Torfaen County Borough Council

2022 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment

E-sessions focus groups - Report

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Introduction

The following report outlines the feedback that was attained as the outcome of a series of e-focus group (virtual) sessions and structured discussions that were facilitated with Torfaen locality resident parents, carers and guardians in February and March 2022, as part of the research for the 2022 Torfaen Childcare Sufficiency Assessment.

The key objective of the e-focus group sessions project was to collect *qualitative* feedback and detail to supplement the data that had been attained via an online survey which was promoted in October 2021. This Welsh Government parental survey had generated 501 responses on the subject of childcare and early years and specific themes including: (a) current usage of types of formal and informal childcare; (b) types of childcare which responding parents and carers were considering accessing more of; (c) any barriers to accessing registered childcare and; (d) the usage of funded programmes including Flying Start programme childcare places and Childcare Offer provision.

Both the qualitative research (which is the subject of this report) and the quantitative research undertaken via the online Welsh Government survey sought to provide an insight into parental experiences with regard to childcare as the country continued to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The virtual sessions were undertaken by an experienced organisation: Place Group Ltd. Since the advent of the Childcare Act in 2006 and its inherent sufficiency duty, Place Group have undertaken identical quantitative and qualitative for circa 36 Welsh and English Local Authorities, simultaneously producing full Childcare Sufficiency Reports and thematic reports, including reports aligned to the backgrounds of particular stakeholders, parents and carers

Methodology

During the period mid-February 2022-Mid-March 2022, Place Group Ltd organised and facilitated a series of virtual focus group e-sessions with parents, carers and guardians from the following backgrounds:

1. Carers of children with additional learning needs
2. Lone Parents
3. Low Income Households
4. Unemployed Households/Parents
5. Parents that are studying or training
6. Parents interested in Welsh-Medium childcare

A seventh session was held and was entitled a Pan-Background/Torfaen Families e-session. Parents and families from a range of backgrounds and including the backgrounds listed above were invited to attend and participate in the Pan-Background e-session. Stakeholders and partners which represented the locality's faith settings and forums and forums representing parents and families for whom Welsh or English was an additional language were also informed about this particular virtual e-session.

Each virtual e-session was facilitated over the Zoom platform for a duration of 50-60 minutes by an experienced members of the Place Group sufficiency projects team. Collective advice made it evident that weekday evening's during the window of 6.30pm – 8.30pm was a suitable time to convene and facilitate each of the seven virtual e-sessions.

A first full e-session for each of the backgrounds detailed above was facilitated in the Welsh language (by an experienced Welsh language interpreter professional), followed immediately by an e-session being facilitated parents/carers from the same background(s), in English.

The specific e-sessions - for each background both (in) Welsh language and English language - were promoted to potential participants via (GDPR compliant) approaches including:

- Specific emails to local gateway professionals and forums
- Local Authority officers with specific roles and responsibilities
- Torfaen County Borough Council social media functions and twitter feed
- Word of mouth and specific children and family-themed Facebook groups

All participants at each virtual e-session were paid an Amazon Thank You voucher of £15.00.

A structured topic guide was used to support and prompt relevant feedback and an element of free inter-active discussion was also promoted.

Participants feedback about early years and childcare… choices, affordability, barriers and future intentions is now summarised in the following narrative…

Outcomes and Feedback from participant groups

1 Carers of children with additional learning needs

1.1 Three carers attended this virtual e-session. The additional learning needs of their relevant children (who were all aged 0-5 years) included: Global Development Delay and Autism.

1.2 The types of registered childcare which were accessed (mainly during term-time it became evident) included:

- A private day nursery which a child with ALN attended 3 full days a week
- A part-time place at a day nursery

It was evident that one carer was very appreciative of the registered childcare that they accessed, describing their child *"as very settled and always wanting to go back".* It was believed that their nursery tried hard to be inclusive.

However another participant/carer was not as satisfied with the support which her family accessed via a day nursery and outlined how *"the nursery does not really understand the extra help he needs".* There was also an agreement that ideally more one-to-one support would be ideal for children attending a day nursery/full day care provision *"rather than a key worker, who tends to be a room leader and who can change quite often".* There was an agreement that one-to-one support could be (in participant's evident experience) *"patchy"* and *"inconsistent".*

1.3 One carer of a 19-month year old with Autism outlined how they were intending to locate a suitable *"pre-school provision"* when the child became 2 years of age.

