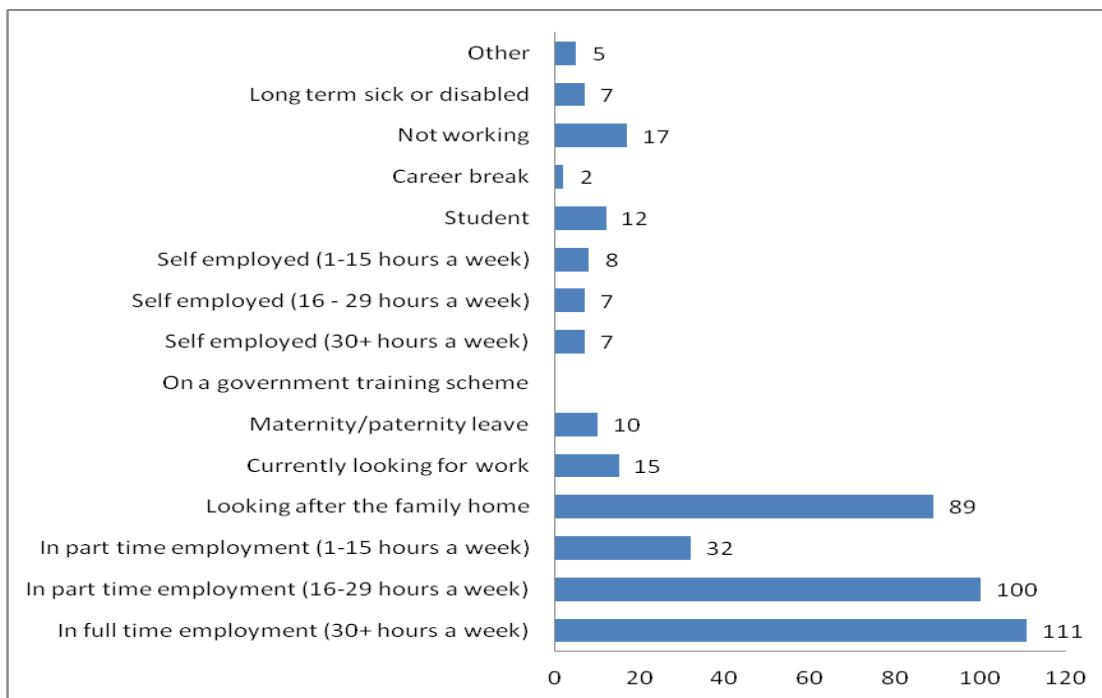
The gender mix was 89.6% (354 parents) female and 6.6% (26 parents) male [Q1 (Q35)]. A review of the total household income gave a very varied outlook with 10.6% (42 parents) earning a combined income of less than £10,000 as per Q1 (Q36). Two hundred and twenty-nine parents (58.8%) described themselves as 'Married couples with dependent children' while 72 parents (18.2%) were lone parents with dependent children, as per Q1 (Q37).

In Q1 (Q38), the researcher explored the different working patterns of the parents who responded to the survey. Only 111 parents were in full-time employment (30+

hours a week). For parents who were not in paid employment, the researcher identified potential options to enable them to consider working, training, or studying in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q40).

The majority (103 parents) indicated that they would go back to work, training, or studying if their children were older. This means that no policy incentives are required to encourage parents to return to work. However, 6 parents (1.5%) indicated that they would not consider working, training, or studying in the future. This was explored further, with indications that parents with disabled or SEN children tend to reach this view.

**Figure 28: {Q1 (Q38)} - Parents' Employment Status**



A policy implication is that further support is required to target this group of parents, helping them to return to work, training, or studying in the future. It is important to note that 15 parents (3.8%), as per Q<sup>1</sup> (Q42), indicated that they consider themselves as disabled parents or parents with SEN.

The research outcome in Q<sup>1</sup> (Q40) also highlights the fact that 67 parents (17%) need more financial help to enable them to return to work, training, or studying. The policy implications are twofold: First, on the supply side, the more childcare spaces are available in the right locations the more the cost to parents is driven down.

Although the new childcare bill proposes the increase of free early education funding from 15 hours per week to 30 hours per week for working parents, the central government needs to reconsider extending the 2/3-year-old free spaces to all children under 5 years old (as is done in other Scandinavian countries). This will enable quality standards to be raised, reducing costs for the benefit of parents. Access to these services, while universal, would have the effect of gatekeeping citizens entitled to reap the benefits of these incentives i.e., citizens and visitors who can work and live in the UK.

Secondly, on the demand side, it raises the question of how parents can best meet the rising cost of childcare (the demand side). The UK government could enable this market through the targeted introduction of childcare insurance schemes to boost the current arrangement with childcare vouchers. This would shift the burden from the Government to the private sector, enabling efficient allocation of the subsidies provided in the marketplace. However, one needs to exercise caution with these research outcomes, as 226 parents (57.2%) indicated that they would prefer to look after their children than return to work, as per Q<sup>1</sup> (Q41). This reinforces the theory of attachment, and has policy implications regarding how society can best support a gradual return to the workplace, while also supporting and keeping parents in the workplace (as discussed in the next section).

## **Parental attachment and safeguarding concerns**

People's experience when seeking information was described by Kuhlthau (1993) to be holistic, with interplay of thoughts, feelings and actions which take into cognisance the affective aspects or feelings of a person in a process of information seeking along with the cognitive and physical aspects. Parents interviewed in this research highlighted that, even though finding childcare might be easy, it nonetheless led to worry. This suggests that finding childcare involves an interplay of thoughts and emotions that may affect information seeking.

*'Easy but still a worry'* **White/Caribbean part-time employed mother**

Leaving a child to a childcare provider was a decision most parents interviewed described as very difficult, especially for their first child. One of the parents described the process as 'heart-wrenching', and another parent said she came out crying after leaving her child in the nursery. Some of the parents agreed it was hard at the beginning, but eventually both parents and the children get used to the arrangement and settle into the new phase.

*'When I left her there I came away crying! She really didn't like it; she's never been away from me. Obviously the teachers were telling me the best thing I could do is just walk away and let her.'* **Full-time employed mother**

Some mothers confirmed they struggled to leave their children initially for fear of being seen a poor parent as they viewed their 'mothering' role as their main priority. Some claim they felt they were failing in their role until the child eventually settled.

*'It was hard at the beginning, a lot of mums think it's quite easy to dump your child; it's a horrible feeling at the beginning because you feel you are one of them. In the nursery I could trust them, in a couple of weeks I was feeling okay, the experience has been good, and for me it's a completely different experience between nursery and childminder. Although the end is the same that's what they do, but it's a completely different approach.'*  
**Asian mother**

Parents were asked in Q2 what their major concerns were in leaving their child with a childcare provider and their answers varied based on family types, dynamics, personalities, and attachment issues. For first-time parents, it was the fear of the unknown, and, in some instances, parents being unable to let go due to attachment issues between the mother and the child. This is prevalent in circumstances where the mother is the sole carer and the child is used to having just the mother around; or refuses to socialise with other people, including family members.

*'...she was at a young age and wouldn't stay with anyone, it was hard to have childcare or anything because even with my family she was really funny with, she just does not like being away.'* **Full-time employed mother**

When asked what the real fears are in leaving a child with a childcare provider, issues seemed to vary based on previous experience, the needs of the child, and

other symptomatic issues, which parents were sometimes unable to articulate or explain.

*'...leaving my son. It doesn't matter how good the nursery or school is, as a parent you're terrified, of leaving your child. Leaving them and going to work, actually it's no better now. Even though our little boy has attended nursery for two years, you still have fears. So they never completely go if you understand.'* **Employed Dad**

Discussion suggests that parents are more sceptical of childminders than leaving children in a group setting. Parents identified not knowing the person, the fear of not being able to have a 'say', or of not being in control over certain things as some of the reasons behind their concerns.

*'I mean you still feel a bit in the dark to a degree because it's something you've never done before and leaving your first baby to a childcare provider is a heart-wrenching thing anyway.'* **Full-time employed mother**

For most parents, neglect is a key issue: parents feared that their child would not be cared for adequately. In addition, parents were concerned their children would not have a friendly face to turn to when they needed someone. First-time parents were most likely to have these feelings. One parent did highlight their own fear of being able to speak to the childcare provider or ask questions without feeling stupid or burdensome. The fear of the child's needs not being met or understood by the provider was another key issue mentioned by parents.

*'...my fear of neglect. I'm quite an optimistic person so I didn't want to think on the bad side too much because I kind of thought that if I just walked in and I wasn't happy I knew that would be a clean straight no. I was scared of neglect. I was scared of not a friendly face to go to, so if I have any questions about my child, because I am a new mum and he's my first child and my partner's a new dad, we just wanted to know if we could ask some questions it would be ok, we wasn't going to be laughed at or anything like that.'* **Croatian Mum**

*'I suppose the main thing was making sure that my children are going to be well cared for and not just another customer for more money coming into the business sort of thing. But it's the level of care that the children can get that was my main concern.'* **Employed Mum**

Some parents are not able to leave their child with a childcare provider as they do not know the person and would not be able to entrust their child to a stranger. A few of the parents who do not use childcare claimed they are not comfortable leaving their children with others. One of the parents who just moved to the UK explained that she is not familiar with the people or the culture and therefore cannot entrust her child to anyone.

*'I only trust me and my husband nobody else. Because most of the people here are not known to me, I am new here so how can I trust them; I only trust only schools and preschools only. I think I can trust them because they are with [...] to government already so everybody can rely on them, so I can trust them.'* **Student Mum (new to area)**

*'Not knowing the person. Not knowing the child carer. Not knowing the carer that was probably one thing I was worried about. No I didn't actually go with any; I wasn't comfortable with the people I had found.'* **Unemployed Mum**

Another immigrant mother who had also recently moved to the country had a different view, confirming that she had less concerns using the nursery as she saw other children in the setting and therefore believed her child would be safe. This confirms the view that issues concerning trust depend on individual parents.

*'Yeah, I saw a lot of children there so I didn't fear that much.'* **Bangladeshi Mum**

Some of the parents alluded to previous bad experiences with childcare providers and some had heard stories from friends, families, or the media. This would appear to be the situation with childminders. However, there seem to be more trust for group care such as nurseries and preschool.

*'[O]ne of my other friends had a bad experience with a childminder years ago, she said if they were in a bad mood they've just got that one person but in a nursery you've got a team of people and they're looking out for each other as much as the children.'* **Full-time employed mum**

One parent from experience felt the staff did not care about the children and so did not feel confident in leaving her child there. The mother questioned the safeguarding whistle-blowing policy and lack of transparency in reporting such matters.

*'I think that you have lots of fears but I don't think you can list them, but mine was in terms of what happened with my childminder when she was verbally abusing my child, how do they deal with things like that if someone's being a bit cruel to a child, do they have a whistleblowing policy and that was the other thing I was interested in.'* **New-to-area employed mum**

For other mothers, the emotional detachment of the staff seemed to be key, as one parent described the lack of enthusiasm of the staff as concerning. The parent

equated the detachment as indicating a lack of passion for the job they do, and would thereby not want to leave a child in that environment.

*'They didn't really care; they were just there to oversee. They did not really seem to have any enthusiasm about being there; they just seemed to be there because they have been there for a long time and its local, that sort of thing. Quite negative sometimes, in front of the children as well, which I thought was not very good really.'*

**Unemployed mother of twins**

Another group of parents were also concerned who their children would be mixing with in terms of behaviour; a factor that is handled differently in various childcare settings. One parent's concern included the ethnicity 'mix' of the setting. She didn't want to send her child to a setting where the majority of the children were from ethnic minority communities, even though she has no prejudice against them.

*'[F]or me it was about my children mingling with other children and learning from each other. It was more about educating them playing with other children and it's not just a one-way road, it's a two-way road.'*

**Unemployed Asian Mum**

Another key but silent issue some parents verbalised was the fact that they would be missing out on watching their child growing up, and might miss key milestones such as saying the first word or taking the first step.

*'...I was worried that I was missing things, milestones as they were growing up as both of mine started nursery when they were six months old.'*

**Employed Mum**

Issues of attachment were discussed in various dimensions by the parents. From the discussions, it could be deduced that children who have had their mothers as their sole carers for a longer period struggled to settle in in a nursery more than others. The mothers also found it difficult to let go of their children. As described below, the fear felt by mothers was understood by other providers who were mothers themselves. These providers were able to support both mother and child in managing the transition from home to provider by being sympathetic.

*'...just attachment and just that she'd miss me and be unsettled. Would they feed her and change her nappy when she needed it and things like that. Also I'd miss out on things and I just hoped that she didn't say her first word there or take her first steps and things without me.'* **Full-time employed mum**

*'It was more to do with the fact that she'd been with me for three years and I was a sole carer, then to give her up to someone else to look after her is a fear but as I say at the preschool they were really good to them, I think they understand because they're all mums, they've all been there, they understand that we have that fear. But they put your mind at rest and to be fair, she had, I tried not to show her my fear, and just went in and played and never shown any signs of being worried so my fear was less when they went in happy and they come out happy. And a minute goes, that was my biggest fear that she wouldn't be happy then I wouldn't be happy, I want a happy child.'* **Older New Mum**

*'No the first day we actually stayed there with them, and then she was ok then, then when it came to leaving her, I don't know maybe for a couple of weeks or maybe even longer than that. Because when we got her school report it even mentioned in there that {name} found it hard to detach from her mum.'* **Full-time employed mum**

The mothers also discussed an interesting concept of not showing fear to the child or signs of being worried so these would not be transferred to the child. This essentially suggests that the child, being sensitive to the behaviour of the parent, could pick up cues that could either encourage or discourage the child from settling down in the setting. The concept of having a keyworker that looks after the child helps both parent and child to transition into the new setting. One of the concerns parents discussed was the thought of the child not having anyone to go to when they needed something.

*'...it is very difficult, if she wants something, I asked her..., I said {name} has got to retire next year, and she said, "I don't want anybody else." She's adamant that she does not want to see anybody because she's brought out that trust from a young girl, from the age of six. It's ten years; it's a long time with that person really. So it is hard going and now to give her some free, she's learning, it's been really hard work and maybe now she can, I have to do it now, but back then, no way.'* **Mum of a disabled child**

The keyworker's role in the child's life replicates the mother's as they seek to provide the support the mother would have provided had they been there. However, this becomes an issue of concern for parents when the setting has a high staff turnover and the child's keyworker keeps changing.



## **INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR: STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES**

Eight key stakeholders and practitioners were approached to gain a better insight into their thinking and the direction of travel for policy implications for the emerging paradigm shift within the current administration. Respondents in Q<sup>1</sup> and Q<sup>2</sup> reiterated the importance of the Internet and social media irrespective of where it was accessed i.e., the library, office, homes, via mobile devices, or even from their televisions. In QSQ8, this research explored how recent trends in technology influenced parents' childcare-seeking behaviour. In the traditional sense, policy makers have taken demand on information systems for granted, as merely an interrogation of a standalone database. However, with the advent of the Internet, social media, and digital transformation through the 'cloud', demand on information systems now has a broader meaning for childcare information-seeking behaviour in the UK.

*'I think it is easier because everything is on the Internet, everything is available to look up.'* **Chief Executive Officer, Third sector organisation looking after autistic children**

*'...social media, Twitter... are free... a good way of marketing the service, it doesn't reach everybody. I think family information-seeking behaviour has changed in line with technology but a lot of people haven't'* **National Co-ordinator, Family & Childcare Trust**

Stakeholders confirmed parents now have more access to information and support than there used to be. Information dissemination is much quicker, clearer, more transparent, and easier to find. Families are able to find childcare easily and decisions on choices are instant, which presents problems for parents who fail to conduct sufficient research into various options before making their choice. The digital age has provided parents with more information-delivery channels and platforms that have made information more easily accessible. Searches that could have taken days to carry out now take less than five minutes to accomplish. The challenge, however, is the exclusion of certain groups of people, which could result in the widening of the digital divide between social strata, communities and age groups.

*'Yeah Facebook... I think Facebook as where you can put something on and it's seen by however many friends you have' 'I think the public access point that we have here... has given people the chance to have a look perhaps in more detail...'* **Children's Centre Manager**

*'I think the Internet continues to be a form of communication that allows you to disseminate information in a timely manner... other(s)... like Twitter, Facebook...'* **General Practitioner (GP)**

Broadly, all respondents agreed that recent trends and innovation in technology have influenced childcare-seeking behaviour in such a way that the demand on information systems extends beyond the standalone database in a library, children's centre, or any other physical location. A Principal Officer of the local authority noted that social media has reinforced key messages and created a level playing field in such a way that information is at the fingertips of parents. Another contributor, a social worker, noted that '...social media has made a huge impact in our social life and that includes families with children with disability... families could install [apps] on their mobile devices.'

However, contributors have also highlighted the risk of unauthenticated information or recommendations based on misinformation or rumours. A childminder project manager with a third-party vendor noted on a named website dedicated to 'mums on the net' that they 'debate [and have] all sorts of discussions without actually knowing necessarily what legislation entails. So they wind each other up really on some of these forums.'

Stakeholder contributions were divergent from parents' responses (in Q<sup>1</sup> and Q<sup>2</sup>) when it came to the drivers for decision making. While parents weighted Quality and Staff qualifications more than the cost of childcare, stakeholders conversely (in QS) believed that price/cost was the key driver. The research then explored if childcare information influenced the childcare market. It is a paradox, as noted by one of the stakeholders, that 'parents... say they are choosing [based] on... quality' but some parents nonetheless say that 'price is the most important thing'. The survey (in Q<sup>1</sup> and Q<sup>2</sup>) however, demonstrates Quality and Staff qualifications as parents' key decision-making reference points. Nonetheless, a stakeholder acknowledged that parents as 'clever consumers' look beyond price:

'Clever consumers will look beyond price [and] identify what makes the good quality.' **Children's Centre Manager**

Further on the issue of quality the practitioners confirm that parents would influence the childcare market by driving up the standards of provision if they recognise good quality provision and would only choose based of quality standards.

