A study of employers to inform the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment for Dorset

Full Report

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Prepared by the Market Research Group (MRG), Bournemouth University, on behalf of
Dorset Sure Start

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1: Executive Summary

The Childcare Act 2006 requires all local authorities to undertake a childcare sufficiency assessment, to identify gaps in childcare provision for parents who wish to work or undertake education or training leading to work.

As part of the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment for Dorset, Dorset Sure Start has sought:

> to find out employers' views of child care provision in Dorset and the impact that provision of child care has on recruitment and retention within their respective organisations.

The Market Research Group (MRG) based at Bournemouth University was commissioned by Dorset Sure Start to undertake a study of employers in the South East Dorset conurbation. This report refers to primary data obtained from structured interviews with 50 employers.

1.1 Key findings

- Twelve per cent of organisations in the survey provide supervised child-care facilities.

- Respondents from 90% of the organisations do not believe that employers should collect information regarding employees' childcare arrangements.

- Nurseries/pre-schools or playgroups and the help of family or friends are used by staff in the majority of organisations.

- About two-thirds of respondents believe that the absence of childcare provision for staff would have a detrimental effect on the effectiveness of their organisation.

2: Methodology

The survey population consisted of all employers in the South East Dorset conurbation who are featured in the Bournemouth, Poole, Christchurch and East Dorset Business Directory, 2007-2008, segmented by location, size and industrial sector as follows:

Location by Local Authority:
- Christchurch Borough Council
- Bournemouth Borough Council
- Poole Borough Council
- East Dorset District Council

Size by number of employees:
- 9 or less
- 10 - 50
- 51-199
- 200 or more

Industrial sector:
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Non – commercial
- Professional
- Retail

Organisations in the sample segments were randomly selected, contacted and the person responsible for Human Resources/Personnel or the owners of small businesses were identified. In total, respondents from 50 organisations participated in a structured telephone interview, with responses entered into a standard instrument by the interviewer.

The closed questions were pre-coded and entered into the SPSS statistical package and the open questions were subject to thematic analysis using NVivo2 software as an analytic tool.

The statistical data is presented in table format in Appendix 1.

3: Research findings

3.1 Characteristics of the respondents

The respondent organisations were selected purposefully to characterise organisations in the South East Dorset conurbation (see Tables 1-3), based on location, size and sector.

3.2 Use of Childcare

Respondents were asked about their organisations' policies on childcare provision for their staff (Table 4). Six organisations (12% of the total), including two major public sector organisations, provide supervised childcare for their staff. Two organisations provide child care facilities as part of their core role and of the remaining two, one is a non-commercial employer of over 200 employees and the other is a medium sized industrial organisation of between 10 and 50 employees.

Two organisations have a salary sacrifice scheme and five operate a voucher scheme. One of the latter has electronic childcare vouchers which are paid straight into an employee's bank account. These vouchers are worth 95p per hour whilst working and 47.5p if on leave.

When asked whether they collect information about their staff's childcare arrangements, one of the public sector organisations that provide facilities confirmed that they do, but only two other organisations (neither of which have childcare provision for their staff) also collate this data. One, however, is a child-care facility but the other is an industrial employer with 10-50 employees. Therefore the information respondents have given about their staff's use of childcare facilities, must be based to a certain degree on speculation by the respondents. It seems likely that in small organisations, the respondents may be aware of their colleagues' arrangements, but in medium and large organisations, their replies are more likely to be based on conjecture.

Similarly, the knowledge of respondents about their organisation's policies was often dependent upon the circumstances having arisen during the course of their employment. On numerous occasions, respondents could not comment on provision because of this. On many occasions they simply responded that they had no knowledge at all, but in only a few instances was this because childcare provision was not in their remit (for example, because it is dealt with by a Human Resources department at Head Office).

Notably, only two organisations that do not currently collect data about their staff's childcare provision thought that they should do so. There is therefore a widespread belief (held by 90% of respondents) that this is not an aspect of the employer/employee relationship in which they should engage. Two respondents stated categorically that child care provision is the employees' responsibility.

There is, however, awareness by the vast majority of respondents of their colleagues' use of child care. Forty-two per cent believe that the staff in their organisation use childcare and 32% suggest that they know the frequency of use.

Figure 1 shows that in 78% of organisations, staff use nurseries/pre-schools or playgroups for child care (either for less than 4 hours a day [36%] or more than 4 hours [42%]); whilst engaging the help of family or friends to care for children is the second most frequently adopted option (70%). Using childminders or other professional carers such as nannies is also prevalent.