1.4 One participant outlined her experience that a nursery which her family accessed could be a bit *"hit and miss"* when it came to attending e-meetings with other practitioners and this is a theme that she would have liked to see improve. Another participant believed that the nursery which they accessed could ideally be *"more proactive, particularly in terms of possibly approaching other specialists".* There was a concern that some nurseries were not sure of 'processes' when it came to engaging with other specialists. Specific feedback on this theme included:

"Presently my nursery doesn't initiate progress meetings. I am more proactive with asking for more updates and also when my son moves across the rooms I will ask to go and meet the staff in the room and get to know them a bit more… I feel this works when they do make the time. The [joint practitioner] *meetings, when they happen, are great but lot of the things they agree to help with do tend to fizzle out".*

On a similar theme, one carer described how her family would have ideally liked more support with transition from nursery to Reception and inherent within that more

information about a EHCP as *"this whole process is going to be daunting and we need to make a big decision as to whether my child goes to mainstream or special school".*

1.5 Two carers described how they had felt well supported by a local health visitor. One carer described how a health visitor had put her in touch with an organisation called Wriggly Woos[1] and that they had been very supportive, although the advice that they offered could have been replicated ideally too, by the child's nursery.

1.6 Two carers highlighted financial pressures associated with caring and childcare. They outline dhow childcare was one of a number of costs which raising a child with ALN could necessitate and that this could repeatedly make finances tight. One carer described how her family *"live across the road from a Flying Start area, and we don't qualify, which is of course very frustrating".*

In terms of work-life balance, participants tended to believe that flexibility in childcare was key and that although a nursery was to them a preferable option they did have concerns as to how flexible their nursery could be if a situation or work routine changed.

1.7 In terms of concluded priorities, a first repeated theme was that training was a key element and having a *"key ALN trained person"* at a childcare provision was essential who is able to support children *"with their emotions"* and *"in situations where my child could become aggressive because of their needs".*

A second considered priority was that childcare providers should be aware of the value of communication and them updating a family about progress and any concerns they may have.

A third priority was agreed to be *"more consistency"* around ALN-responsible team members at settings.

[1] Wriggly Woos is a LA run group for under 4s.

2 Lone Parents

2.1 Three lone/single parents, that were resident in the Torfaen local authority area, attended this virtual e-session. Occupation included: a teacher, studying on a full-time degree course and one participant described how they had been made redundant as an outcome of COVID-19.

The types of registered childcare being accessed were:

- A school-based day nursery
- A registered childminder who undertook a school pick-up
- Reliance on family and friends.

It was also observed how one parent was accessing the Childcare Offer and was very pleased with its support and its role in maintaining her ability to access registered childminder whilst she was at work.

2.2 A repeated theme by the three participants was that they would welcome greater accessibility to childcare during the summer school holidays. For example, one participant stated that:

"During school holiday days I do struggle a bit… but I have a seventeen year old daughter as 'back-up' and can do a few working hours during the day and in the evening if needed".

Another parent stated how half-terms can be a challenge for parents that are studying due to university term-times being different to school term-times.

Encouragingly, on the same theme another parent stated how:

"I am very happy with the holiday playscheme service delivered by the Council. There is a wide range of activities available for all children. I am aware they have young people employed there and the range of activities are great".

2.3 Another repeated theme on the subject of out of school childcare was in relation to breakfast clubs. One participating lone parent described how her routine was affected by the lack of a breakfast club at her child's school. She described how she would consider an alternative:

"The nearest school that does offer a club is a 15-minute walk and my son would potentially get absolutely wet. This breakfast club, at [another] *school, does not offer transport. I would consider using the club if there was transport and there was no extra cost".*

The fees associated with out of school childcare - including breakfast clubs and after school clubs - were also highlighted during this virtual e-session and whether it was economical to work overtime aligned to what an additional cost/hour would be.

2.4 One parent outlined how she would appreciate more flexibility (including because of in the parent's opinion there is an increased of parents working from home) from out of school childcare provision. Her suggestion was:

"I feel childcare is not moving with times and needs to be more flexible. Presently the summer holiday provision run by the Council runs for 4 weeks and it would be more helpful for working parents if it was open for 6 weeks or at least an extra week".

2.5 One parent who accessed a childminder on an evidently flexible basis was very happy with this provision and described her positive experience:

"As I worked in the school, I knew my childminder, who was highly recommended. She is absolutely brilliant, she sends me updates throughout the day and I wasn't expecting the childminder setting to be as educational as a regular nursery, but it is".

3 Low Income Households

3.1 Due to concerted Local Authority promotion and excellent word of mouth encouragement, 45 parents accessed the virtual focus-group session. This level of attendance necessitated that the Place Group facilitators adjusted their facilitation method and a more 'polling' based approach was taken, so as to ensure that all participants were able to give voice and feedback.