*"the more that parents choose or say they're choosing on the base of quality, the more likely that it is that childcare providers will want to show that their quality is good. The more that people say that price is the most important thing, the greater the number of childcare providers will say, actually, we are very good on price. So I think it does affect it I think the way in which families choose, or go about choosing, change the way in which the childcare providers advertise or project what they do"* **Early Years Manager**

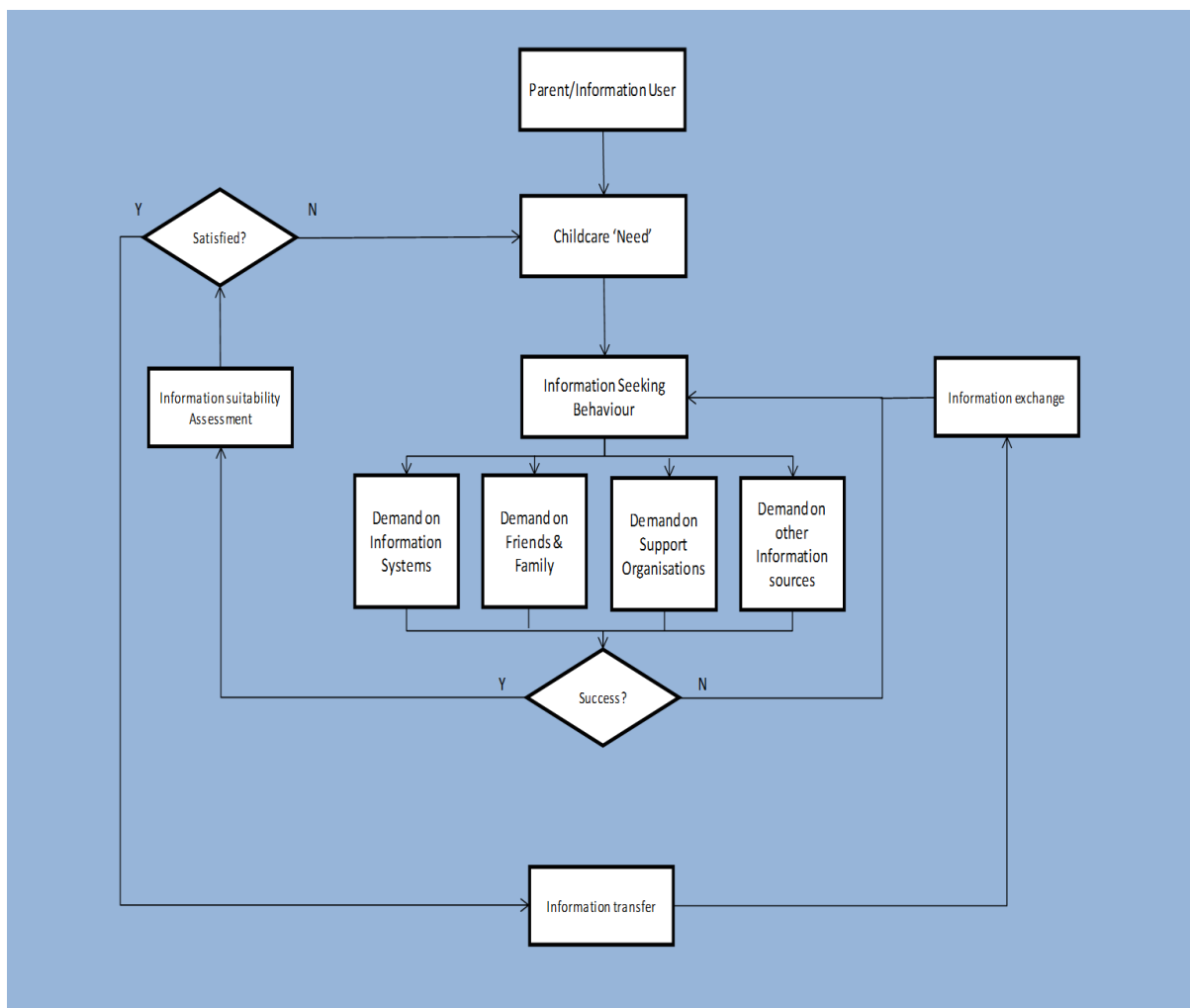
However, practitioners acknowledged that parents may not necessarily choose based on quality but would choose based on what is most important to them, which is their child's happiness. This they admit may be dependent on the child's needs, learning environment and the activities available at the setting. Quality and cost are variables that are significant to childcare choice and the stakeholders interviewed in this research support the claim that childcare is expensive but is affordable based on government financial incentives at different stages of the child's early years.

The disparate funding systems could make the process of application seemingly difficult for parents to understand. Overall, the stakeholders and practitioners are of the view that parents seek out childcare provision that is close to the level of care and love a child receives at home. One of the main objectives of this study is to develop a parents' childcare information seeking behaviour to add to existing theories of information seeking behaviour and this is hereby presented in the next session based on the results and findings of the study.

## CHILDCARE INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR MODEL

Based on the data analysis, a new model for information seeking behaviour for childcare has been developed, based on Wilson's First Model (1981, 1994, 1997, 1999). Wilson's generic First Model identified 12 components. The new model for childcare information-seeking behaviour identifies 10 components with 2 decision points and feedback loops based on the empirical evidence gathered from the researcher's fieldwork and data analysis.

**Figure 29: Model of Childcare Information-Seeking Behaviour**



The first three components (parent/information user, childcare need, information-seeking behaviour) have been found to be consistently the same in Wilson's First Model and its application to childcare information-seeking behaviour. The major difference between Wilson's First Model and the new model for childcare information seeking behaviour lies, firstly, in the next 2 components: demand on information

systems, and other information sources in Wilson's First model. The empirical evidence supports the identification of 4 components: demand on information systems, demand on family and friends (which eliminates another component called 'other people' in Wilson's First Model), demand on support organisations, and demand on other information sources.

## **DEMAND ON INFORMATION SYSTEMS**

That people have information needs is a fundamental assumption regarding information seeking (Case, 2008). Although there has been a shift from the study of information systems, toward how people make sense of their environment, the role of information systems in organising and disseminating information is still relatively crucial to information-seeking behaviour studies. The information environment for seeking childcare is built on systems and data-feeds for filtering and sharing information on databases linked to websites, and other information channels such as social media. The digital age has improved accessibility to information as information that could have taken days to reach parents can now be accessed online, on smartphones, iPads, or through other digital means as and when required. This enables more parents to access information more easily, and demand has shifted from mere accessibility to trustworthy sources, good quality information, and less-complicated systems. As argued by Bates (2005), accessibility is often the key determinant of the use of systems and parents confirm that they are looking for good-quality information that is accessible in a form that enables them to perceive the quality and reliability of the system. The trust placed in information systems varies according to situational factors, and, indeed, the importance of the need. Users are wise enough to know their details are safe in some domains and not in others. From this research, parents confirmed their trust in local authority sites such as the Family Information Service and children's centres, as well as other government sites.

*'I trusted it because councils have been around for a long time and I would imagine like anything that the council do, like if they were to put someone in residential care or something, they have to, and the care home has to meet certain conditions. I'd imagine it's the same as the childcare.'* **Part-time employed nurse**

*'I don't take it as gospel... it was a way to find places in my area then obviously... it was walking around, going to have a look, meeting with people, looking at the facilities and everything else so I didn't take it as gospel but I just used it for a way for me to find what is available in my area.'* **Full-time employed lone parent**

Even then, parents use evidence and recommendations from Ofsted (inspection reports) and friends and families, respectively, to safeguard against the risks posed by unsecured and unverified sites, information data sets, and systems. The quality of the information provided on government systems and sites are trusted, as parents believe that since the government manages it, the providers will be registered and regulated. Users also determine the quality of information on sites through the relevance and the accuracy of information. Therefore, it is pertinent that the information on the sites be up to date. According to Heztzum et al. (2002), in seeking information, people rely on some information sources whilst others are left unexploited.

A parent's decision to explore an information resource is determined by whether the source is easily accessible; hard to get; factual or complicated; and whether it contains information or points to information. The complexity of an information system determines human information behaviour. Essentially, as suggested by Wendel and Frese (1987), the complexity (or 'complicatedness') of an information solution could be a determining factor in whether the solution will indeed be employed by parents. In defining complicatedness, Wendel and Frese (1987) describe it as complexity that is out of control; has little functionality; is less transparent; is unpredictable; and involves complexity that is not necessary both technically and socially. Parents of children with SEND have asked for the development of apps that are intelligent enough to carry out tailor-made research with the return of results that can be followed up relatively easily. Essentially, they are requesting less complicated systems to conduct online searches.

Quite recently, digital technology added social media to the list of information sources for childcare. Consequently, parents are now able share childcare information with their friends and family through social media, such as Facebook. It would seem that Facebook is fast becoming the 'new' word of mouth with even more access to a bigger audience than the intended recipient. With more families using

Facebook as a source of recommendations, the information environment is broadening. One of the parents interviewed confirmed she found a childminder through Facebook.

*'I found her through Facebook actually, yeah, I was ringing a lot of people from the Family Information Service website, and I couldn't find anyone because I'm quite limited because I don't drive.'* **Student and lone parent**

Information advisors interviewed as part of the research envisage the future of information provision as social media: a platform offering a 'live-chat' feature that allows parents to discuss their needs with an advisor online and receive information, advice, and guidance in a less intrusive and non-threatening manner. Although parents are quite passionate when it comes to their children, the less experienced parents confirm it could be daunting to ask questions and not feel stupid in the process. Social media offers anonymity that protects users' identity and allows them to ask questions freely. Early years stakeholders predict social media to be the next platform for information sharing, not only between systems and parents, but also between practitioners working with families.

Unfortunately, the current challenges for demand on information systems are data quality and information management issues. The expectation is that the information presented online would be accurate at any point in time. However, only a fraction is standardised and regulated by Ofsted, placing responsibility on the local authorities and the provider. The result is seemingly out-of-date information that sours the relationship between the local authority and the provider due to the demand for constant updating. In addition, this leads to exasperated parents who have to bear the burden of inaccurate information and contact yet another provider who has no vacancy.

The new childcare bill of 2015 sets out to ensure all information about childcare is published so that families are able to work. The platforms on which these are to be published is yet to be specified, but the wider the scope and the more joined up services need to be so parents are able to find information in one place. However, the most pertinent issue for parents is the standardisation of vacancy details to improve parents' experience when looking for childcare. Developing responsive

services for families would be enhanced by not waiting for parents to seek information on systems, but for the system to be able to identify parents' needs and seek them out for information. Spink and Cole (2001) advise that the development, implementation, and use of effective information services depends on a sensitive assessment of people's needs, an assessment that goes beyond a simple description of information use. A systemic customer relationship management system whereby parents are sought out for information would require systems that are joined up and fully utilised to support the dissemination of information to parents at crucial stages of the child's life until they reach adulthood. This would ensure that, irrespective of a family's background, needs, or circumstances, and whether they are information rich or poor, childcare information that is responsive to the family will be made available to them. The decisions to either opt in or out, or use the information provided, is the family's choice; but at least all families would be beneficiaries of the system. A similar system was trialled with the dissemination of the eligibility letter for two-year-old funding, although the process was riddled with quite a few mistakes. If it is possible to seek out the poorest families, then it is possible to disseminate information across the board to all families in a responsive manner.

Parents also place demands on information systems and websites such as Netmums, Childcare.co.uk and other similar voluntary online organisations. When asked if they trust these sites, parents registered their preference for government sources as sites they could trust. Parents may seek information from these sites but would verify the information with other sources of authority. The use of leaflets, posters, and other sources of advertising for childcare information may trigger the search for childcare through various channels. The individual's perceptions, reflections, and evaluation of changes in self and individual circumstance may be shaped by encountering information. However, the trust individuals place on these non-official sources depends on confidence reliability. Giddens (1990) argues that an abstract system has an access point where trust can be built or broken, and that it is at this user interface that expectations are influenced. Trust, time, quality, and cost are discussed as linked to the last theme, focusing on childcare choice and influencing factors when looking for childcare.



## **DEMAND ON FRIENDS AND FAMILY (SOCIAL NETWORKS)**

Johnson (2009) argues that information behaviour is dramatically influenced by the social contexts in which people are embedded. The interest in social context is given additional impetus: people seek information from interpersonal sources that can summarise information for them in meaningful terms and that are accessible. In addition, people seek information that does not require them to be terribly persistent nor sophisticated, essentially suggesting that sometimes people consult their social networks because doing so requires the least effort. Fisher et al. (2004) also claims that social worlds are grouped into three major categories in which people are charged to seek information for others: the operation of groups in the form of teams or communities, and information brokers strategically placed in social networks. Parents confirmed that they use their social networks for recommendation, verification, signposting, and sometimes to provide childcare, thereby confirming that people seek out knowledgeable others in their informal networks for answers to their questions (Burt, 1999; Huckfeldt et al., 2004; Johnson, 2004).

Parents confirmed their social networks include family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbours. In the interviews, a parent acknowledged the benefits of school gate friendships for childcare-sharing responsibilities and information. The advent of Facebook has also extended parents' social networks as it provides access to more virtual friends who may be more knowledgeable in childcare. Social media essentially provides opportunities for people to interact, in certain concerted ways to meet other like-minded people in order to receive and exchange information in their work, everyday social lives, and to collaborate on personal and professional projects (Lakshminarayanan, 2010).

Parents are able to share experiences, or solicit information, recommendations, or verification widely through social media. The value and trust parents place on the information provided by their social network was identified as higher than that placed in authorities such as Ofsted who register and inspect childcare providers. Through social media, parents are now empowered to go beyond being consumers of information to becoming creators and disseminators of information to their immediate communities and beyond (Lakshminarayanan, 2010).

Social media therefore provides the information ground for childcare information to be shared. One of the stakeholders identified the downside to social media as the propensity for some to use the platform to share negative news and penchant stories emanating from relationship 'fall-outs' with a childcare provider or parent, thereby boycotting people and businesses. However, parents are known to corroborate information with different sources before making judgements or decisions. Sometimes, the demand on a social network is in the provision of childcare itself. A few studies, including those carried out by Pearce et al. (2010); Wheelock and Jones (2002); Arpino et al., (2010); Skinner and Finch (2006); Geoffroy et al., (2010), Jamieson and Wasoff (2008); Brannen et al. (2003); Buddelmeyer (2007); Wallar (1998); Zamarro (2011); Aassve et al. (2012); and Garcia et al (2013) have discussed the use of informal childcare by parents desiring return to work or return to study. This research has not focussed on informal childcare as the previous research listed has already done so. However, this study identified that informal childcare is more highly favoured by parents, especially that provided by grandparents.

Granovetter's social network theory and the strength of weak ties recognises that families who are moving to a new area may not have access to a strong social network that can provide support or information. Parents in these circumstances rely on formal sources such as Ofsted for verification or health practitioners for signposting to services in the local area. Others simply visit settings and follow their gut instinct. Conversely, Granovetter (1973) also argues that our acquaintances (weak ties) are more likely to move in circles different from our own, and essentially the information grounds are different. A mother who was a participant confirms that, as an older mum, she had her first child late. Therefore, her immediate friends were not able to identify with her worldview, as their children were much older.

A parent belonging to an information-poor group may not have access to valuable information due to weak ties, unless they seek information above their level or social class. This essentially suggests that parents with weak ties may be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system, and could be limited and confined to the unsophisticated and closed viewpoints of their close friends or family members.

## **DEMAND ON SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS**

This study ascertains that parents seeking childcare to suit their family's circumstances place demand not only on systems and social networks, but also on organisations locally and nationally for information that would support their search and decision making. Organisations are recognised as part of the information horizon of parents looking for childcare, and they consult these organisations for verification, quality assurance, accessibility, funding, and signposting. Included in this list is local authorities early years services, disability teams, children's centres, schools, Jobcentre Plus and health services (NHS). Although a parent's immediate environment represents or shapes their information source, the family's needs may require an arrangement beyond the typical or immediate information stimuli described by Johnson (1996). Parents now laterally seek information across various platforms, systems, and organisations, therefore making it even more imperative for information to be shared and made available across the board. Sonnewald et al. (2001) also claimed that the proactive nature of information resources and the relationships between different information sources significantly influence the information-seeking process.

The duty and responsibility to disseminate childcare information currently lies with the local authority. However, the information is being shared with parents in schools and children's centres. Parents new to the local area or the country argue that basic signposting services can be provided by the health sector so that families do not miss out on valuable information such as funding at critical stages of the child's life.

As argued by the general practitioner and early years' practitioners in this research, the health sector has recently been through reforms and reorganisations that have merged the health visiting service with the local authority, consequently providing integrated services to families. Collaborative and partnership work is critical to supporting families when looking for childcare to reduce the feeling that information is scattered in many places. Rather than families looking for information, collaborative work would ensure that consistent but responsive information is provided to parents when it is required.

## **DEMAND ON OTHER INFORMATION SOURCES**

The demand on other information sources is in line with the findings and analysis. In the future, parents have identified preferences for printed material (34.9%) or audio/visual materials (4.1%) as information sources in their search. Hunter (2005) confirmed the use of leaflets as a popular age-old strategy publicity strategy that is widespread due to public demand, and partly due to time constraints. According to Murphy and Smith (1992), quite a few professionals acknowledge the increasingly important role of leaflets in their work, with a number of pharmacists and occupational health workers confirming the rise in the number of leaflets they give out. However, a number of contradictions have emerged between distribution practices and perceived effectiveness. Some professionals thought that leaving leaflets in public places was more effective, and a few health visitors and midwives believed giving leaflets to the family was more effective. Inglis, Doherty, and Pryke (2010) however, reiterated the fact that leaflets given with verbal reinforcements are more effective, as even parents who are already aware of the information also confirmed that reading the leaflet increased their confidence in implementing what they already knew. The main issue with leaflets is the difficulty in updating them with revised information. Busy parents are more likely to read a leaflet pinned on a refrigerator than reference information from a book (Inglis, Doherty, & Pryke, 2010). Therefore, the extent to which leaflets and posters are effective as information sources is likely to be limited, but if provided in conjunction with verbal reinforcement and tailored to a target group, they are more likely to be effective.

### **Decision point #1: Success?**

The new model identifies two decision points. The first is whether the demand on the four components is assessed as successful or not. Wilson's First model splits this into two components (Success or Failure) with no feedback loop. The empirical evidence from the data analysis, however, shows that there is always a feedback loop, and that failure is not a dead end. Where there is a failure, there is a loop back to the information-seeking behaviour component for a new information-gathering exercise. Where there is success, childcare information suitability is accessed by visits to childcare providers to select the preferred service provider. It should be noted that this component is similar to Wilson's First Model named 'information use'.

The differences in both models lies in the presumption that the information user is either satisfied or not satisfied, which then loops back into need. The evidence from the research survey and interviews show that there is another decision point that parents have to make, based on their assessment of the childcare information suitability, which then leads to the second decision point.

### **Decision point #2: Satisfied?**

At this point, parents who are satisfied with their childcare information will make the critical decision to utilise the services of their chosen childcare provider through the information exchange, to emerging or future information-seeking behaviour, or sharing the information within their social networks. The feedback loop triangulates these sequences back into information-seeking behaviour. However, where there is a non-satisfaction of the information derived from the information-seeking process, the parents go back to the drawing board, to either re-specify their 'childcare needs' or re-assess the criteria they have set.

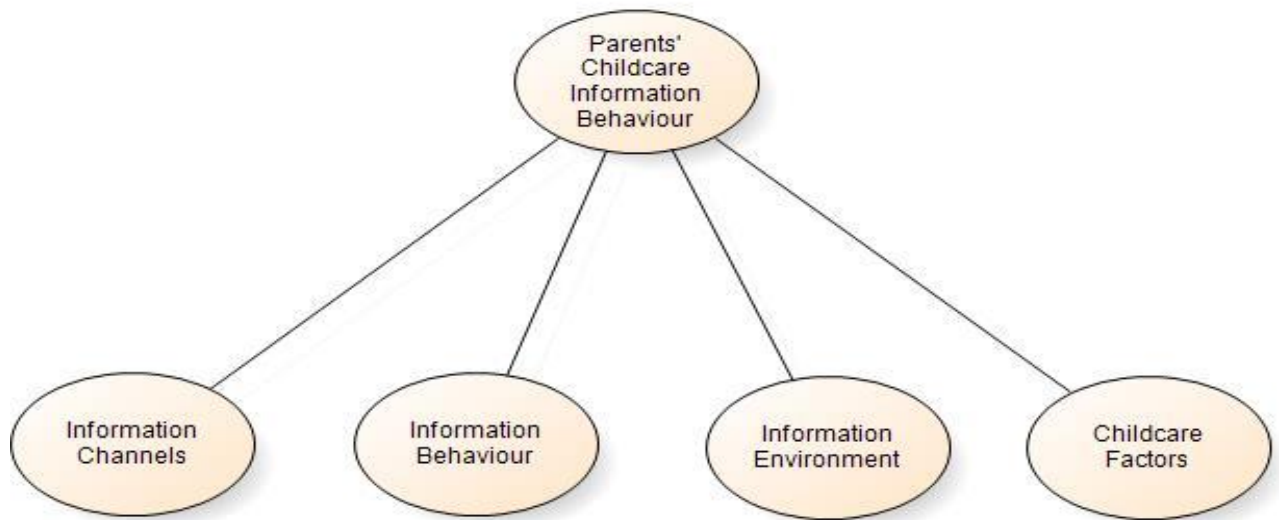
## **INFORMATION-SEEKING BEHAVIOURS**

Parents' description of their information search when looking for childcare highlights some information behaviours from the onset of the search to when they finally made a decision. Parents' information horizon is affected by accessibility to information channels, their information environment, childcare factors and parents' information behaviour. This section presents evidence of parent's assessments and orientations on the theoretical underpinnings of childcare information-seeking behaviour. In response to the research questions, the emerging findings from the survey and interviews have been grouped into categories according to the themes and relationships evident in the grounded theory analysis.