Figure 1 Type of childcare used by organisations' staff
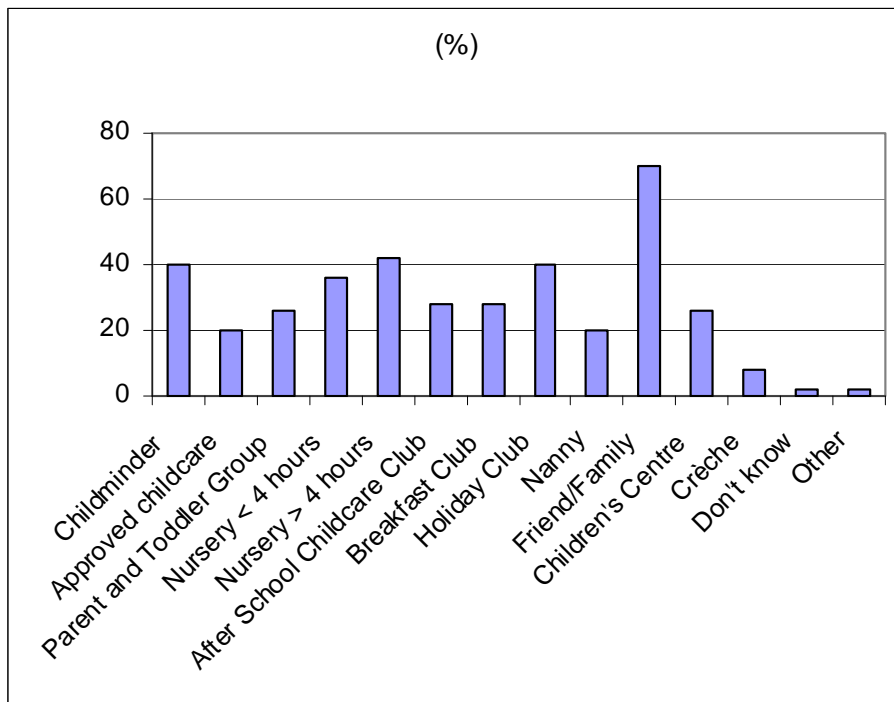
In 42% of organisations, respondents believe that a member of staff uses childcare on a daily basis and the same percentage considers that it is used during school holidays (Figure 2). Slightly less think childcare is used weekly or a few times a week.

Figure 2 Frequency of use of childcare by organisations' staff
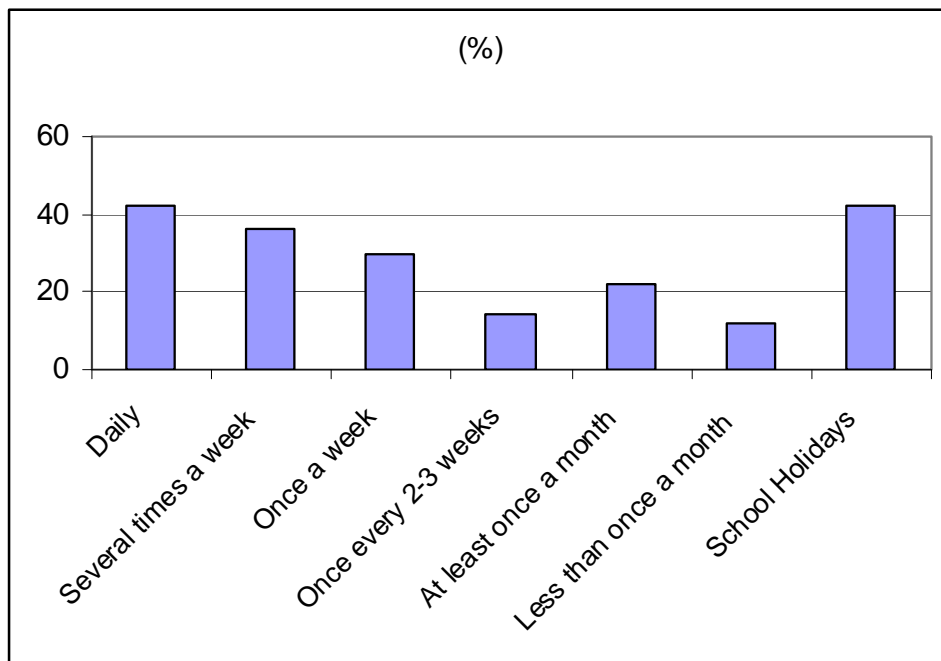
When asked why they thought employees do not use organised childcare, almost half of respondents identified that employees are helped by family and friends (Figure 3). Expense was referred to as a possible constraint by 18% and 10% stated that the hours organised childcare is open is unsuitable. It is notable that three respondents (6%) added an option that employees are able to choose to work only while their children are at school, so childcare is not an issue.

Figure 3 Main reasons given for non- use of childcare by organisations' staff
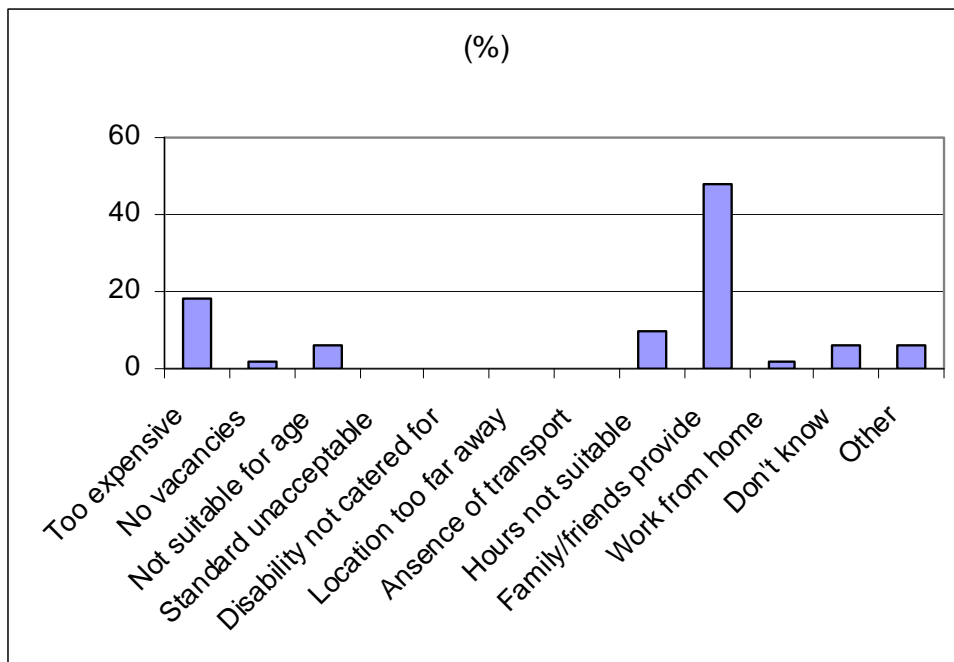
3.3 Childcare provision in Dorset

Turning to the impact of childcare provision on employers, 62% of respondents hold the opinion that if childcare is not available to employees it would have an effect on staff recruitment, within their organisation. More, (68%) think absence of provision would have an effect first, on staff retention and secondly, on staff motivation. More still (72%) think it has an impact on staff punctuality, whilst the largest percentage (74%) stated that they believe it would have an impact on the absence/sickness level of staff that have children.

A respondent from a large retailer acknowledged the wider benefits to the business community from childcare provision, noting that their profits are dependent on low earning families who are able to purchase their products, because they have a wage.

3.4 Effects of work/life balance

The survey also sought to establish what provision employers make to create a better work/life balance for employees with children. Flexible working is one such arrangement which might be useful and 14% of respondents said that their organisation had had to introduce flexible working specifically for staff that use childcare provision. However, a much larger majority, 72% had introduced flexible working for all staff. Working from home is a further option that was mentioned.

Many employees are eligible for statutory rates of maternity pay and leave (up to 39 weeks) or paternity pay and leave (up to 2 weeks). Most respondents were familiar with the scheme and four organisations of those surveyed offer additional benefits to the statutory minimum. Some organisations expect new parents (particularly fathers) who are not eligible for the statutory scheme, to take annual leave. Additionally, 60% of respondents stated that staff in their organisation, take unpaid leave to look after their children.

When asked how organisations manage and cope with employees taking paid or unpaid leave to care for their children, the majority use the existing workforce to provide cover. A few have part-time staff who temporarily increase their hours to full-time, others offer overtime and/or days off in lieu; or have a bank of staff they can draw on. Two suggested that students are always pleased to have extra hours. One employer in the non-commercial sector, with 51-199 employees highlighted the issue of replacing supervisory or managerial staff; their representative stated that 'somebody acts up'.

The second most frequently mentioned option is to employ temporary staff or agency workers. However, the respondent from one commercial organisation, again with 51-199 employees, stated that they can not use temporary staff, because they need specialist skills.