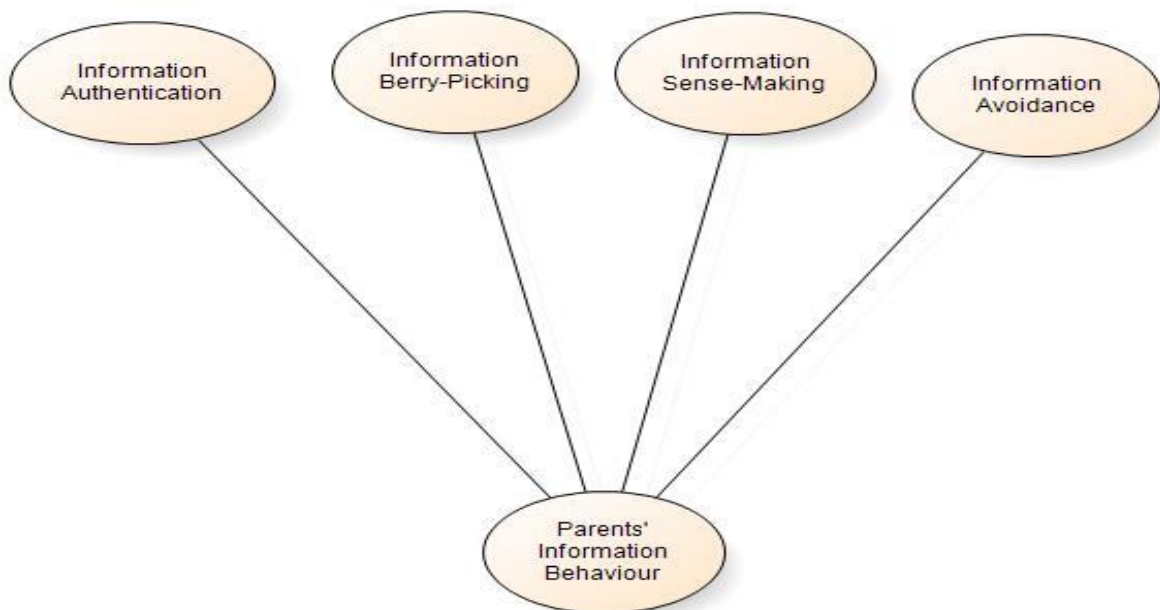
This examines information-related behaviours as they apply to parents' lived experiences when looking for childcare. The first category revolves around the information behaviour of parents as revealed in the interviews. These include sense-making, berry-picking, verifying, and avoidance. The second category highlights the

childcare choice factors that accentuate the dynamics and impact on the childcare seeking process, including quality, trust, staff, cost, and time.

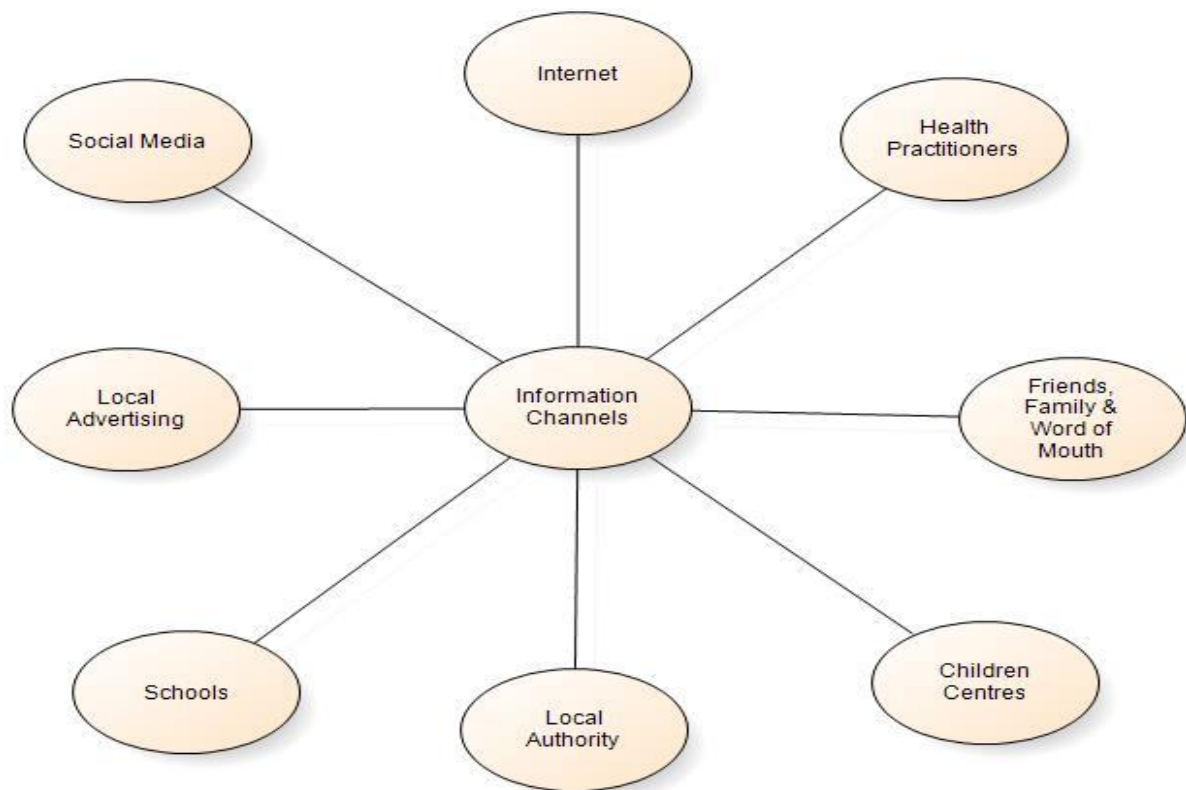
**Figure 30: Diagram of Parents' Childcare Information Seeking**



**Figure 31: Diagram of Parents' Information Behaviour**



**Figure 32: Information Channels**



### **Making sense of childcare**

Klein et al (2006) defined sense making as a process of creating situational awareness and understanding in situations of high complexity or uncertainty in order to make a decision. Making sense of their current situation and seeking to understand the childcare information ground is critical to making a good choice. Whilst second-time parents can boast of some knowledge, mostly gained through practical experience, this research identified that not all first-time parents feel the same way when making decisions to either go back to work or stay at home to look after their child.

*'I had no idea where to start. Because I was an older mum a lot of my mum friends, the information that could give me at the time was quite out of date really on a lot in the last sort of decade or so I had no idea where to start.'* **Older Mum**

Sense making in childcare is motivated by the continuous effort to understand systems and processes in order to anticipate trajectories and act effectively. Making sense of childcare options, information channels, financial incentives and application processes are internal constructs parents go through in order to address information discontinuities or gaps in knowledge. Although Devin (1992) believes that sense making begins with an unexpected event that may not readily be explained, this is not necessarily the case with childcare. However, sense making is equally required to determine the meaning and differences between the options available appropriate decisions can be made. For example, a new immigrant father from one of the Scandinavian countries explains that the childcare system in the UK is significantly different from what operates in his country. The changes include type differences, age differences, funding differences and application differences – which all made the entire process quite complex and complicated for the family.

Inability to make sense of childcare may lead to information poverty which would eventually affect family outcomes. Chatman's (1983) theory of information poverty research on life posits that certain groups of individuals have difficulty obtaining useful information for solving everyday problems. Dervin (1983) describes this group as having a knowledge gap or being 'information poor'. These individuals are a class of information-poor persons who are not able to access information from people they know or from other mainstream sources. Chapter Four highlights the concept of information poverty and the three main interrelated approaches utilised: the information content approach, connectivity approach, and the human approach.

The information connectivity approach accentuates lack of access to modern IT infrastructures, capabilities, skills, and resources. The connectivity approach also refers to the digital divide. In interviews with parents, most parents identified that they have access to IT infrastructure and claimed computer literacy. This reinforces the fact that lack of access to computers or infrastructure is not necessarily a problem for those who took part in the research. The information content approach emphasises that unavailability and inaccessibility to quality information required for



development or making critical decisions may be an issue with another group of people. One of the major concerns for channel shifts is the focus on digital technology in the dissemination of information to parents. Whilst most parents confirmed that they were able to access childcare information through various channels, stakeholders argue that it is those who are really in need of information who are unable to access quality information. These people are 'hard to reach'. The third approach, known as the 'human' approach, capitalises on the knowledge aspect. Britz (2004) argues that having information is sufficient, but that people must have the ability to derive a benefit from that information and harness it to meet their needs.

*'I phoned the council, Medway. Well the website's terrible. So that's why I just call and they sent me an email with a list of childminders in my area and I just sifted through that to find one that was close enough'* **Full-time employed mum**

Information poverty is one of the major information-seeking behaviour theories. A good understanding of childcare options is paramount to making the best possible choice as a parent. Whilst some parents confirmed that they were able to adopt technical strategies to look for the information they require, a group of parents lacked the required skill to understand the contents of the information. They also lacked the ability to interpret the information or put it to use. Understanding childcare information may be straightforward for some, but was conversely described as a 'minefield' by some of the parents and stakeholders interviewed.

*'I think if I had more guidance. It was one of them areas where was very vague, I was just going on gut instincts really; I didn't know what to ask. I didn't want to sound silly. There wasn't a lot of guidance really it was just gut instincts.'* **Employed mum (using informal childcare)**

From the interviews, it was deduced that some parents might struggle with understanding the options available. Early education funding, as simple as it might seem, could be complicated for families who prefer to utilise their entitlements flexibly. Stakeholders also cited an example of the language used for the early education entitlement as 'not culturally sensitive'. That is, some groups would not allow their child to access early education funding if it was presented as 'childcare'; but they would gladly take up the place if tagged as 'education' or 'learning'.

## Information berry-picking

Once a parent is able to make sense of their options, the next stage is the information gathering stage. 'Berry-picking' is the act of gathering information from different information sources or websites using a variety of techniques and collating this together into a coherent whole to inform decision making, instead of using one information resource. Parents in this research confirmed practicing 'berry-picking' based on their knowledge of childcare and information sources. The reasons parents gave for sourcing information from different sites included a desire to achieve a sense of reassurance that they explored all options; the needs of the child and the family; and, most commonly cited, the fact that childcare information is scattered throughout so many places. Those who search online are more than likely to berry-pick due to the vast amounts of information available when searching the web.

*'I just went online and put nurseries in Walderslade in Medway, and then it came up on a map so then we went and phoned them up, some of them said they couldn't talk and they'd phone us back but then they didn't phone us back so we knew they were the ones we didn't wanted to go and see. Then we picked four of the best phone conversations we had, and then we went and saw all four of them'* **Croatian Mum**

The online environment supports multiple simultaneous searches and presents choices to users. However, when 'berry-picking' is not a choice, but people are forced to forage for information on different websites and other information channels, as information is scattered in many places, information seeking is perceived as stressful. This may lead to abandonment of the search if the parent is not successful, or to satisficing, which in the case of childcare may result in a parent utilising a less-than-satisfactory provision (further discussed under least effort).

## Information authentication and verification

Findings further identify that once information is gathered from various sources, the process of elimination begins based on various factors and through authentication and verification of the information received. With more websites springing up as childcare information providers, the request and search for childcare online is quite high and has likely consequences for the childcare sector. The Internet offers widespread access to childcare information, through huge benefits for tailoring and quick accessibility. Gradually, more parents are looking for childcare over various

channels, including the Internet. The health sector is increasingly questioning the quality of online health information as limited research indicates that much of the information is inaccurate (Cline & Haines, 2001). Similarly, the childcare sector is experiencing the emergence of websites providing details of childcare providers, some of which are unregistered, as there is no standardisation requirement. This adds to the vulnerability of parents and children. The fact that only 56% of parents who participated in this research confirmed that they trust information on the Internet, confirms the suspicious attitude of online users and their concerns about the authenticity of information. When asked how they searched for childcare information, parents confirmed they used more than one source to find childcare and similarly used more than one source to authenticate the quality of the information they had about providers. According to Lakshminarayanan (2010), the more people perceive a piece of information as important, the more they verify it with trusted sources or people perceived as cognitive authorities.

Likewise, parents verify a childcare provider before considering leaving their children in their care. Parents rely on official and non-official sources to confirm the suitability of childcare providers. Official sources include Ofsted and local authorities, whilst informal sources could include family, friends, neighbours, or other parents using the service. Whilst Ofsted's verification is a formal route through channels of communication including phone, the Internet, or emailing the local authority for details, informal verification, or authentication, occurs primarily through word of mouth. This research identified that parents on low incomes and with low levels of education were more likely to seek informal sources and word of mouth verification, whilst parents with higher levels of education seek quantitative facts about settings, including Ofsted reports, staff ratios, registered numbers, qualifications, and so on.

*'I just went on the opinion from what other parents in the village were saying about this particular childcare provider.'* **Low-income employed mother of twins**

This behaviour corroborates Granovetter's law of strong ties, principle of least effort, as well as the information horizon theory. Parents with strong ties and good social networks may default to these sources, as they are trusted and easily accessible. Those who are not highly educated may struggle to understand or decipher

information easily, and will therefore resort to recommendations from friends and family. According to Case (2008), verification is usually undertaken for work-related information problems or information seeking related to one's property or family. This mostly involves seeking information from governmental or organisational websites after hearing about something that has worried them. Lakshminarayanan (2010) also established that people use their social networks to seek verification of certain kinds of information; and this they do by posing questions or asking for suggestions. From this research, it was also evident that some parents used both official and non-official sources to verify their observations or the information they had about a setting. Most parents confirmed they would trust word of mouth, especially from family members, but this was not the case with Ofsted reviews. Parents said they would not trust Ofsted's grades over feedback from another parent or a family member, as Ofsted's review is based on a 'snapshot' taken at a particular period of time. Parents were of the view that this 'snapshot' was not a true reflection of the quality of the service or the level of care and learning at the setting.

*'[The] Ofsted report can't tell you personally, whether it's a good place or not or whether it has a good feeling about it or not, they can only tell you the, are they well catered for you know, do they follow the early learning you know, they can only tell you the fact side of it, not the human side of it.'* **Older Mum**

Verification of a childcare provider by a parent also depends on social networks, relationships, and accessibility to online information on websites. Families new to the area confirmed that they had no recommendations from friends or families as they had nobody they could ask. These groups of parents say they had no choice but to rely on Ofsted's review and their gut instinct to determine their choice of childcare.

*'When we were moving to the area, we phoned. Because we're a service family, my husband's in the military. We obviously made various phone calls to the schools in the area and read the Ofsted reports and it was from the school website that we realised there was a preschool on site. We read all about it online and then we visited them when we came down also...'* **Military family mother**

However, most parents would also visit the setting before making a decision to leave their child there. According to one parent, the best way to verify the information about the setting is by visiting.

*'More or less, you can read a lot of good things then when you go there it's like different'* **Romanian employed Dad (new to the area).**

## **Satisficing, gratification, and least effort**

Satisficing is a behavior which attempts to achieve at least some minimum level of a particular variable, but which does not necessarily maximize its value (Huw, 2001). Satisficing, according to Simon (1956), is a decision-making strategy that involves searching through alternatives until an acceptability threshold is met. This method differs from optimal decision making whereby the best alternative available is sought. Interviews indicated that most parents would sought to find the best possible option for their children, but achieving this was found to depend on other factors such as cost, location, and other exigencies. In addition, it was also dependent on the knowledge of the childcare options available and the application process. The information poor were more likely to practice satisficing, as they were not necessarily aware of other alternatives.

Stakeholders and practitioners acknowledged that sometimes parents delayed seeking childcare information until very late (e.g., when returning to work or after school holidays), simply because they were unaware that some providers had waiting lists, or were simply unfamiliar with the system. When asked how many settings they visited before making a choice (to determine the presence of satisficing behaviour), parents responded with, on average, three settings, before making a choice. Whilst some parents confirmed they conducted thorough research before making a choice, others simply explored their options using word of mouth, recommendations, and the possibility of informal childcare through relationships. Some parents also confirmed that once they found a setting they liked, they decided it was the best for them and stopped the search process, even if it was the first one they had visited.

*'Well we only visited one but were very happy with what we saw, and because we'd already made a number of phone calls, they were all full, we thought we'd try this one and hope for the best, but we were very happy, the staff at the nursery that we chose were very understanding of our situation and they've had experience of adopted families'* **Adopting parent**

This view seems to resonate with Zipf's theory of least effort (1949), which states that 'it is human nature to want the greatest outcome for the least amount of work'. It is indeed a possibility that satisfaction can be achieved the first time one visits a childminder, if prior research has been carried out prior to the visit. Mooer's law

(1960) concerning the use of information systems argues that no one would use an information system if using it was more trouble than it was worth. Connaway et al., (2008) also posits that information seekers rationally evaluate the benefits of the information's usefulness and credibility, versus the costs in time and effort to find and access it. The process of searching for childcare can be onerous and it seems that those who report a poor experience with childcare are more likely to have settled for a setting of lower-than-average quality during the search process. Stakeholders interviewed asserted that parents wanted childcare close to or similar to what the child had at home.

*'Treating the child as an individual, like a home from home environment, flexibility, you know where she follows the child rather than the child having to fit into a timetable.'* **Part-time employed lone parent**

*'...I suppose I needed somewhere that was going to uphold the values I have, you know like be polite, etc. but speaking to other mums, some nurseries don't really do that, so that sort of thing. We're not religious or anything like that so it didn't need to be connected to a church or anything.'* **Older Mum**

*'So that stood out to us from a complete mile off, that they were willing to support what we are doing at home, that was really lovely.'* **Croatian Mum**

In essence, parents seek the best alternative available, but seeking perfection in childcare may not be a realistic venture and may be difficult to achieve, even in the best quality settings. About 25% of the parents interviewed confirmed that they were not working but were looking after the home. Some of these parents stated that they had to make the decision to look after their children, as they could not find childcare that was good enough for their child.

*'No I didn't actually go with any; I wasn't comfortable with the people I had found.'* **Unemployed mother**

Others would visit too many settings, motivated by perfectionist tendencies. The consequence of this behaviour, as cited by an early years practitioner, is the risk of losing a place at a popular setting. Whilst a parent was busy visiting as many settings as possible, they could miss the most suitable place, as vacancies fill up quite quickly. When asked what they were really looking for in childcare, parents' responses reflected a variety reasons based on their needs and values:

*'[W]e wanted a nursery that could understand that any ethnic origin or religion, they were absolutely fine and as we walked into this nursery they had probably ten different kinds of greetings on the wall from English right the*

*way through to Russian, they had pictures of all the children that they had which I now know is agreed by the parents, like little captions of what they've done in that month and everything. And one of them said, this child's religion was celebrated and something in that religion and all the children got involved, which I thought, was lovely.'* **Croatian Mum**

## **Information avoidance**

According to Case (2008), there is a tendency for humans to avoid exposure to information that conflicts with their prior knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, and anything that causes them anxiety. Johnson (2009) argues that most people seek out information that agrees with their current worldview and level of cognitive skill. Johnson also notes that most people do not acknowledge or seek information that creates cognitive dissonance. Bhanna (2010) describes the act as a refusal to process encountered information rather than a refusal to seek information. Bhanna also proposes that information avoidance can be grouped into two categories: active and passive information avoidance. Passive avoidance is described as long-term avoidance of information relating to long and deeply-held beliefs related to self and identity. Active avoidance is more short-term in nature and reflect a rejection of information as a coping mechanism in response to information that has already been processed affectively. This has the consequence of blocking further information seeking for a short time. Some of the parents in this research avoided seeking childcare information, due to family decisions and intrinsic family values; it was their wish to raise their children on their own.

*'...not wanting somebody other than ourselves to look after our children.'* **Stay-at-home Dad**

*'From a family point of view, if your preference would be if you could keep it within the family then that's always good isn't it.'* **Employed Dad**

Challenging these worldviews and debunking the myths surround childcare may be a solution. However in some instances parents seem to be holding on to parenting and childrearing values as legacies passed down from generations which may be outdated for the current system in which we live. Others, due to prior negative experiences, stereotypes or hearsay, refused to use childcare and avoided information. For example, some parents would not consider using a childminder and would block or avoid any information about childminders.

*'I didn't really think about childminders to be honest because a part of me thought that was more of a risk.'*  
**Employed mum**

For some parents, the idea of leaving a child with just one person poses a risk as they believe 'there is safety in numbers'. Others simply fear the inevitable situation in which their childminder falls ill and there is no replacement childminder available. The consequence of avoidance in this example is that parents might miss the most flexible childcare option available.

### **Information overload and anxiety**

In some instances, parents confirmed they were sent too much information which made them to eventually abandon the search. Case (2008) defines information overload as the state of having too much information. Everett (1986:181) also describes information overload as the state of an individual or system in which excessive communication inputs are not processed, leading to breakdown. The tendency to ignore or overlook information occurs when too much information confronts us. Two participants in this research reported receiving 'too much information'; the consequence was that they completely ignored the information provided.

Another described the childcare information ground as a 'mine field', suggesting that filtering and other coping strategies are required to wade through the vast amount of information presented. When confronted with information overload, Miller (1960) classified users' behaviour into seven categories: omission (failing to process some inputs); error (incorrect processing); queuing (delayed processing); filtering (processing only high-priority information); approximation (low precision in categorisation); decentralisation (splitting up information into bite-sized pieces); and escaping (giving up the search process completely).

According to a social worker for SEND children interviewed in this study, parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities are usually bombarded with too much information. These families are generally supported by numerous practitioners who (with the best of intentions) want to enlighten the family through



information provision. These parents also report not having enough time in the day to wade through details either online or through lists sent to them through various information channels. One main carer reported being simply 'too tired' looking after their SEN child throughout the day to search for information. The suggestion of simplifying the online search process through simple apps that tailor searches to user's needs and returns a small number of relevant results would bode well in supporting families of SEND children.

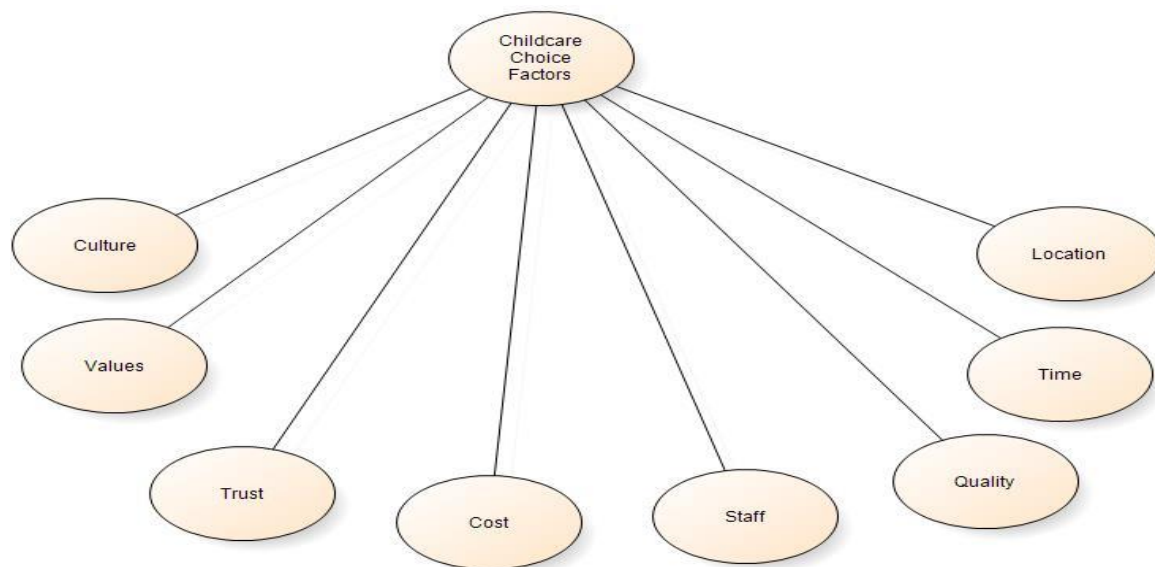
According to Garner (1962:339-340), 'people in any situation will search for meaningful relations between variables existing in the situation, and if no such relations exist or can be perceived, considerable discomfort occurs.' Case (2008) also stipulates that it is easy to imagine stopping research when one faces an overwhelming number of information sources and an uncertainty about their relative quality. He links this view to Charles Perrow's remarks about the cost-benefit analysis of information: 'When the effort of gathering information seems too great, we make do with what little information we have.'

Information overload could therefore be identified as one reason parents resort to word of mouth from friends, family, or users of services for childcare information. This fact highlights the need for advisory support and guidance for those who are not able to filter information to meet their family's needs.

## The Critical Success Factors of Childcare

One of the objectives of the study was to identify the socio-economic factors that influence parents' choice when looking for childcare. In this section, the researcher discusses intrinsic factors that parents identified as contributors to their childcare behaviour. These include trust, staff, time, quality, cost, and values as outlined in figure 33 below:

**Figure 33: Factors Influencing Childcare Behaviour**



### Trust

According to Giddens (1990), trust is confidence in the reliability of a person or system regarding a given set of outcomes or events, where that confidence expresses faith in the probity of love of another, or in the correctness of abstract principles. In this study, parents displayed three levels of trust: trust in the information system, trust in the childcare verifying process, and trust in the childcare provider. El-Attar (2007) states that trust can affect the choice of IT system a parent uses and labour force participation, as some parents are not able to entrust the care of their child to a childcare provider. Parents revealed that they would only consult trusted systems for information; and some parents indeed confirmed that they could not entrust the care of their child to another. Trust in systems has been discussed in

previous sections of this thesis; however, this section focuses on trust to leave a child with the childcare provider. As shown in the data analysis section, childcare is complex and involves a degree of uncertainty. Essentially, parents highlighted that leaving a child with ‘strangers’ in a childcare setting requires trust.

According to Luhmann (1979) social complexities force people to develop mechanisms to reduce such complexity, and one of these mechanisms is trust. Luhmann further elucidates that trust can function as a mechanism to take away uncertainty, lowering the feeling of complexity and minimising the feeling of risk. Parents, through initial trust in the system or source from which they received childcare information, and probably after verification through another process (family members, friends, or Ofsted), are able to leave their children in the care of a childcare provider. The fact that parents report a higher level of trust in family members and friends than in Ofsted’s review about a setting’s quality does not necessarily mean the information presented in the review is not useful. Rather, it serves to provide supporting evidence and guidance in the childcare-seeking process. However, it reflects the fact that parents need to be enlightened on how to read and understand key points in an Ofsted inspection report. This helps them make sense of the information, and also to use the information to guide their childcare-seeking process.

Whilst some parents admit that trust is built over time, the offer of taster sessions would help in building this trust, as well as a strong relationship between provider and parent. A couple of visits to the childcare provider before gradually leaving the child to settle in would also help to build trust. It is interesting that some parents describe the appropriateness of leaving their child at a setting as involving ‘a gut feeling’ or ‘instinct’ about the staff and the environment.

*‘...it’s just a gut feeling. They have to earn trust over time. At the beginning I was a bit unsure...’* **Employed Asian Mum**

Trust, according to Luhmann (1979), lowers uncertainty in other people’s behaviour, which may be unpredictable. As a continuous feedback loop, people’s behaviour

justifies the trust others have in them, which parents expressed by signifying that the staff/childcare provider was a key factor in the childcare-seeking process.

*'...you're putting your child into their care and you want them to be able to look after them well...'* **Military family mother**

*'[T]hat's like instinct kind of thing. Nobody can trust the person you're leaving them with, you have to think that they will make the right decisions...'* **Full-time employed Mum**

Trust requires a history of reliable background with which, depending on the specific history, trust is either built up or broken down. According to Giddens, the feedback a person receives from a trusted object or person is very important. Government information sources such as schools, local authorities, and children's centres were highlighted by parents in this research as the most trusted sources, based on their history and reliability. Parental trust is an expectation of information needs being met: when such an expectation is confirmed, trust will increase. When the expectation is not confirmed, the trust will decrease, and this does not preclude people or systems. The impact of finding the right childcare, however, reveals that the ability to find a provider that the family can trust has enormous benefits, despite parental concerns in using systems and people. Overall, parents want providers they can trust to provide the best learning and caring environment for their children, even though most agree that this would be established and gained over time.

## **Staff engagement**

Also included in the mix of choice determinants is a combination of staff qualifications, experience, approachability, interaction, and understanding. Customer relationship management and parental engagement from the onset is a key determining factor when parents look for childcare. After the first hurdle engaging with systems, the next crucial step for parents is visiting the setting to confirm the information they have gathered over time. The welcome and attention parents receive when they visit a childcare setting is part of the critical assessment of the setting and helps to eventually determine if the family will solicit the childcare provider's services. The results of interviews with parents revealed that, aside from the assessment of the learning environment for cleanliness, learning apparatus,

space, outdoor facilities, and features, staff and other relationships are assessed mainly through observation; i.e., staff/new parent interactions, staff/new child interactions, staff/setting child interactions, child/child interactions, and staff/staff interactions.

*'Just because the people were really caring and it's like quite relaxed and they seem like they're, Bo's really settled there now, he's been there for a couple of years so'* **Student and lone parent**

In instances where parents are torn between two choices, the approachability of the staff was said to have influenced decisions. Also, in instances where the child was attached to the mother, instant interaction and engagement with both mother and child was reported to have assisted the family to adjust quickly to the new arrangement. The interaction of the staff with the parents and the children helps to reduce parents' concerns about how the provider will look after their child.

*'It was down to the staff actually; they were just really nice and genuine. It wouldn't have been my first choice in some ways because like they didn't have a play outside area, they used the Vicarage Green next door where they've got an arrangement with the Vicar, there was a facility but it wasn't like the one at Brompton we looked at was really nice, but it was just too expensive.'* **Full-time employed mother**

Experience and staff turnover also seems to affect parents' decisions, as some believe younger staff members are less experienced; and if a child's keyworker keeps changing due to turnover, parents become concerned about continuity of care.

*'I was quite interested in how the children were in themselves but certainly how the children were engaging with them and the staff weren't just standing around chatting, they were actually down on the floor and at the tables with the children'* **Full-time employed mother**

## **Time factors**

Parents in this study confirmed the significance of time as purported by Meyers et al. (2007), who claim that information seekers like to be in a position of autonomy when seeking information, rather than be subject to rules imposed by others. Woods (1988) elucidated the fact that the dynamics of a situation is linked to temporal aspects. The complexity and uncertainty that surrounds the childcare-seeking process is further complicated by interrelated factors such as time. Parents in this

research established that time to search for childcare could be an issue, as they are seeking the best alternative for their child.

In as much as parents want to maximise the cost and benefit of finding the right childcare, the availability of time expended to search for childcare on systems and visit settings may affect information-seeking behaviour. Time, according to Savolainen (2006), is one of the main contextual factors in information seeking, and in most cases is a scarce resource. Essentially, the time available for information seeking usually permits people to access and use only a limited set of information sources or channels. Parents like to have control of the seeking process by being able to decide when, where, and how to seek information. As such, the process is also determined by the family's needs and circumstances.

Seeking childcare information is an activity that may be subject to time restraints depending on the situation or circumstances of the family. In most cases, the desire to seek childcare information is subject to other factors, including employment or studying. Parents in search of childcare may be constrained by time, as the information they need affects their employment status, and ability to study or attend training with the view of returning to work.

*'One of them we looked at... I really liked it and they couldn't say at the time if they had a space or not and ....I was literally going back to work and changing jobs as well so obviously I had to let my new employer know that I was ready on a particular day so I took a space with one provider to only find out that the one I liked did have space.'* **Michelle, Full-time employed mother**

Time pressures vary depending on how soon information is required, i.e., a few hours, minutes, days, weeks, or months. Time pressure and the level of thoroughness faced by seekers of information may vary considerably, depending on the nature of the problem or task at hand. The search for childcare information is triggered by different situations, including returning to work after giving birth, returning to work after being out of work for a long time, planning to have a family, moving to a new area, or even a breakdown in current childcare arrangements. In

situations with open or undetermined time limits, parents would use more sources than during any other timeframe. Time pressure may lead to a less selective approach in assessing information. In a situation where there is a breakdown in childcare provision, parents are confronted with time constraints to look and arrange for suitable childcare, in order to remain in work or continue study or training. This suggests that only the most easily accessible and familiar sources according to the principle of the least effort will be preferred, depending on the time available. Similarly, in the next stage of seeking childcare (visiting settings), time pressures may force a parent to opt for a less than favourable childcare option.

## **Quality**

Quality in childcare information-seeking behaviour can also be grouped into two categories: information quality and childcare quality. Information quality, as described by Case (2008), refers to the perceived attributes that make it valuable to a potential user in a specific context. Some of the components of quality include relevance, timeliness, accuracy, specificity, comprehensiveness, and authoritativeness. Parents' demand on systems, organisations, people, and other sources for good quality childcare information require that all these attributes be built into information systems to foster trust and continual usage. The ability to access good quality information is the lifeline to good family outcomes, just as access to good quality childcare offers a child the best start in life.

Parents acknowledge that quality is of paramount importance in the childcare information-seeking process and rated this factor higher than any other when looking for childcare, even though stakeholders (including early years' practitioners) are of the view that cost matters more to parents than quality. This study nevertheless focused on how parents' information seeking behaviour impacts on childcare quality and the childcare market. Good quality education and socialisation were mentioned as key reasons some parents wanted their child to go to a childcare setting, allowing children interact and engage with their peers and other adults outside the family. It was observed that the definition of quality as provided by parents during interviews differed depending on the needs of the family and the child.

Parents rated quality based on the excellence of service provided by staff, the staff having been trained to provide a good service, and the level of care/service provided being delivered to the expected standard.

*'...doing what they should be doing and not doing a poor job'* **Unemployed lone parent**

*'The people who are working there are getting trained or trained or are going through training'* **Full-time employed Dad**

For other parents, good quality had to do with the education children received; the activities and facilities available, structure, and how children were challenged based on their strengths and levels of learning.

*'...going into a nursery that's got lots of different activities for children that they are able to take different childrens' strengths at any one time to help get the most out of the children.'* **Adopting parent**

Other parents used happiness as a measure of quality. This was based on the child's enthusiasm to attend the setting. Essentially, these parents subscribed to the view that if a child were not enjoying what they do at a setting, they would be reluctant to attend.

*'A happy bouncing child that's happy to go in and happy to go again the next day, doesn't want to come home, this says to me they've got the right quality.'* **Mother of disabled child**

Some parents regarded safety and security at the setting as very important in determining quality. However, for a particular parent, quality is a cluster of factors, which also includes providing care at an affordable cost.

*'Quality for me is basically making sure that the children are safe, happy and the place is run well. Its value for money really, that's what I mean by quality.'* **Full-time employed Dad**

Some parents also mentioned the experience of having a child or looking after a child as good quality. These parents were sceptical of childcare providers who did not have children of their own and had no personal experience.

*'Quality is someone who has either brought children up before or has children of their own so they know the manner of the children, they know how to behave and how to act, and they know how to tell them when they're doing something wrong.'* **Unemployed Mum**

The environment is the most important for some parents. This includes the room size and facilities for outdoor play. Even though settings without these facilities may pass



Ofsted standards and inspection, parents with the need for more indoor or outdoor space would disregard the Ofsted report and look for somewhere with bigger and better facilities.

*'...last preschool it was very small room... not good for children because the children need bigger space to play so that is quality. I like this better because it's bigger space.'* **Student and Mum**

Whilst some families wanted more structure, i.e., planned activities, others wanted a less regimented environment that allowed children to roam and learn through play. Stakeholders interviewed for this research agreed that parents' demand for good quality childcare would drive up the provision of a good quality area. However, parents' loyalty could also drive down quality when they remained in a setting whose quality has dropped over the years. Reasons cited to this effect included the child already being used to the childcare provider, disbelief in the Ofsted inspection report, and issues of convenience.

The research establishes that culture and values are issues that could affect parental choice. Language, the presentation of information and the content of information shared with parents could be potential barriers to engagement with some cultures and communities. Presenting information in a language and context that is acceptable and understandable would encourage communities to engage with services, investigate benefits and explore further opportunities. An example was cited with two-year-old early education funding. Some communities would find it offensive if it is tagged as childcare - they think they are being judged on how they look after their children and believe they are well capable of looking after their children. However, if it is presented as an educational and socialisation opportunity, they would happily take up the offer.

Maintaining a good and healthy relationship between parents and providers is a prerequisite to building trust. Going the extra mile would require providers understanding diversity and embracing the culture and needs of the family. For this to happen, there needs to be a two-way communication and engagement between parents and providers to discuss the needs of the child, those of the family, and the processes and routines within the setting. Trust, according to stakeholders, is built

over time and the experience parents have within the setting, would encourage them to access further services and recommend the provider to other members of their community or social network.

## **Cost and affordability**

A very much known and often discussed barrier to childcare and has been the cost of childcare which has been on the increase over and beyond inflationary rates for almost fifteen years. Parents have always considered childcare to be expensive and not affordable, despite the incentives of tax credits and employer supported schemes introduced by the government to reduce family stress. According to one parent, bringing up a child is an expensive venture and adding the cost of childcare to the mix is simply an impossible task for some low-income families. The cost of childcare in England has been on the rise over the past decade, and families are struggling to keep up with the cost (Family & Childcare Trust, 2014). Some unemployed parents interviewed cited the cost of childcare as the main reason they decided to stay home and look after their child.

*'... it was financial and not wanting somebody other than ourselves to look after our children. I think it's our responsibility as parents to look after our own children and we'd miss out on milestones and things that they do for the first time and yeah. As my wife earns more than I do so we made the decision for me to give my job as a heating engineer to become a househusband and that was when Emma was four months old.'* **Stay-at-home Dad**

*'I do totally understand that childcare people, that's their main job, they need to earn their money, but I just think like because some people charge fifteen pound for pick up and stuff from school and I personally feel that that's a lot of money. Then obviously you have to pay the hour rate on top, I totally understand but I'm just not in a situation where I can afford to part with that much money.'*

Some parents claimed that it was not really worth working and giving most of their wages to someone else to look after their children when they (as the parent) are the best person to look after the child. This demonstrates the cost benefit analysis that parents make in rationalising the need and choice for childcare.

*'The only thing basically is obviously the costing is always something of a focus and some of the times you did question the amount of money going out whether it was worth going to work to earn it.'* **Stay-at-home Dad**

*'When I was looking for childcare I earned so, but now I have stopped working then I gave up because there was no point of me going to work and earning just for childcare basically, that's what it was coming down to.'*

**Unemployed mother**

A couple of parents complained about the ability of providers to increase childcare costs without considering the implications for families. Transparency with price increases and a gradual introduction rather than a sudden decision imposed without much notice was suggested as an option. Stakeholders were of the view that the assumption that all parents qualify for Tax Credits or the Employer Supported Scheme may explain why some local providers were inclined to increase the cost of childcare to meet their overheads. Parents eligible for tax credits may not necessarily feel the impact of a sudden increase in childcare costs as much as parents who are not eligible. According to one parent who does not claim tax credits, sometimes money for childcare can only be found by forgoing other family luxuries.