As before, some respondents commented that this situation had not arisen in their organisation, so they had no knowledge of what action would be taken. One said that it had occurred during a quiet period, so cover was more easily organised, another also stated that their actions would depend on the time of the year, as their staffing needs have seasonal variation.

Several respondents referred to the flexibility of employers *and* employees to enable leave to be taken. One commented that their staff base has been together a long time so they work on a basis of helping each other out; changing responsibilities and hours, etc and that this benefits them all including their business. Another remarked that their company is very flexible as it has an objective of high staff retention, which in turn minimises training costs and improves efficiency. However, one respondent commented that they just 'run on' as usual but with a shortage of staff.

4: Conclusion

In conclusion, several respondents commented that childcare provision seems to be adequate to meet the needs of their colleagues, but a few referred to its cost and complexity. Others referred to the importance, to not only their colleagues but also society as a whole, of the provision organisations are making for employees with children, whether as a result of legislation or on a voluntary basis. Finally, speaking on a personal basis, one observed that a salary sacrifice scheme had enabled her to continue doing a job she enjoyed whilst having a family. Another remarked that she wished that the current benefits were available when her own children were younger.

5. Appendix 1

Area	Christchurch BC		Bournemouth BC		Poole BC		East Dorset DC	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
	8	16	13	26	13	26	16	32

Table 1 The locations of the organisations participating in the survey

Size	9 or less		10 - 50		51 - 199		More than 200	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
	12	24	13	26	13	26	12	26

Table 2 The sizes of the organisations participating in the survey

Sector	Commercial		Industrial		Non-commercial		Professional		Retail	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
	13	26	9	18	9	18	11	22	8	16

Table 3 The sectors of the organisations participating in the survey

	Yes		No		Don't know	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Do you collect information regarding your staff's childcare arrangements?	4	8	45	90	1	2
Do you think you should collect information regarding staff's childcare arrangements?	2	4	35	76	9	20
Does your company provide staff with supervised childcare for their children?	6	12	44	88	0	0
Do your staff use any other form of supervised childcare for their children?	42	86	2	4	10	10
Are you aware of how frequently these members of staff use childcare?	32	76	2	5	8	19

Table 4 Respondents' perceptions of childcare provision within their organisation

	(n)	(%)
Childminder	20	40
Approved Childcare (Care in child's own home)	10	20
Parent and Toddler Group	13	26
Nursery/Pre-school/Playgroup (open less than 4 hours)	18	36
Nursery/Pre-school/Playgroup (open 4 hours and over	21	42
After School Childcare Club	14	28
Breakfast Club	14	28
Holiday Club	20	40
Nanny	10	20
Friend/Family	35	70
Children's Centre	13	26
Crèche	4	8
Don't know	1	2
Other	1	2

Table 5 Types of childcare believed to be used by employees within the organisation

	(n)	(%)
Daily	21	42
Several times a week	18	36
Once a week	15	30
Once every 2-3 weeks	7	14
At least once a month	11	22
Less than once a month	6	12
School Holidays	21	42

Table 6 Frequency of childcare believed to be used by employees within the organisation

	(n)	(%)
Too expensive	9	18
No vacancies	1	2
No provision suitable for age of children	3	6
Not happy with standard of provision	0	0
Disability/Special Need not catered for	0	0
Location too far away	0	0
No transport to reach provision	0	0
Hours do not suit needs	5	10
Partner/Family/Friends able to provide childcare	24	48
Work from home	1	2
Don't know	3	6
Other – only work while children are at school	3	6

Table 7 Perceived reasons for non-use of childcare

	Yes		No		Don't know		Not applicable	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Recruiting staff to work for your business	31	**62**	15	**30**	3	**6**	1	**2**
Staff retention for your business	34	**68**	12	**24**	3	**6**	1	**2**
The motivation of staff who have children	34	**68**	12	**24**	3	**6**	1	**2**
The absence/sickness level of staff who have children	37	**74**	11	**22**	2	**4**	0	**0**
The punctuality of staff who have children	36	**72**	11	**22**	3	**6**	0	**0**

Table 8 The effects on employers of employees having children

	(n)	(%)
Introduced specifically	7	**14**
Introduced but not specifically	36	**72**
Not introduced	7	**14**
Total	50	**100**

Table 9 The introduction of flexible working by organisations

	Yes		No		Don't know		Not applicable	
	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)
Do staff take unpaid leave to look after children	30	**60**	16	**32**	3	**6**	1	**2**

Table 10 The taking of unpaid leave by staff with children