*'...it was just the way it was done, there was no other option and it wasn't introduced gradually it was this is it take it or go and find somewhere else for your child. There are the things they stopped doing: from when she moved from one branch to the other they didn't do hot lunches. So, not only prices we had to provide food ourselves and say oh they need this apron they need this particular thing, a pair of shoes for indoors and a pair of shoes for outdoors and there's all these extra bits and pieces. I've since learned that schools [are] quite similar actually.'*

**Michelle, Full-time employed Mum**

*'Transparency. The one that she actually went to, during her time there they changed her terms and conditions and they didn't used to charge for bank holidays and I think there was a change in the law where they had to pay their staff for bank holidays. So they then made us sign a new contract saying that we had to pay for bank holidays and I thought that was a bit rich. She said, "Oh we haven't put the price up," and I said well you have put the price up by a small amount a week. Then she started charging for bank holidays and she said well "That's your problem you get paid that day anyway and you can just claim it back from tax credits," and I said "I'm sorry but I don't get tax credits so I've got to find that extra money myself".'- Full-time employed Mum.*

Similarly, parents with more than one child were more likely to say childcare is more expensive as they have to pay for more than one child. This may be one reason some families consider using informal childcare such as grandparents to support the family. Some parents, however, confirmed that they would rather pay for expensive but high-quality provision over a low quality but cheaper childcare provision, as they want the best for their child.

*'Too expensive, the nursery was too expensive to have two children; I was looking at one hundred pound for two days that was near enough, a month that was half our wages. I could not continue living like that it was too expensive.'* – **Employed Mum (Informal care)**

According to Bernard et al (2010), mature students with caring responsibilities claim financial stress as the key factor impacting on their ability to study. This feeling was expressed by a mother who had to leave her child with friends and neighbours before her student finance was eventually resolved.

## **Parents Information Seeking Behaviour and Family Outcomes**

The impact of finding the right childcare on family outcomes reveals that the information horizon of a family is quite important. According to Fisher et al. (2005), the collaboration of an individual with the information sources and resources within his or her information ground influences success in achieving desired outcomes. This is captured in parents' responses to the impact childcare has on their family outcomes. Parents reported that childcare has made a huge difference to their family and lifestyle. It has enabled some to return to work without feeling guilty, provided independence, gave them the opportunity to enjoy adult company at work, and developed their child's independence, communication, and social skills.

*'I'd say the biggest impact for me is that I felt comfortable going to work knowing that my children were well looked after and it didn't make me feel guilty going to work knowing that they were safe and well looked after and I think from their point of view, when they were younger being around other children has helped them socially. They interact quite well with a mixture of children and now as well.'* **Cathy, Employed Mum**

*'Yeah, I enjoy it, I enjoy having my own independence and going to work and don't get me wrong I feel like being a parent is harder work than going into work. You do everything and I do not know, it's sort of like a little break, not like I enjoy going to work, because I don't. But it is like seeing adults and it's like having a break'.* - **Kelly, Full-time employed mother.**

The need for a break from caring for a child as suggested by some parents highlights the fact their need for some respite, and that they use a funded place to achieve this. Others also admitted it has provided their children with skills they as parents may not have been able to give the child at home.

*'I did have the option to stay at home, but then I wouldn't be able to give my children what I think I should be giving them and I could be with them all day. And it's quite hard to be honest, the childcare, they are specialist in looking after children. They can learn more in a nursery than they could learn with me'* **Employed, Asian Mum**

For parents of children with disabilities and special educational needs, childcare provided the much-needed break and respite they needed whilst also meeting the child's needs. Parents new to the area said childcare provided them with the opportunity to meet with other parents, and helped their children integrate into the system seamlessly.

One of the key benefits of finding the right childcare, as articulated by one mother, is the elimination of the stress that childcare brings to family relationships. Using registered childcare for this mother means that she is not reliant on others, and this helps to maintain her family relationships. She is also confident that she has her child in an environment that fosters the child's education and learning.

*'It's definitely helped and made a big difference, I mean I had to go back to work full time, I'd prefer to go back part time and have a bit of a balance. But having her in the right place we knew she was secure and in her school now she was just much more ready to start school being in that environment with other children in a learning environment. The pressuring, I mean I've got family members who use parents and things and the sort of stress it causes within the family, and relying on each other, I don't feel I have any guilt about having my Mum looked after her for days on end and at weekends as well because I've paid for what I used.'* **Michelle, Employed Mum**

Parents confirmed that finding the right childcare led to a happy child with the possibility of achieving well, which one parent claimed to be every parent's desire. Finding the right childcare also takes away feelings of concern and elements of worry from parents.

*'...a massive impact because in the right, if the child's in the right place and they're happy they achieve then they do well and they're happy and that's what every parent wants. Not to be worrying about them.'* **Steve, Full-time employed Dad**

Finding the right childcare provider establishes the routine needed for a child's development. The use of various forms of informal childcare destabilises children, as it demands that they get used to different environment and people every day, which could be quite unsettling. As articulated by a parent who relied on irregular forms of childcare due to financial constraints, finding the right childcare means the child settles into a known environment and a single routine.

*'Yeah it's good. Its been a big help, he's a lot more settled, when I first started uni a little while ago, it wasn't just because I couldn't find childcare, I was having problems with student finance as well, so a combination of the two meant that I done the first half term with no childcare, so it was a bit all over the place really with sort of going through different friends and stuff, so it wasn't ideal for him and you could tell he was a bit upset but yeah, he's got into a good routine now and he looks forward to going in there and stuff.'* **Student and Mum**

For some parents, the ability to find a setting that provides a home away from home where their child is settled, happy, and receives feedback from the child and provider about daily activities and the development of the child, has a huge impact on the child and parents.

*'The impact is that we're all extremely happy. When we drive off to nursery in the morning, we'll say oh we're going to nursery! And he'll squeals with excitement, its so nice for us to go to work knowing that he's happy and then we pick him up and they let us know what he's done all day, what he's eaten, has he eaten that much... It's a family run nursery, so It does feel very much like he's gone from home to another family home.'* **Croatian Mum**

*It's been huge. She's come on leaps and bounds, finding the right place she wants to go. And for me it's nice to see her happy and growing so you know, for her to come home and tell me the things she's learnt, it makes me very happy and it makes for a happy home I think to be honest.'* **Mother of disabled child**

According to some parents, childcare has improved their child's socialisation skills and enhanced the child's communication skills. For some children, the ability to mix with peers has enabled them to imitate their peers and learn from others. Although informal childcare has its advantages, a learning environment seems to favour the child based as per the views the expressed below.

*'I think having a little boy who is quite reserved and who relies heavily on his big brother to do his talking for him. To now find a boy where he's got a confidence now, and can interact. So coming from four hundred miles away and not knowing anyone down here, I certainly would recommend their service.'* **Military Family mother**

*'...because we've had the preschool and the childminding sets, I think that's improved his communication skills more than it would be just to have him looked after by grandparents.'* **Stay-at-home Dad.**

For a child who does not have English as first language, the formal childcare route according to parents provides a platform for the child to learn a new language and culture. With the help of understanding and supportive staff, children from various cultures can maintain their sense of identity whilst also learning a new language and culture. Childcare helps them to socialise, improve their communication skills, and helps them to integrate into a new system of learning.

*'For me it's good because he's never been as good, for example he needs to learn like two languages, at home it's Romanian, and at school, he speaks English. And now I'm proud that he does... I'm really pleased about this. He's happy and the staff are really helpful and [...].'* **Romanian employed Dad**

Integration into a new system or culture may be daunting for parents who are new to the country or whose first language is not English. For these families, childcare offers a platform for the family to make new friends, understand the system, and integrate into the education system. Childcare makes a beneficial difference in the lives of parents and children. It offers the possibility of developing socialisation and communication skills, thereby building the child's confidence. Similarly, childcare improves or enhances a child's readiness for school by familiarising them with learning environments. It establishes a routine that may not be provided through the use of informal childcare.

Childcare during school holidays can be a parent's nightmare, as finding childcare during this period may be difficult. The ability to find suitable childcare during school holidays allows parents to continue working and keeps children engaged in positive activities. According to one parent interviewed, it provides a sense of assurance that the children are safe, and enjoying what they are doing, hence removing the guilt associated with 'not being there' as a mother.

*'It made the summer holidays more enjoyable because the kids wanted to go the place for the day and it puts my mind at rest that they're enjoying themselves when I'm at work so the impact has been very positive. I was reassured and it put my mind at rest that I could go to work and I don't feel guilty about not spending time with them, I knew they were having a good time.'* **Part-time employed nurse**

Worthy of note is the mention of staff by parents in supporting the child and family in the transition from home to the setting, and preparing the child for the future. For parents, it would seem that having a happy child who is always excited to attend the setting is quite important. Childcare for parents provides a sense of reassurance that their children are safe, learning, and enjoying what they do. Ultimately, for working parents, finding the right childcare helps them to remain at work without a sense of guilt that they are lacking in their primary role as parents. Childcare also establishes a routine for the family, which helps to enhance a parent's work-life balance and the family's well-being in general. Essentially, childcare helps to remove the sense of uncertainty and apprehension experienced by parents when studying, considering work, or already employed. Paying for childcare also helps families to be self-reliant, not having to depend on their friends and family for help and support. Childcare thereby helps them maintain good relationships with those close and dear to them.

## **Implications of parents' information seeking behaviour on the childcare market**

The research confirms that in a well-functioning market, ideally parents' behaviour should drive up quality, reiterating the fact that where people are well informed, their choices would regulate the market. Governing factors in the childcare market are cost and quality. As parents demand better quality childcare and standards of service, providers would adjust their services accordingly. Essentially, if choice is based on quality, childcare providers will be forced to improve the quality of their provision. However, parents' definition of quality which is centred on their needs and circumstances may not necessarily be driving up the quality of childcare. Convenience and affordability are factors that significantly impact on parental choice as some parents would consider these as more important than quality.

Parent's behaviour in trusting friends and families reviews and recommendations could also influence the childcare market. Seeking out good quality provision information about services facilitates the decision making process. The local authority is not allowed to recommend one service over the other, but they are able to empower parents with Ofsted reports. However, as parents are now accessing recommendations and reviews through social media, providers are more careful about their reputation and seek to ensure this is very well protected.

In terms of how government policies have influenced parent's behaviour and its impact on the childcare market, stakeholders highlighted that government interventions through various policies and initiatives, have both direct and indirect impacts on families and influences their behaviour differently. Tax Credits, Employer Supported Schemes, Early Education funding are direct incentives. Childminder agencies, Pupil premium and Introduction of the EYFS are indirect incentives which have not necessarily influenced parent's behaviour although the latter two were widely welcomed by early years strategists and stakeholders.

The local offer, another indirect incentive for SEND children, supports their families in finding information easily. Government interventions would encourage families to use more childcare but stakeholders highlighted that these are not currently



presented in a joined up format for families. Stakeholders also believe that the impact of the interventions depend on publicity, awareness and the provision of information, advice and guidance, to embed the policies and ensure they are well accessed by families who are eligible and really need them. Practitioners are of the view that negative publicity from press and news headlines concentrating on the fact that childcare is expensive, focusses on full-time childcare and ignores part-time childcare which is more affordable. This affects demand for childcare as it discourages parents generally and the overall impact is that less demand could result in a market not necessarily driven by quality.

Parents' loyalty also impacts on the childcare market and may lead to providers {who do not feel the need to raise quality and provisions} becoming complacent in raising standards. Parents would remain with a childcare provider as long as the child is happy, the health and safety of the child is not affected, it is convenient for the parent and they can still receive funding or other government incentives at the setting – even if Ofsted reports says the setting is Inadequate. Stakeholders identified that parents are sometimes loyal to a provider due to availability and affordability issues.

Even though providers are mandated to provide good quality childcare to current tight regulation of the market makes it difficult to manoeuvre as profit margins are quite small, therefore discouraging new investors into the market; which would have attracted competition and driven up quality of provision. For parents to be able to drive quality and influence the childcare market positively through their consumer behaviour, they need to be empowered to identify good quality provision. It would seem that parent's definition of good quality provision differ and are largely based more on their needs than Ofsted's definition. These definitions also obviously differ from practitioners' definition of quality which essentially suggests that there is a need for this disparity in definition to be addressed in order to meet families' need and ultimately improve childcare outcomes.

## SUMMARY: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Findings of this research revealed that parents' definition of childcare is based on their needs, age of the child and individual family circumstances. Parents described childcare as a safe place for a child when parents are at work, and others described as a place to learn social and educational skills. Some described it as a transition stage between home and school, supporting school readiness. Childcare arrangements for the families surveyed fall into the categories below, and this largely depended upon the parents' values and circumstances:

- **Traditional Approach** where the mother stays at home to look after the children and family (based on value systems)
- **Non-traditional Approach** where the father stays at home to look after children (determined by the higher earnings factor)
- **Synergistic Approach where** both partners work and contribute to childcare by arranging and sharing childcare responsibilities around their work patterns (based on modern egalitarian values)
- **Formal Contractual Approach** where the registered childcare provider is contracted to provide childcare support (both partners work, but are not able to juggle childcare due to strict working arrangements)
- **Informal Flexible Approach** where the both partners work, but use informal childcare provided by friends or family members.

## SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS

Parents were asked to describe what childcare means to them and their family. The description varied and reflected parents' needs for childcare – from education and socialisation to care of the children to enable parents to work or train to work.

The Internet seems to be the natural place for most parents to look for childcare followed by advice from a trained advisor over the phone or face-to-face. Social media sites are now gaining popularity as more parents use these platforms especially Facebook for seeking or sharing reviews and recommendations.

The order of looking for childcare seems to be from the Internet, then ask friends and family for recommendations, then consult Ofsted's website for grading and inspection report and lastly the parent visits the setting. Those new to the area would rely more on Ofsted information than neighbours if they are yet to foster trusted relationships locally.

Although parents admitted visiting various sites looking for childcare, they also confirmed that the Council's site is trusted more than other sites due to its credibility, the providers are vetted by Ofsted and the quality of information provided.

Parents still struggle to find childcare information and most of the parents interviewed confirmed this fact. This corroborates the result of the survey where 60% of parents say they would know where to find childcare.

Parents confirm that using childcare for the first time could be daunting. However, parents are less worried when the person looking after their child is not a complete stranger i.e. either a friend, family member or a provider they have used in the past. The research confirms grandparents as the popular choice of informal childcare and this is based on trust, affordability and availability issues. For some families it is also about keeping childcare in the family so legacies and family values could be passed on.

When asked what the major concerns of parents are regarding childcare, these included fear of the child's need not being met, fear of abuse, fear of not being in control and discipline issues. Others felt they were letting their child down in their role as a parent.

Choice determinants when choosing childcare included quality; flexibility; staff experience; friendliness; understanding and approachability; the environment; education & socialisation; location; transparency and affordability. Other inherent issues which parents may not necessary mention are culture, convenience, trust, discipline and behavioural issues.

Parents were asked to define quality and this varied as they defined quality based on their needs, circumstances and views of childcare. Quality was defined in terms of the child's development, the environment and the child's happiness.

When asked what their childcare search experience was like, some found it easy, some daunting and others say it was frustrating. These however depend on various family and personal circumstances. Those who have already planned to use family members or juggle with their partner did not list any challenges. Others cited issues of affordability, availability and accessibility to information.

Parents' experience of childcare in Medway is generally good with 40% rating their

experience as very good; 35% rated it good; 11.6% rated it fair and just 3.3% rated their experience as poor.

Parents were asked to advise other parents on how to look for childcare and most allude to their gut instinct being very useful. This gut instinct seems to be influenced by the environment of the setting, the responsiveness of the staff – how the parent and child are welcomed, their approachability, and the transparency of the provider.

When asked how parents can best be supported the following were listed:

- More information for all parents
- Making childcare free for all not just the poorest families
- Access to reviews and recommendations for childcare providers
- Access to advisors who can support parents through the process
- Information being sent to families at key stages of the child's life
- Signposting through the Health service for parents new to the area or the country

Parents were asked what impact finding the right childcare has had on them, their child and the family. Parents claim childcare has made a huge difference in their lives. While some alluded to an extremely happy family, others say childcare has improved their child's communication, social skills and the child's confidence. Other parent's say they now enjoy their own independence; they can now work full time; reduced stress of using friends and family members (which sometimes affect these relationships). Some also confirm childcare helps to prepare the child for a formal environment such as starting school. Some parents claim it has given their children skills which they would not have been able to give them at home.

### **Parents Information Seeking Behaviour Model**

The results confirmed that depending on their information horizon parents place demands on - Information Systems (databases, websites, Internet); Friends & Family (social networks); Support Organisations (schools, LAs, children centres, JCP, NHS); and other Information Sources (flyers, brochures, printed materials). Grounded in the data analysis and the details above, a new model for information seeking behaviour for childcare has been developed, based on Wilson's First Model (1981, 1994, 1997, 1999). Wilson's generic First Model identified 12 components. The new model for childcare information-seeking behaviour identifies 10 components with 2 decision points and feedback loops centred on the empirical evidence gathered from the researcher's fieldwork and data analysis.

## **Parents Information Behaviours**

Stakeholders identified that parent's behaviour when looking for childcare would vary as families are unique, with each looking for a childcare solution that would fit their families' circumstances and family type, depending largely on the ages of the children and their stage of parenthood. The study also identifies patterns in parents' information seeking behaviour as - Making sense of childcare; Berry-picking strategies; Information authentication and verification; Least Effort strategies; Information Avoidance due to overload, misguided info, value systems or system complexities.

### ***Critical Success Factors responsible for parents' choice ultimately are:***

Quality, Staff engagement, experience, qualifications; Cost; Trust; Values; Time; Location; Cultural issues – were all recognised as key factors informing parental decision. The study identifies that affordability of childcare is still an issue for most parents, even though parents claim the quality of childcare is more important to them than the cost of the childcare. Ultimately, parents would seek out the best quality childcare they could get at a price they can afford and sometimes this involves forgoing other essential needs of the family.

The information landscape around a family is vital to accessing the right information when it is most needed, and this study confirms this is largely affected by their environment, social networks and accessibility to services, information delivery channels and portals in their local area. Stakeholders identified that the lack of knowledge about what is available, where to find it and how to access the incentives, leads to misinformation about the affordability of childcare which then discourages parents from either seeking work or training. Information about incentives and benefits therefore needs to be made available and 'pushed' to parents from birth and at key stages as the child grows to improve outcomes for the child and family.

Finding acceptable childcare reassures parents that their children are safe, learning, and enjoying what they do. For working parents, finding the right childcare helps them to remain at work without a sense of guilt that they are slacking in their primary role as parents. Childcare also establishes a routine for the family, which helps to enhance a parent's work-life balance and the family's well-being in general. Ultimately, it improves the family's economic well-being as the parents are able to work to provide for the family.

## CHAPTER 6

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The analysis of childcare information-seeking behaviours demonstrates that parents need to be supported with appropriate policy interventions to collect, collate, consolidate and utilise information sources to meet childcare information needs which would enable them to stay at work or train with the view to join the labour workforce. This can be achieved through enhanced service improvements and a robust, free, up-to-date and unbiased childcare information service governance framework that spans local and national spheres. Essentially, the overall experience of information seeking and decision making for parents requires significant improvement. The new model of information-seeking behaviour for childcare based on inferences drawn from the responses to the survey questionnaires (in Q<sup>1</sup>), the interview with Parents (in Q<sup>2</sup>) and structured interviews with key practitioners (in QS) demonstrates that parental information-seeking behaviours are modelled on the following information channels and sources:

- Word-of-mouth recommendations from friends and family;
- Information systems (which extend beyond the traditional stand-alone database/directory to encompass the Internet, social media channels, and applications);
- Local support service organisations, such as schools, children's centres, Job Centre Plus, and the NHS; and
- Other information sources, such as magazines, leaflets, and posters, which are ostensibly in decline.

The key findings also demonstrate that the key drivers for parents' decision making are quality of service and staff qualifications, not only cost as initially thought by policy makers. This has implications for demand and supply gaps in childcare provision. This chapter explores the policy implications of the data analysis and research findings and offers recommendations to address service gaps, and offer new insights to add to the collective understanding of this body of knowledge.

## **Enhancing parents' information-seeking experience - Optimising information sources**

Parents in this research outlined some barriers when looking for childcare. These include not knowing what to look for; lack of awareness of options available; not being able to find childcare for the times required; Information scattered in too many places; being scared to ask a silly question; complex systems; delay in receiving information; source disappointment; lack of time to seek information; inaccurate information; information scatter. Time, money, language, and inability to seek information are other barriers to information as highlighted by parents in this research. This explains why the 'word of mouth' recommendation is an important and significant information channel for parents while seeking childcare. However, parents relying on their informal network sometimes re-validate the recommendations through the formal information channels such as the local authority or Ofsted. Parents interviewed and surveyed in this research, who were new to an area or did not have an existing or emerging informal network feel that they were at a disadvantage and reached the same conclusions on barriers to information seeking with other studies.

To overcome and mitigate information related barriers (such as information scattered in too many places, lack of awareness of options available and inaccurate information), there is the need for the simplification of childcare information accessibility and information content shared through the different formal information systems and channels. Parents in this research have mentioned information relevance, and usability or accessibility as important factors in their information search for childcare. Therefore, this research suggests that, in terms of system optimisation, real-time vacancy information should be made available to improve parents' childcare-seeking experiences and reduce the time wasted and frustration experienced when looking for childcare.

The findings from this study support a recommendation for a new model of childcare information governance, which would merge the best of the informal information sources through social networks and social media with the formal information system

sources. With appropriate safeguards such as Data Protection and Freedom of Information Act and authentication processes in place, this could enable formal information sources to combine recommendations from end users (past and current parents using the childcare service) with up-to-date information on childcare vacancies provided by the provider (with real-time updates), quality standard ratings from Ofsted (written in plain English) and cost of childcare published in the public domain by the childcare provider. This could increase information transparency across the childcare sector, provide a level playing field and drive up childcare quality as Ofsted reports would be cross referenced to all childcare providers including childminders.

Childcare Information systems integration and optimisation, with real-time vacancy information availability would improve parents' childcare-seeking experiences and reduce the time wasted and frustration experienced when looking for childcare. Further legislation would be required to mandate that childcare providers have a duty to publish these information parameters. The recommendation, when implemented, could create the enabling environment required to simplify, streamline, standardise and merge information systems across all Local authorities into regional and national information hubs reducing cost, increasing the economies of scale and process efficiencies. The regional and national hubs would support parents to set their child's automatic information selectors (based on live events i.e. birthdays and transition milestones) to support the proactive 'push' of relevant information to the parents, when required. This would facilitate an increase in the levels of awareness, buy-in and ownership from parents to fully embed the regional information system's brand identity and recognition as the new 'one source of the truth'.

As noted in literature, the information source itself can be a barrier to information if it is difficult to access or not sufficiently credible. Childcare information seeking is a complex information and communication activity requiring access to diverse sources of information to deal with personal, social, and work-related problems. In seeking childcare information, parents showed they tend to rely on certain information sources to the exclusion of others. This suggests that parents' assessments and choices of information sources are determined by factors that include whether the source is oral or written, human or virtual, in-house or external, lay person or



authoritative, easily accessible or hard to obtain, and whether the source actually contains information or points to information. Parents in this research confirmed that factors influencing their choice included ease of access, trustworthiness, and timeliness. Optimising and improving formal sources of childcare information is beneficial in allowing parents to build more confidence in utilising information. When parents have better access to information, family outcomes are likely to be enhanced. This reflects the importance and relevance of information sharing and implies that information systems should be based on a sound understanding of the ways in which parents assess and choose information and information sources. The development, implementation, and use of effective information services therefore depend on the sensitive assessment of parents' information needs, an assessment that goes beyond a simple description of information use.

The principle of least effort predicts that seekers will minimise the effort required to obtain information, even if it means accepting a lower quality or quantity of information. However, this research confirms that parents seek to maximise their search efforts subject to some exigencies. For example, a parent who does not drive would not necessarily seek information about a provider beyond their local area, thereby limiting the scope of the information accessibility. Similarly, a parent whose childcare arrangement has just broken down may not have enough time to conduct a thorough search, thereby defaulting to least effort, which may result in choosing a low-quality provision. Therefore, regional and national system(s) and processes must be developed with simplicity so parents are able to access good quality childcare information without much effort. Parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities requested 'apps' that are responsive and tailored to individual needs to improve accessibility. Intuitive systems that are built with good customer relationship management features can also save the history of previous searches, making it easier to understand the user's needs and requirements.

An on-going three (3) year cycle of re-assessment of parental childcare information should inform a schedule of future enhancements to regional and national childcare information platforms and hubs in order to support parents in making optimal childcare choices.

## **Demand led interventions - Capitalising on social networks**

Increased information transfer with social computing alters the world we search, allowing more information to be transmitted in less time and between more people. With the rise of social computing, communication technology has carried the world into a new understanding of time and space (Ergul, 2012).

The information-seeking behaviour of parents is largely influenced by their environment and the people around them. It may also be dramatically influenced by the social contexts in which people are embedded. Our social worlds can be divided into three key groupings: agencies in which people are charged with seeking information for others, the operation of groups in the form of teams or communities, and information brokers strategically placed in social networks. It has been established that people seek knowledgeable others in their informal networks for answers to their questions. Likewise, parents seek out information, reviews, and feedback from friends, families, or other users of a particular childcare setting through word of mouth. The key would be for parents to be in a social environment characterised by knowing what the other knows and when to turn to them.

The majority of parents interviewed in this project confirmed that they sought information, advice, and guidance from other parents, friends and families. The findings suggest that parents also relied on Healthcare and Social Work practitioners to signpost them to appropriate childcare information sources. This implies that parents consider Healthcare and Social Work practitioners as part of their social network and have indicated that childcare 'information push' is more preferable than childcare 'information pull'. This implies that parents seek and anticipate childcare information to be pushed to them as early as during their pre-natal visits or contacts with social work or early years practitioners especially troubled families' parents and single mums.

The research findings also confirm the increasing trend for social media use to expand the social networks of parents, thereby providing the opportunity to seek and share information widely. The research findings show that faith groups/organisations

are the least effective information source and channel, in their social network strata, when parents are seeking childcare information. This situation points to the need for childcare information needs to be collaboratively enhanced with community gatekeepers, community opinion formers, Healthcare and Social Work practitioners. This recommendation would extend the traditional engagement and consultation framework for childcare information beyond the parents, providers and early years' practitioners. The more collaborative the consultation is, the better outcomes achieved across the community.

Parents may not necessarily seek information from people of their own social class, but would access views across class strata, depending on the need and the category of information required. Johnson (1997) notes that for complicated information, people will seek information from interpersonal sources that can summarize information for them in meaningful and accessible terms, and that people are neither terribly persistent nor sophisticated in their search behaviours. However, this research confirms this depends on the nature of the information sought and the experience of the searcher in seeking the information. Parents participating in this research reported a search process that involved different stages of searching, contacting, verifying, visiting, and validating before making a choice. Typically, most parents visit about three providers: this nullifies the notion that individuals are neither terribly persistent nor sophisticated in their search behaviours. This study has led to discovering how parents develop a feeling of mastery due to active childcare acquisition. This feeling usually occurs when people emerge in central positions in networks as they become sought out for the unique information they possess.

The impact of social media on childcare information seeking behaviour would also be a fruitful research topic for further exploration. Social media tools such as 'smart phone apps' can also be used to push childcare information to expectant mums who have registered their interest to receive appropriate and timely information.

## **Supply Led Interventions - Improving Accessibility and Affordability**

In looking for information that is of high quality, parents look for information that is accessible in a way that enables them to form a perception of its quality. However, the willingness to trust information depends on the perceived quality of a source of information. Accessibility of sources is often the key determinant of their use (Bates, 2005). Although most theorists confront the world with a scientific model that implies exhaustive searching and testing will help information seekers to come to the correct conclusion, most information seekers will stop searching when they discover the first somewhat plausible answer to their query (Johnson, 1996). However, these findings above, suggest that this is not true, as parents have access to various childcare information sites/sources and would practice berry-picking before making a choice from the various childcare options they have gathered. Accessing a source of information is influenced by trust, and people place trust in each other and information systems to varying degrees, depending on numerous situational factors. They know that their sources are reliable in some domains but not in others. Parents in this study confirmed that government sources and sites are often more trusted than others. Their berry-picking habit reinforces Johnson's (1996) claim that users collect multiple sources of evidence to safeguard themselves against actors with inadequate capabilities or deceitful intentions. The study also confirms that parents engage in much communication to build and maintain a network of people they can turn to for advice and information.

At the moment, all government childcare information sources are free, at source, and all the parents surveyed and interviewed, in this research, have not paid to access childcare information sources. However, there are websites in the UK (like [www.childcare.co.uk](http://www.childcare.co.uk)) that have successfully charged parents a premium membership subscription fee to access childcare information, and keep them informed (through 'information push' tools) on childcare availability and cost. The parents who subscribe to these premium services also benefit from bundle family amusement park, travel and events discounts packages negotiated by such sites. This business model has significant policy implications for policy makers as it opens up future options for regional and national childcare information hubs, once

established. Childcare information access through local support organisations such as schools, children's centres, Job Centre Plus and the National Health Service (NHS) will also benefit from the new childcare information governance framework which will help reduce duplication of effort across these information sources. This will enable the government to introduce what I recommend could be called Individualised Childcare Information Packages for families. The Individualised Childcare Information Packages will be tailored to each child's live event (birthdays) and their transition milestone(s) from early years to adolescence. The Childcare Information Package will consist of a comprehensive list of services, funding and support packages that each child and family can access at milestones and key stages. The information will be 'pushed' to parents and provide the best foundation to commence their berry picking.

### **Reducing complexity and complicatedness**

The less complicated a source or system is, the higher the likelihood of usage by parents. Complexity and complicatedness lead to information avoidance. Sometimes the ripple effect is a digital divide, as parents who are less literate must seek knowledgeable others to interpret information for them. The Ofsted reports are a good example of this phenomenon. Though they are supposed to provide details of the quality of a service provision to parents, the information content is written in the language of professionals and practitioners, making it difficult for parents to understand how to use the information to guide their search. Therefore, findings from this research suggest that a simplified version of the reports should be provided for parents based on research or a consultation exercise of what parents would like to see on such a report. Similarly, the new Universal credit has been described as complicated by critics and parents who found the old tax credit system difficult to understand would also struggle to comprehend the Universal credit which is even more complex. Complicatedness of the tax credit system leads to information avoidance by families. Simplification of these processes would help families to understand their eligibility for help with the financial costs of childcare therefore alleviating poverty issues for the family and improving outcomes for the children.

## **SUMMARY: POLICY IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

The analysis of childcare information-seeking behaviours demonstrates that the UK government needs to implement genuine and sustainable family policies to support the childcare market and improve outcomes for families. The research identifies that parents need to be supported with appropriate policy interventions to collect, collate, consolidate and utilise information sources to meet childcare information needs. This chapter explores the policy implications of the research findings and offers recommendations to address service gaps, whilst also offering new insights to add to the body of knowledge in childcare and information seeking behaviour.

Parents in this study confirmed major concerns impacting on using childcare. The fear of being judged as poor parents, the fear of missing out on key milestones in their child's life and the growing moral panics bordering around safeguarding – prevent or discourage parents from using childcare. Most of the parents confirmed that a point in time they had these fears and felt they were taking a risk in leaving their children to be looked after by others. The study ascertains parents are looking for good quality information that is accessible in a way that enables them to form a perception of its quality. However, the willingness to trust the information available is usually blighted by the perceived quality of the source of the information. Parents highlighted **7 key barriers** to childcare information seeking as - Not knowing where to look; Not knowing what is available; Being scared to ask silly questions; Information scattered in too many places; Complex systems and complicated processes; Inaccurate information; The cost in time and cost of childcare.

### **Key Recommendations**

It is imperative that the UK government seek to implement a sustainable and genuine family policy to support working families so they can stay in work and also to encourage those currently not working due to childcare barriers. This would involve first and foremost tackling the issue of childcare affordability which is a major issue for parents and the disparate funding and benefit structures that confuse families and those working with them.

**Optimisation of information sources.** The researcher offers a few recommendations to improve parents' experience when looking for childcare. The first recommendation is to remove the barriers highlighted by parents through the optimisation of information sources by sharing information across all platforms as outlined in the model, instead of focussing mainly on channel shift options.

Optimising and improving formal sources of information is beneficial in allowing parents to build more confidence in utilising information. Parents will also benefit from a new childcare information governance framework which would help reduce duplication of effort across these information sources. Introduction of responsive apps for families would also improve their information seeking experience.

***Reduce complexity and complicatedness.*** By simplifying processes such as funding eligibility, application processes as well as information content so parents can make informed decision. Affordability issues are exacerbated by complex information systems, which could lead to information avoidance by parents. Simplification of information content will reduce digital divide and least effort behaviour which may lead to parents settling for childcare that is not really their choice.

***Legislate provider updating processes.*** The study identifies that availability of real-time vacancy information would be a great benefit parents. Currently, providers are not obliged to update the information hosted on the government sponsored directories in local authorities therefore making the task of looking for childcare onerous. Access to up to date vacancy information would reduce the time and effort expended when looking for childcare.

***Integrate social media into systems to provide feedback.*** The research provides evidence for demand-led interventions which include collaborative engagement with community gatekeepers, opinion formers and joint work with healthcare and social work practitioners who work with the families. Providing information at key stages of the child's life through practitioners as an 'information-push' to parents would ensure families do not miss out on key information that could change their lives.

***Introduce Individualised Family Childcare Packages.*** Supply-led interventions were also identified through the study. Introduction of Individualised Family Childcare Packages tailored to key stages of child development, events and key milestones in the child's life as well as information, advice and guidance services at these stages would help families make the best choice to suit their needs and circumstances.

***Investment in childcare workers - Introduction of CRM into staff/childcare training.*** The fact that parents would determine choice based on the quality of childcare and staff experience and relationship with child and parents reaffirms the need to invest in childcare workers through salary reviews, and integration of CRM into staff/childcare training so they are empowered to deliver the best services to improve family and child outcomes.

## CHAPTER 7

# CONCLUSIONS

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Childcare is an essential commodity that allows parents to participate in the labour market which can ultimately lead to improved social mobility and economic well-being for the family. In the UK childcare objectives have also been linked to the education of the child, thereby facilitating further benefits relating to the child's educational and social development. Finding the right childcare however is not a simple task for families despite government interventions over the years. This research sought to understand parents' childcare needs so policies and reforms can be better targeted to meet these needs improve parents' experience and eventually transform child and family outcomes.

The central aim of this study was to thoroughly investigate parents' information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare in the UK, and to develop an information seeking model for childcare based on the findings. No study, to date, has analytically studied childcare information seeking behaviour or produced a model of information seeking behaviour for childcare. The evidence gathered from 550 parents and in-depth interviews with key practitioners provided a good foundation for this pioneer study to inform theory and practice. The importance of this study is that it addresses gaps in literature and extends our understanding of parents' information seeking behaviour for childcare to inform changes recommended. The originality and distinctiveness of this study has also been demonstrated through the policy implications and interventions identified in my findings and the inferences that I have been able to draw out and articulate in my recommendations on policy interventions.

The research methodology adopted was mixed methods. The quantitative survey lent itself to an exploration of the statistical inferences for parents' childcare information-seeking behaviour. The quantitative phase used structured questionnaires as the data collection tool. Sensitive information about parents' experiences when looking for childcare was captured through semi-structured interviews. The rich qualitative data extrapolated through interviews with parents and practitioners produced further insight into parents' childcare information-seeking behaviour. This enriched data, provided by a randomly selected sample of parents



from the first phase of the research, covered a selection of participants from different socio-economic classes and ethnic backgrounds, which could resonate with parents across the country.

This research has produced considerable evidence of parents' childcare information seeking behavioural patterns. It has also provided the perspective of stakeholders, including childcare providers and Healthcare, Social Work and Early Years practitioners working with families, illustrating the intrinsic factors involved in the childcare seeking process and their influences on decision making and choice. Furthermore, this study reveals the reasoning behind the choice of information sources and channels utilised by parents, and the linkages between quality, trust, and time when looking for childcare. These findings were used to develop childcare information seeking behaviour model for parents. The model builds on and extends Wilson's model of information seeking, by highlighting the intricacies of information demand from friends and families, the Internet, organisations, and social media.

## **Empirical contributions**

The research contribution of this thesis is five-fold.

- First, it has built on existing theoretical approaches by integrating a multi-theoretical approach to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of parents' childcare information seeking behaviour. Meanwhile,
- It also demonstrates that a mixed methods approach produces much rich and rigorous data that reflects the structural dimension of the information seeking process and the detailed analysis of the experiences of the parents when looking for childcare. Second,
- It reveals that the childcare information seeking process is characterised by information behaviour underpinned by parents' information horizon, their information ground, and other sociological factors, such as trust, time, cost, and quality which could impact on their choices and life outcomes.
- The research identifies patterns of childcare information-seeking behaviour such as sense making, berry-picking, authentication and verification and in some instances avoidance due to anxiety, overload or values.

- The research also builds a model that reflects the four categories of information sources parents consult or engage with during the relevant period.

For parents in this study, the decision to leave the care of their child to another person was not easy, which is why some decided not to do so. For others, the decision of whether to use childcare as revealed in this research is underpinned by various reasons, including the continuity of family values, achieving economic wellbeing, concerns about the child's needs being met, and, for some, the fear of neglect and abuse. Research revealed that, while some parents favour a home environment in a small setting, others believe there is greater safety in numbers and would prefer their child be in an environment that potentially has a pool of people who can look after the child. These questions were asked, as it was deduced that parents' perceptions and decisions to look for childcare are guided generically by information and personal experiences.

Parental fears of being judged to be poor parents especially for mothers whose traditional role is to look after the family; and the growing moral panics around safeguarding in an ever-changing system of child protection – all contribute to the matter of childcare being viewed as a calculated risk even when trust has been established. The original data presented in Chapter 5 as findings provided in-depth insight into the reasoning behind these decisions, and demonstrated the vital role of information accessibility to parents when looking for childcare to enable them to participate in the labour market.

A further empirical contribution of this research is the comparison between the use of various information channels and sources by families to search for childcare that would meet their needs. The evidence provided presents the Internet and word of mouth through friends and families as the most natural channels of information. Furthermore, the evidence reveals that schools, children centres, and local authorities are the most trusted sources of information for parents. Interestingly, although the Internet was described as the preferred place for parents to look for information, statistical evidence from this study reveals that 44% would not trust information sourced from the Internet, and would verify such information through

trusted sources, such as friends and family, and other sites owned or sponsored by the government.

This highlights the fact that parents' information horizon and information ground has a direct correlation to information accessibility. Parents with strong local social networks seek verification and validation about a setting from their social networks, whereas parents with weak ties or those who have recently moved to a new area confirmed their reliance on official sources (such as Ofsted) for verification, or simply went with gut instinct when choosing to trust a provider. This research confirms that the law of the social network regarding digitally-poor and digitally-rich parents is influenced by information content, information sources, and a human approach.

The research also adds social media to the repertoire of information channels through which parents seek childcare information. The power of social media is such that it can be used for recommendations, validation, or verification. More recently, it is now being used to source childcare when parents are struggling to find what they require from other channels. Transcending different social strata, social media injects a wider network scope into information-seeking behaviour, which can be utilised by parents to either seek childcare information or validate a provider's services.

In looking for information, this research highlights key behaviours practiced by parents preceding a childcare decision. These include making sense of the information berry picking, information verification, information avoidance, and the principle of least effort. These behaviours are subsequently governed by trust, time, and quality. Having a good knowledge of childcare was identified as a key factor affecting the childcare selection process. It enhances the trust parents have in the system, reduces the time spent searching for a suitable choice, and also helps them to make a better decision for the family. Parents are looking for the best quality childcare for their child at a price they can afford, and they practice berry picking by visiting different information sources, gathering details, and making a selection of childcare providers to contact or interview based on their families' key priorities, needs, and circumstances.

Berry picking is an information-gathering exercise that spans various information sources and channels based on the parents' information environment. The research identified that parents trust some sources more than others, depending on ownership of the information, and time spent in the information gathering exercise depends largely on how soon information is needed. The research also suggests that parents with less time to look for childcare based on work or study contingencies may spend less time on berry picking or any other stage of the process. As parents have already asserted that they have concerns about leaving their children with strangers, the first level of trust is usually achieved based on information verification with other trusted sources or people. Ofsted and friends/family were identified as the main sources for validating a childcare provider, even though parents confirmed that their level of trust in friend or family recommendation is higher than Ofsted reports (which in their opinion is simply a 'snapshot' of a day in the setting).

An important behaviour worthy of mention is information avoidance, which was identified in parents who experienced information overload when looking for childcare. These parents' reactions to an overabundance of information being sent to them or being downloaded due to a lack of filtering (required to narrow down the search to their specific requirements) led to total abandonment of the search process and avoidance. Parents of children with special educational needs or disabilities were identified as more likely to practice information avoidance depending on the nature and the level of the needs of their children. The parents confirmed that they simply lacked the time required to look for information after spending the whole day looking after their child.

The research also noted that a group of parents avoided information that challenged their worldviews. This is especially true for parents who had decided not to use formal childcare due to previous experience or family values. The complexity or complicatedness of a system was also confirmed as another barrier to seeking information by parents. The research confirms that parents would prefer to use simple and less complicated systems to find quality information within a short timeframe. While most parents seek the best possible childcare for their child, they are sometimes bound by the timeframe available to find something suitable. This is why it is essential for parents to have easy access to information when it is required.

By talking to parents, the researcher noted that the principle of least effort does not apply to most parents, as most conduct a thorough childcare search before leaving their child with a new provider. However, under certain circumstances, such as time and work pressures, a parent may not be sufficiently privileged to conduct a good search, and may thereby resort to least effort strategies. The implication of this as revealed in the research includes the parent being anxious about the wellbeing of the child, especially when quality of care is deemed poor.

Other external factors identified as influencing parents' behaviour when looking for childcare included the quality of provision, the quality of staff/providers, and cost. Parents in this research confirmed that the quality of childcare is more important to them than cost, yet 70% of those not currently using formal childcare in the survey claim this is purely due to the fact that childcare is expensive. Cost presented a significant barrier to entering the labour market for parents, and this research confirms and corroborates previous research that casts doubt on the affordability of childcare across the UK. According to the parents interviewed in this study, though the quality of childcare is considered more important, they are only able to purchase childcare at a level they can afford; good quality childcare is perceived as expensive. Stakeholders, on the other hand, claim that cost is the most important factor for parents, and believe that good quality childcare does not have to be expensive for parents, given the existence of government demand-led interventions in terms of tax credits, childcare vouchers, and other financial benefits. Interviews with parents also reveal that some are willing to pay high childcare costs by forgoing some luxuries in order to afford the best quality childcare for their children. This is hardly surprising, as not all families qualify for the means-tested working tax credit threshold and therefore would have to make budget adjustments to accommodate the cost.

The affordability of childcare was one major reason for choosing informal childcare. However, parents in this research also revealed that these reasons might not necessarily be due to monetary factors. It was evident that parents are less worried about childcare if the provider is a known person, i.e., a member of the family or a regular friend. Once a relationship has been built with a childcare provider, it is also very likely that the same provider would eventually look after siblings. Survey results revealed that grandparents are preferentially trusted when it comes to informal

childcare, followed by family members, and then friends and family. This corroborates Hall's (2006) claim that grandparents act as support for the family, family members act as substitutes for grandparents, and friends/neighbours are used as back-ups when all else fails. Families with strong family attachments and views seek to transfer or transmit their views to their children, and even to the next generation, thereby making the decision to keep childcare in the family. Parents confirmed that grandparents' support is more flexible, cheaper, and readily available in comparison to other informal sources.

Other benefits derived from grandparents' support include the perpetuation of generational family values, discipline, and continuity of care. However, not all families are the same, and some parents would rather pay for childcare than use friends or family members. The underlying reason for this, as exposed by parents, is based on relationships. While some would gladly jump at the prospect of support, others would consider the health and wellbeing of their parents and strings attached in terms of outside influence on parenting style. Some parents claim they would rather avoid the potential conflict it could present to their relationships, and others would prefer to remain independent of any ties or obligations.

This study also reveals that the behaviour of staff and childcare providers influences parents' decisions when looking for childcare. Parents highlighted, as a deciding factor, the customer relationship management of staff during the initial visit to the setting, and their support in the transition process from home to a childcare setting for both parents and children. This support, as discussed by parents, was viewed as very helpful in circumstances in which the child is very attached to the parent, and where the parent figures as the only adult figure in their life. When asked what they look out for when visiting a setting, parents described their assessment of staff engagement on three levels: staff/child interaction, staff/parent interaction, and peer-to-peer interaction. This essentially suggests that government policies should focus more on supply-led interventions, such as training and development for childcare staff, salary/remuneration reviews, and incentives for staff to encourage the delivery of an excellent level of care. This would enable parents to build more trust in childcare providers and encourage their participation in the labour market with the assurance that their children would be receiving a good quality standard of education

and care. At this stage the researcher recommends that parents' views should be listened to in terms of their need for supportive and acceptable childcare beyond the notion of their contribution to the nation's economy but for more concern about the needs of the family in whatever setting, and built with flexibility of choice. Their requests when asked how parents can best be supported are as listed below:

- More information for all parents
- Making childcare free for all not just the poorest families
- Access to reviews and recommendations for childcare providers
- Access to advisors who can support parents through the process
- Information being sent to families at key stages of the child's life
- Signposting through the Health service for parents new to the area or the country

Beyond these requests are advantages that benefit the child, parent and the economy at large. Parents were asked what impact finding the right childcare has had on them, their child and the family. Parents claim childcare has made a huge difference in their lives. While some alluded to an extremely happy family, others say childcare has improved their child's communication, social skills and the child's confidence. Other parents say they now enjoy their own independence; they can now work full time; reduced stress of using friends and family members (which sometimes affect these relationships). Some also confirm childcare helps to prepare the child for a formal environment such as starting school. Some parents claim it has given their children skills which they would not have been able to give them at home.

Finally, finding acceptable childcare reassures parents that their children are safe, learning, and enjoying what they do. For working parents, finding the right childcare helps them to remain at work without a sense of guilt that they are slacking in their primary role as parents. Childcare also establishes a routine for the family, which helps to enhance a parent's work-life balance and the family's well-being in general. Ultimately, it improves the child's development – educationally and socially, it improves the family's economic well-being and social mobility as the parents are able to work to provide for their family.

## Research Limitations

While due diligence has been done to provide a robust assessment of parents information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare, like any other research, this study has some limitations. The first limitation is a consequence of the diversity of the respondents. Medway, being a predominantly white area, does not have a full representation of the diverse communities found in some areas of England. The research would have benefitted from representation from all communities in the UK. In particular, Asian-Indians were not represented in the research. The researcher advises that readers approach the findings with caution, as the sample is not 100% representative of all ethnic groups in the UK. In order to generalise further, the researcher suggests future research into the information-seeking behaviour of parents, based on their ethnicity, to provide greater insight and a broader perspective of the subject of study.

Achieving a statistically significant sample from each ward was an initial hurdle in this research. The first phase of administering questions generated 410 questionnaires and a top-up survey had to be carried out by administering the same questionnaire to 140 more parents in areas where fewer responses were received, in order to achieve the 550 surveys required to achieve a representative sample. It was observed that the areas with fewer responses were rural areas. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that it was not the aim of this study to conduct an entirely quantitative study with statistical validity. Instead, a mixed methodology was used to develop a small-scale research project that sought to explain parents' childcare information-seeking behaviour. Limitations of the mixed methodology approach have been fully addressed in Chapter 3.

The researcher also acknowledges that utilising a mixed methodology could be time consuming: The first phase, which involved the administering of questionnaires, had to be completed before the second phase interviews could commence. Although the mixed methods approach provided the depth and breadth of information required for the research, the process was significantly longer than if just one method had been utilised as already predicted by Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2004) . The depth of the wealth of information achieved, however, justifies both the process and the methodology. The research instrument also presented some complications. Telephone interviews were used in the second phase of the interviews to overcome the barrier of travelling



for the parent and the researcher, and to allow the parent to choose a neutral and less threatening environment for the interview. The ability of the participants to abruptly end the interview was not anticipated which occurred in one instance where the participant perceived that she was being forced to go back to work. In two other instances, the participants stopped the interviews mid-flow to attend to other calls. The implication in both instances was the extension of the interview session beyond the agreed-upon time.

Finally, the researcher also experienced interpreter/gatekeeper bias while interviewing one parent whose first language was not English. Even though this was anticipated, there was an occasion whereby the gatekeeper refused to allow the parent to participate in the research or share any information about her childcare-seeking behaviour. The researcher suggests that for future research, a Skype interview may be a better research instrument, so that body language and signs of stress are observable during the interview process. Extending research information details to gatekeepers beforehand may also help researchers to avoid resistance.

### **Future study**

This research pioneers information-seeking behaviour studies in the field of childcare, providing a foundation for the proposal that future studies look into the childcare information-seeking behaviour of parents. The scope of research opportunities that can be explored is quite broad, and would create knowledge regarding our understanding of how parents seek childcare, which would consequently influence policy development and the childcare market.

While this research has concentrated on developing a model for parents' information-seeking behaviour and has elucidated the intrinsic factors affecting parents' behaviours and choices, a wider field of study could lead to further discoveries regarding the level of impact these factors have on family outcomes and how these can be harnessed by policy makers and childcare providers. It also offers potential childcare users with the ability to understand the childcare-seeking process and how they can better understand their own behaviour to secure the best choice for their family. Practitioners supporting families would benefit from the pedagogy of understanding the behaviour of the parents and families they are working with, in

order to provide the best support required by the family in a more responsive manner.

The main problems with childcare provision in the UK and elsewhere have been identified for many years and its accessibility and affordability scrutinised by many researchers. Cost of childcare to parents in the UK is very high in comparison to its European neighbours and has been increasing steadily at a faster pace than general inflation over the last ten to 15 years. For the first time in more than 15 years, the family and childcare trust confirms that childcare costs has risen at the same rate as the inflationary costs. Although the government has proposed free 30 hours of early education for three and four year olds in working households, the best solution is to invest massively in a free universal full-time formal childcare for all children from 0-18, with highly trained and well paid staff.

As elucidated in previous chapters the UK government over the years has expended a lot of money into supporting parents back to work. If indeed they wish to eradicate all childcare barrier problems, then all childcare benefits should be merged into one simple and single initiative – universal free childcare and education for all. Future research will however benefit from investigating the uptake of the free 30 hours childcare and how parents' behaviour towards the initiative has impacted on the childcare market and family outcomes.

Of utmost importance will be future research into the implications of the recession and the austerity measures put in place by the government in recent years to mop up the country's budget deficit on parents childcare behaviour, the childcare market and UK economy at large. Already, the closure of quite a lot of children centres, coupled with the diminishing number of childminders puts even more disadvantaged families at the risk of not finding flexible childcare when they need it. With drastic cuts in social security and public services, low income households in particular lone parents and single pensioners were found to have bore the brunt of the cumulative spending cuts in services and tax-benefit changes. Affordability could become an even greater issue and the impact on the childcare market would be a drop in quality as parents would no longer be able to afford quality childcare.

The researcher also believes there is significant potential to explore in the future, the differences between gender information behaviour and experiences when looking for

childcare, inter-linkages between ethnicity and childcare behaviour; and the barriers experienced by parents based on social class.

The relationship between childcare and parents' mental health was also not adequately researched in this study, and there is scope for further research here. Although no correlation was identified or established between childcare and parental mental health, the researcher suggests further research in this area, as parents reported anxiety, fear, and concern when they were unable to find suitable childcare. Previous studies have been carried out to investigate the mental health of childcare staff - there is research yet to be done in this area for parents. An impact assessment may be useful in determining how parents who find childcare seeking stressful manage or cope with the stress. Other areas for further study include testing the following hypothetical conclusions produced from this research as below:

- Trust: That parents rely on trusted others and systems to verify a childcare provider before utilising their services; however, trust in the provider is built over time through the quality of the relationship and the quality of the service. Future research into how to re-establish trust in Ofsted inspections, safeguarding policies, childcare systems, application processes and provider settings would be of advantage in the field.
- Information avoidance: Essentially parents are within their rights to make the decision to look after their children even as the decision to use childcare depends on family circumstances and values. Future research will benefit from how to debunk parents' myths about childcare and how to improve transparency around safeguarding issues within settings when parents choose not to use childcare or avoid information that does not agree with or challenges their value system.
- Information overload or anxiety: That parents abandon the childcare search process if complex, or seek knowledgeable others to either interpret the information or provide alternative solutions. Exploration of how these occurs and how it can be mitigated at different stages of the seeking process.

Finally, investigating parents' childcare information seeking behaviour has opened opportunities to understanding the rationale behind parents' behaviour when seeking childcare. Future research in this area would help improve families' well-being and outcomes through the application of theories informing social policy and practice.

## SUMMARY: CONCLUSION

Identifying that no study to date has analytically researched childcare information seeking behaviour, this chapter summarises and encapsulates the significance of the study and its empirical contributions to knowledge in the area of childcare and information seeking behaviour to inform policy and practice.

The empirical contributions of the research is fivefold:

1. It builds on existing theoretical approaches, by integrating a multi-theoretical framework to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of parents' behaviour when looking for childcare.
2. It confirms that a mixed methodological approach produces much richer data through a rigorous research reflecting the structural dimension of the information seeking process and detailed analysis of the experiences of parents when looking for childcare.
3. It reveals that childcare information seeking is characterised by information behaviour underpinned by parents' information horizon and symptomatic sociological factors such as **Quality, Cost, Trust and Time**.
4. The research also identifies patterns of childcare seeking behaviours – **Sense-making, Berry-picking, Authentication and Verification, Information avoidance due to overload, misconceptions or value systems**.
5. The study offers childcare information seeking behaviour model that reflects the four categories of platforms of information sources that parents consult or engage with when looking for childcare – **Internet, Friends/family, Organisations and Other Sources (printed materials – leaflets, posters etc.)**. Collaborating and sharing information across these platforms would enhance information accessibility rather than concentrating majorly on channel shift proposals.

Even more importantly, the study confirms that the cost of childcare still remains a significant factor in seeking childcare, as parents would seek the best quality childcare at the price they can afford. 70% of parents not currently using childcare in this study claim they are not able to afford good quality childcare provision. Parents however rated the quality of childcare as more important to them than the cost of childcare; therefore indicating that they may not take up childcare if perceived to be

of low quality. Parents' definition of quality however depends on their needs and circumstances and differs from practitioners' definition.

The research confirms that parents would prefer to use simple and less complicated systems to find quality information within a short timeframe. Whilst most parents seek the best possible childcare for their child, they are sometimes bound by the time available to find a suitable provider. Simplification of Ofsted information, funding processes and application for the new universal credit is therefore absolutely crucial to encourage and support more parents back to work.

Trust was identified as a key factor in leaving a child with a provider. Parents' ability to trust childcare providers as evidenced is based on their worldviews, values, experiences and word of mouth. Therefore, building a strong childcare workforce would require developing CRM modules of communicating and working with parents for childcare providers. Transparency about whistle-blowing and safeguarding policies should be available to parents to alleviate fears of neglect and abuse.

Overall, the study builds on the proposition that information provision to families is underpinned by the belief that families are unique, each searching for relevant information in a way that makes sense, and expecting that their questions or problems will be resolved in a culturally appropriate and supportive environment. This research accentuates that parents' ability to access quality childcare information, make sense of the information provided, understand the meaning in the right context, and use the information to improve their ability to engage, participate, and contribute to society at large, is highly dependent on their information-seeking behaviour as shaped by their information environment and horizon.

As a pioneering research, this study opens up gaps in information seeking behaviour research and its impact on the childcare market. Nonetheless, the research has only been able to concentrate on specific areas but much work still needs to be done to provide in-depth analysis of parents' information seeking behaviour in relation to higher costs of childcare, childcare information seeking behaviour based on class, ethnicity and gender. More work also needs to be done to analyse the impact affordability of childcare plays in the childcare information seeking behaviour of troubled families and how recent policy changes such as the introduction of the recent free 30hour early education and the closure of children centres across the country would influence families' childcare seeking behaviour.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

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### MOTHERS AND FATHERS WANTED TO TAKE PART IN A SURVEY ON PARENTS' CHILDCARE INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR.

Mothers and fathers aged 18 or older with one or more children under the age of sixteen are invited to complete a short survey for an academic doctorate research at Goldsmiths University London that seeks to understand parents' views, experiences and information seeking behaviour when looking for childcare in England.

The survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete and the findings will help the researcher design a model of information behaviour that is directly relevant to families, and will support the development of policies and responsive services.

Participation of fathers and mothers is very crucial to this research, as this will enhance the production of a study that encapsulates the information behaviour, views and experiences from men and women's perspectives.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate without consequence. Responses to the survey will only be reported in aggregated form to protect the identity of respondents. There are no identified risks from participating in this research. The survey is confidential. Neither the researcher nor the University has a conflict of interest with the results. The data collected from this study will be kept in a locked cabinet for three years.

To ensure safe and proper research procedures, auditors of the Goldsmiths University of London Review Board and regulatory authority will be granted direct access to the research data without violating the confidentiality of the participants.

You or any eligible mother or father you pass this on to can fill out the questionnaire without providing any identifying information. However, if a valid email address or telephone number is entered the participant **will be entered in a prize draw for 1<sup>st</sup> Prize - £100; 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize - £75 and 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize - £50.**

**The survey will be open until (date 2014) and the winners will be contacted by (date 2014).**

Click here (link) to complete the online questionnaire (which has to be completed in one go). More detail on how the information provided will be used is included on the opening page of the questionnaire.

For a response to any questions please contact Esther Olawande via email ([esther.olawande@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:esther.olawande@hotmail.co.uk)) or telephone (07525 479192).

THANKS FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE



## APPENDIX 2: PARENTS' INVITATION LETTER

### COVER LETTER

---

Dear Parent

My name is Esther Olawande. I am a PhD student at Goldsmiths University of London in the PACE department under the supervision of Dr Claudia Bernard.

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled Childcare Information Seeking Behaviour of Parents in the UK. The purpose of this survey is to develop a model of childcare behaviour of parents to support the development of responsive services for families. Goldsmiths University of London Review Board has approved this study.

The following study survey was developed to ask you a few questions regarding your childcare experiences and views. It is our hope that this information would add to the wealth of knowledge in childcare research

Thank you for your consideration. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely  
Esther Olawande  
Researcher.

# APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET

## CHILDCARE INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF PARENTS IN ENGLAND

---

### WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research forms part of a doctorate programme to investigate childcare behaviour and experiences of parents living in the UK.

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH?

The purpose of this survey is to develop a model of childcare behaviour of parents to support the development of responsive childcare policies and services for families living in the UK.

### WHAT AM I EXPECTED TO DO?

Parents are invited to complete a short survey that was developed to ask a few questions regarding your childcare experiences and views. If you complete the survey, provide a valid email address & phone number and consent to participating in subsequent telephone interview, your name will be entered into a prize draw - **1<sup>st</sup> Prize - £100; 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize - £50 and 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize - £30.**

### CAN I WITHDRAW IF I DO NOT WISH TO CONTINUE?

Participation in this research is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the research at any stage without any consequence.

### ARE THERE ANY RISKS INVOLVED?

There are no risks involved in participating in this research.

### HOW WILL THE INFORMATION I SHARE BE USED?

The information you share with us will be used to determine patterns of childcare information seeking behaviour of parents and it is hoped that this information would add to the wealth of knowledge in childcare research. Data will be stored confidentially for three years after which they will be destroyed.

### CAN I BE IDENTIFIED IN THE REPORT?

This research is completely anonymous and confidential. Responses to the survey will only be reported in aggregated form to protect the identity of respondents.

### HOW WILL I KNOW THE OUTCOME OF THE RESEARCH?

The researcher is happy to share findings of the research with participants once the project has been completed. A summary of the result can be shared on request.

### IF I HAVE ANY CONCERNS OR QUESTIONS WHO DO I CONTACT?

You can contact the researcher Esther Olawande by phone on 07525479192 or via email at [esther.olawande@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:esther.olawande@hotmail.co.uk)

Thank-you.

## APPENDIX 4: CONSENT FORM

### INFORMED CONSENT – CHILDCARE INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIOUR OF PARENTS

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick box as appropriate):

1.	I have read and understood the information about the research project, as provided in the Information Sheet _____.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	I understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	I am happy for my name & phone number to be entered into the prize draw to participate in the next stage of the research.	<input type="checkbox"/>
	I understand that I may be contacted to participate in the next stage of the research	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Participant:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

# APPENDIX 5: PARENTS' SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

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## CHILDCARE SUFFICIENCY ASSESSMENT & INFORMATION SEEKING PATTERNS OF PARENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Respondent,

This questionnaire is part of a childcare sufficiency assessment investigating how parents and carers seek information to help make decisions on childcare. It would be much appreciated, if you could spare a few moments to answer the following questions. All completed questionnaires will be treated as strictly confidential.

Survey participants must be 18 years or over: (please tick to confirm)

### SECTION 1: CHILDCARE EXPERIENCE

---

**Q1.** I am a:

- Parent  Grandparent  
 Other relative  Foster Parent  
 Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**Q2.** Have you used childcare in the past?

- Yes  No

**Q3.** How old was your child(ren) at the time?

Child 1:	Child 2:	Child 3:
Child 4:	Child 5:	Child 6:

**Q4.** Does your child/any of your children have a disability or special educational needs?

- Yes  No

**Q5. Which of these reasons best describe why you do not use childcare? Tick all that apply**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="radio"/> I choose not to use childcare   | <input type="radio"/> My child / children are old enough to look after themselves                                  |
| <input type="radio"/> My partner / family look after my children  | <input type="radio"/> Difficulty in finding childcare available at the times that I need it                        |
| <input type="radio"/> Difficulty in finding childcare with appropriately qualified or trained staff   | <input type="radio"/> Difficulty in finding childcare of sufficient quality  |
| <input type="radio"/> Difficulty in finding childcare available that is suitable for the age of my child  | <input type="radio"/> Difficulty in finding childcare that is in the right location                                |
| <input type="radio"/> Difficulty in finding childcare that can be flexible in response to unpredictable attendance, e.g. medical appointment, illness | <input type="radio"/> Difficulty in finding childcare that can cater for my child's disability or additional needs |
| <input type="radio"/> Difficulty in finding childcare that can cater for my child's cultural needs  | <input type="radio"/> Childcare is too expensive   |
| <input type="radio"/> I only use childcare on a short-term basis and it is impossible to plan   |  |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____   |  |

**Q6. Which of the following childcare options have you used?**

- |  |  |                                       |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Childminder        | <input type="radio"/> Preschool          | <input type="radio"/> Grandparents    |
| <input type="radio"/> Neighbours/Friends | <input type="radio"/> Day Nursery        | <input type="radio"/> Other relatives |
| <input type="radio"/> Holiday Scheme     | <input type="radio"/> After school clubs | <input type="radio"/> Home alone      |

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**Q7.a How would you rate your experience when looking for childcare?**

- Very Poor       Poor       Fair       Good       Very Good

**Q7.b Please describe your experience when looking for childcare?**

**Q8.a How would you rate your childcare experience?**

- Very Poor       Poor       Fair       Good       Very Good

**Q8.b Please describe your childcare experience?**

**Q9. How did you find out about your childcare?:**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Family Information Service    | <input type="radio"/> School  |
| <input type="radio"/> Friend/Relative               | <input type="radio"/> Parent/Toddler Group                              |
| <input type="radio"/> Internet                      | <input type="radio"/> Doctor's Surgery, Health Clinic or Health Visitor |
| <input type="radio"/> Job Centre                    | <input type="radio"/> Library   |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____ |   |

**Q10. How satisfied were you with the information you obtained? Was it**

- |  |                           |                          |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Easy to understand                               | <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> No |
| Relevant   | <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> No |
| Accurate   | <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> No |
| Up-to-date                                       | <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> No |
| Comprehensive                                    | <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> No |
| In a physical form that was comprehensive to use | <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> No |

**Q11. Did the information meet all your needs?**

- Yes       No

If not, why?



**Q16. Do you trust childcare information sources**

on the Internet	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
From Family Information Service	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
from Faith Groups	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
from Voluntary Organisations	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
from the Local Councils	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
from the Local Newspapers	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
on the Radio/TV	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
from Health Practitioners	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
From Children Centres	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
From Schools	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No
from Government Publications	<input type="radio"/>	Yes	<input type="radio"/>	No

**Q17. What do you value most in your choice of where you obtain childcare information?**

(Rate your response as 1 – Not Important, 2 – Somewhat important, 3 – Important, 4 – Very Important, 5 – Extremely important).

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Ease of use	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ease of understanding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accessibility	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Preference	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reliability of information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Quality of information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Previous experience of use	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Frequency of use	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information being up-to-date	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



**Q18. What other factors would you consider in making your childcare decision?**  
 (Rate your response as 1 – Not Important, 2 – Somewhat important, 3 – Important, 4 – Very Important, 5 – Extremely important).

	1	2	3	4	5
School/childcare provider Ofsted reports	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Friends and family recommendation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online reviews, e.g. on social media sites	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Nearest to work or train station	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Quality of service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ratio of staff/childminder to children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Cost of service	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Staff/childminder interaction	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Training and qualifications of childcare provider	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify): _____					

**Q19. From the following list of organisations and people below, please indicate if you would approach them, in the future, for childcare information:**

Children's Centres	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Family Information Service	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Friends & Family	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Local Council Offices	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Schools	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Public Libraries	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Faith & Voluntary Groups	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Healthcare Practitioners( e.g. GPs/Health visitors/Social Workers)	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Other (please specify): _____		

**Q20. From the following, please indicate your favourite three methods of obtaining childcare information**

(Select only one method each for your 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> choices)

	<b>1<sup>st</sup></b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup></b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup></b>
Searching on the Internet	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Talking on the telephone with an adviser	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Talking face-to-face with an adviser	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading a leaflet/pamphlet	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading a magazine/newspaper	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing a letter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Television/radio	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q21. Which of the following subjects have you ever wanted to find out more about in the past or feel you might want to find out more about in the future?**

	<i><b>In the past</b></i>	<b>Now</b>	<i><b>In the future</b></i>
Information about childcare policies / the UK Government	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information about your local council	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information about the community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employment / job opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Health and Safety at work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Housing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Health Care	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social Security Benefits	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family / Personal matters	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Taxation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial matters/Pensions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Consumer and Credit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Business opportunities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Legal information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Equal rights and Discrimination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Immigration and Nationality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parental' rights	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Child safety	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Transport and Travel	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Technology and Communications	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Environmental information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Leisure and Recreation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Childcare funding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**Q22. If public access to computers were made more widely available to the general public, how often would you use these computers to look for childcare information?**

Computers in children's Centres	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No
Computers in town halls	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Computers in public libraries/community hubs	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Computers in sports & leisure centres	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Computers in the shopping centres	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Computers in the GP surgeries/healthy living centres	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Computers in the post office	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No
Computers in faith & voluntary organisations	<input type="radio"/> Yes	<input type="radio"/> No

**Q23. How important are the following to you? The need to:**  
 (Rate your response as 1 – Not Important, 2 – Somewhat important, 3 – Important, 4 – Very Important, 5 – Extremely important).

	1	2	3	4	5
Increase your current knowledge	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Solve a problem at hand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have new information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Expand the information you currently have	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Validate the information you presently know	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Understand the meaning of information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Recognise the existence of uncertainty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q24. How often do you face problems while seeking information?**  
 (Rate your response as 1 – Never, 2 – Not often, 3 – Often, 4 – Very often, 5 – Always).

	1	2	3	4	5
Lack of access to a computer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of time for searching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Required material is not available	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Information is scattered in too many sources	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Q25. In which language do you prefer to obtain information?**

- |                               |                               |                                |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> English | <input type="radio"/> Welsh   | <input type="radio"/> Slovak   |
| <input type="radio"/> Romany  | <input type="radio"/> Bengali | <input type="radio"/> Gujarati |
| <input type="radio"/> Hindi   | <input type="radio"/> Punjabi | <input type="radio"/> Urdu     |
| <input type="radio"/> Chinese | <input type="radio"/> Polish  | <input type="radio"/> Greek    |
| <input type="radio"/> Turkish | <input type="radio"/> Arabic  | <input type="radio"/> French   |

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**Q26. In which format do you prefer to obtain information? (Select only one)**

- Electronic/digital material       Audio/visual material       Printed material

**Q27. How would you prefer to receive information (Select only one)**

- By phone       By email  
 By post       By text  
 Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

**Q28. Was/were any of the factors below of consideration when you were looking for childcare?**

- Values       Beliefs       Time  
 Culture       Experience       Trust

Please describe in what way

**Q29. In the last year, have issues surrounding childcare affected you or your partner (if applicable) in the following ways... Tick all that apply**

- Caused problems at work       Stopped you or your partner working / getting a job  
 Prevented the continuation of paid work       Stopped you or your partner working more hours  
 Stopped you or your partner from assessing training / studying       Stopped you or your partner completing any training / study

**Q30. Has the cost of childcare stopped you from seeking childcare information?**

- Yes       No

Describe how cost has affected the decision to look for childcare and the alternatives sought.

**Q31. Which of the following types of support are you aware of?**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Child tax credits   | <input type="radio"/> Working tax credits (childcare element)                |
| <input type="radio"/> Nursery education funding / free places for 2, 3 or 4 year olds | <input type="radio"/> Salary Sacrifice / Childcare Vouchers from an employer |
| <input type="radio"/> Support from JobCentre Plus                                     | <input type="radio"/> None   |
| <input type="radio"/> Care to Learn   |  |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____                                   |  |

**Q32. Have you accessed any of these?**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Nursery education funding / free places for 2, 3 or 4 year olds | <input type="radio"/> Salary Sacrifice / Childcare Vouchers from an employer |
| <input type="radio"/> Working tax credits (childcare element)                         | <input type="radio"/> Child tax credits                                      |
| <input type="radio"/> Support from JobCentre Plus                                     | <input type="radio"/> None   |
| <input type="radio"/> Care to Learn   |  |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____                                   |  |

### SECTION 3: DEMOGRAPHICS

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**Q33. Which of the following would you best describe yourself as?**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> White British                 | <input type="radio"/> White Other               |
| <input type="radio"/> Mixed Heritage                | <input type="radio"/> Black / Black British     |
| <input type="radio"/> Asian / Asian British         | <input type="radio"/> Chinese / Chinese British |
| <input type="radio"/> Traveller                     |   |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____ |   |

**Q34. Which of the following would you best describe yourself as?**

- |                                |                               |                               |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Under 18 | <input type="radio"/> 18 – 21 | <input type="radio"/> 22 – 24 |
| <input type="radio"/> 25 – 34  | <input type="radio"/> 35 – 44 | <input type="radio"/> 45 – 54 |
| <input type="radio"/> 55 – 64  | <input type="radio"/> 65+     |                               |

**Q35. Gender**

- Male  Female

**Q36. For analysis purposes only, could you please confirm which of the following bands you total household income falls into? (Including any benefits you receive)**

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Less than £10,000 | <input type="radio"/> £10,000 - £14,999 | <input type="radio"/> £15,000 - £19,999 |
| <input type="radio"/> £20,000 – £29,999 | <input type="radio"/> £30,000 - £39,999 | <input type="radio"/> £40,000 - £49,999 |
| <input type="radio"/> £50,000 - £59,999 | <input type="radio"/> £60,000 - £69,000 | <input type="radio"/> £70,000+          |

**Q37. How would you describe your household?**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Married couple household with dependent children | <input type="radio"/> Cohabiting couple household with dependent children |
| <input type="radio"/> Lone parent households with dependent children   | <input type="radio"/> Extended family with dependent children             |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____                    |   |

**Q38. Which of the following most closely describes you?**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> In full time employment (30+ hours a week)     | <input type="radio"/> Self Employed (30+ hours a week)    |
| <input type="radio"/> In part time employment (16-29 hours per week) | <input type="radio"/> Self Employed (16-29 hours a week)  |
| <input type="radio"/> In part time employment (1-15 hours per week)  | <input type="radio"/> Self employed (1-15 hours per week) |
| <input type="radio"/> Looking after the home or family               | <input type="radio"/> Student                             |
| <input type="radio"/> Currently looking for work                     | <input type="radio"/> Career break                        |
| <input type="radio"/> Maternity/Paternity leave                      | <input type="radio"/> Not working                         |
| <input type="radio"/> On a government training scheme                | <input type="radio"/> Long term sick or disabled          |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____                  |   |

**Q39. Which of the following most closely describes your partner?**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> In full time employment (30+ hours a week)     | <input type="radio"/> Self Employed (30+ hours a week)    |
| <input type="radio"/> In part time employment (16-29 hours per week) | <input type="radio"/> Self Employed (16-29 hours a week)  |
| <input type="radio"/> In part time employment (1-15 hours per week)  | <input type="radio"/> Self employed (1-15 hours per week) |
| <input type="radio"/> Looking after the home or family               | <input type="radio"/> Student                             |
| <input type="radio"/> Currently looking for work                     | <input type="radio"/> Career break                        |
| <input type="radio"/> Maternity/paternity leave                      | <input type="radio"/> Not working                         |
| <input type="radio"/> On a government training scheme                | <input type="radio"/> Long term sick or disabled          |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____                  |   |

**Q40. If you are not working which of the following would help you to consider working, training or studying?**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> When your children are older                                     | <input type="radio"/> If there was more financial help available |
| <input type="radio"/> You had more information about childcare choices                 | <input type="radio"/> Childcare was available more locally       |
| <input type="radio"/> I would not consider working, training or studying in the future |  |
| <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____                                    |  |

**Q41. Would you prefer to look after your child rather than return to work?**

- |                           |                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> No |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|

**Q42. Would you describe yourself as a disabled or having special educational needs?**

- |                           |                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> No |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|

**Q43. What is your highest level of qualification?**

- |  |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> No qualifications      | <input type="radio"/> GCSE           |
| <input type="radio"/> GCSE A Levels/GNVQ/NVQ | <input type="radio"/> BTech/Diploma  |
| <input type="radio"/> BSc/BA                 | <input type="radio"/> MSc/MA/MBA/PhD |



**Q44.** Do you consider English as your first language?

Yes

No

**Q45.** Would you consider yourself as computer literate?

Yes

No

**Q44.** What is your religion (even if you are not currently practicing) Please tick one

Christian  
(Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant)

Buddhist

Hindu

Jewish

Muslim

Sikh

Any other religion

No religion at all

**Q45.** If you would like to be entered into our prize draw for a chance to win John Lewis vouchers – 1<sup>st</sup> prize £100, 2<sup>nd</sup> prize £75, 3<sup>rd</sup> prize £50 please provide your first name and contact telephone number and/or email address in the box below. Participation MAY require a short telephone interview as part of the next phase of this study.

**Q46.** Again for analysis purposes only, could you please confirm your post-code? (NOTE: THIS WILL ONLY BE USED TO HELP WITH PLACE ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS)

Please return the completed survey by using the following:

Place in the box provided

Post using the prepaid envelope to:  
Medway Family Information Service  
Early Years Services  
Medway Council  
FREEPOST RRUY-ZBTJ-CZZC  
Gun Wharf  
Chatham  
Kent ME4 4TR

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey questionnaire.

## APPENDIX 6: PARENTS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Introduction of self and project.
2. Ask basic introductory questions:
  - a) How many children do you have?
  - b) How old are they?
  - c) Are you a one parent or two parent family?
3. How would you describe Childcare?
  - a) Which childcare have you used in the past – formal or informal?
4. How did you decide to look for childcare?
  - a) How did you go about looking for childcare?
  - b) What were you looking for in your childcare?
  - c) Where did you go to look for childcare?
  - d) Who did you ask?
  - e) When did you look for childcare?
5. What factors or circumstances influenced the method selected to look for childcare? E.g. ease of access, language translation.
6. Describe your experience when looking for childcare?
  - a) Did your values, beliefs, religion or cultural orientation affect your search for childcare?
  - b) Child's needs.
7. Did you feel you knew enough about childcare when you started looking?
  - a) Did you know what to look for, the questions to ask or which option would suit your family best?
8. In your opinion what do you think are parents' needs and fears when looking for childcare?
9. Did you trust the sources of information available to you?
  - a) Why?
10. What challenges did you face when looking for childcare?
11. Did you experience any barriers when looking for childcare? How did you overcome these barriers?

12. What influenced your choice/selection of the childcare provision you finally chose?
13. What has been your experience of childcare in Medway? Please describe.
14. What have been your challenges?
15. Could you have done things differently?
16. How can parents be best supported when looking for childcare?
17. What would you like to change when looking for childcare?
18. What advice would you give to parents looking for childcare?
19. Who's responsibility is it to sort out childcare in your family and why?
20. What has been the impact of finding the right childcare on you, your child and your family?

## **APPENDIX 7: STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

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**Q1:** What are the information seeking behaviour of parents when looking for childcare?

**Q2:** In your opinion, what are the key issues affecting parents' childcare information seeking behaviour?

**Q3:** What are the key drivers for information when parents are looking for childcare?

**Q4:** How effective and responsive are current information delivery channels and what has been the impact of these services on family outcomes

**Q5:** In your opinion what are the current gaps and improvements required to address parents' information needs?

**Q6:** How does parents' childcare information seeking behaviour influence the childcare market?

**Q7:** How have recent government policies influenced parents' childcare information seeking behaviour and what has been the impact on families and the childcare market?

**Q8:** How has recent trends in technology influenced parents' childcare seeking behaviour and what has been the impact on families?

**Q9:** By the laws of the childcare market, providers should adjust to quality, quantity and prices in response to parental preferences, leading to a perfect market in demand and supply. Is this statement true of the UK childcare market?

**Q10:** How has parental 'loyalty' to a childcare provider influenced the quality of childcare provision?

**Q11:** In your opinion, does culture, trust and values affect parent's choice to use or not to use childcare – if yes, in what ways? How can parents overcome these barriers?

**Q12:** The UK is slowly coming out of recession. What has been the impact on parents' childcare behaviour, family outcomes and key implications for the childcare sector?

**Q13:** Childcare is still perceived as not affordable to all despite government incentives. Is this an assumption or reality? What impact does this have on families childcare usage and the childcare market?

**Q14:** How does the information environment or landscape around a family work and what are the key components of shaping and improving that landscape?

**Q15:** Could you suggest any policy interventions as solutions to these issues