3.2 In terms of the fundamental feedback that was generated by polling on the Zoom function:

- 75% of participants were evidently studying, training or seeking employment
- 73% of participants from low income families stated that they rely on informal childcare
- 22% stated that they were not happy with their childcare arrangements
- 61% stated that have to make specific childcare arrangements for school holiday periods and…
- …40% of participants stated that school holidays are an issue, particularly aligned to the cost of registered childcare
- 69% of participants from low income families stated that childcare arrangements had impacted on their work or study
- (However) 67% felt there is good access and availability to childcare places across the locality
- 40% of participants believed that there was not enough Welsh-medium childcare provision across the Torfaen locality…

  …and the highest percentage…

- 93% agreed that there needs to be more registered childcare options and choice in the Torfaen locality during the school holidays… with one participant attaining support from other participants when they stated that *"the school holidays can be such hard work in terms of balancing childcare needs"*.

3.3 Supplementary to the polling method, the facilitators invited the participants from low income households to provide qualitative feedback. This feedback generated a degree of positivity aligned to childcare within their locality, with relevant feedback including:

"I have had positive experiences and I have a lot of trust in the childcare sector… though on the other hand, it is expensive".

"I have had a positive experience… my provider ensures my children are taken care of and they provide activities that the children engage in, which is good".

3.4 The main issue that was highlighted as a barrier was cost and fees – in particular with regard to private nurseries. However, as was profiled in 3.1 above the most recurrent feedback aligned to the theme of what could be enhanced, focus on holiday time childcare provision – where the word 'struggle' recurred during the qualitative discussion period of the virtual e-session.

One participant shared her experience which in fact combined both themes above:

"I am not sure how I will be able to work full time during the summer holidays… I won't turn to family and friends as I feel like I am nagging… Term time is fine, it's just the school holidays, when also the cost is an issue".

On the subject of cost and fees, additional feedback included:

"It would be pointless in my situation to go [into] full time [employment] because the cost of childcare would mean I don't earn much at all"

I've had some negative experiences with private nurseries mainly to do with cost".

3.5 In conclusion one participant summarized the views of others and received virtual support when she stated that *"our key priority is more options in the school holidays which is more affordable".*

4 Unemployed Households/Parents

4.1 Three parents attended this virtual e-session. Two were lone parents and with one exception (a parent who also was raising an eleven year old) all of their combined seven children were aged 0-5 years.

Evident childcare arrangements included:

- A reliance on grandparents
- A reliance on friends
- Use of a breakfast club

4.2 Two parents highlighted how the opening times of their child(ren)'s breakfast club was causing them workplace difficulties. One parent stated:

"Some jobs start at 7.00am and my breakfast club doesn't start until 8.00am and this causes me a problem during my job search".

Another parent stated:

"My eventual working hours will have to fit around the school hours" – similarly another parent stated how in her experience:

"It is difficult to find work that fits around school hours".

4.3 As with the other six e-sessions, the cost of childcare was highlighted as a predominant barrier to accessing registered provision, particularly and repeatedly during the school summer holidays.

One parent who was raising three children stated:

"I am 'looking into childcare as I would like to back to work… I am looking at childminders as they appear to be a 'bit cheaper' than a private nursery… however I am concerned about how I will be able to pay for three children all using 'formal' childcare". Another parent outlined how she was also 'considering' accessing a childminder and was going to take steps to find out more information about this option. The third parent also explained how the form of registered childcare that she was considering was **also a childminder**.

4.4 Two parents highlighted their lack of awareness about financial forms of support that can help to meet the costs of childcare and fees, including Tax Free Childcare, the Childcare Offer and what they termed *"the 85% contribution towards childcare costs"* – though when details about both programmes were explained to these participating parents they were impressed that the Welsh Government and the Local Authority were involved in initiating such support.

One parent outlined how she had received advice and support from Cwmbran Jobcentre plus, which she believed had been helpful and that this had catalysed her

understanding of what childcare-themed support was accessible to working families. This parent had been receiving support from a member of the local PaCE[2] team and she described this experience:

"A member of the PaCE team explained about childcare and financial support… I didn't know initially what was out there to help with childcare costs and PaCE explained to me that they could support with the cost of a first four weeks at a nursery…".

This participant outlined how a perceived unaffordability of childcare had dissuaded her from seeking employment, however *"since seeing a PaCE worker, this has changed my attitude to going back into work". I now want to go part-time and see if childcare can be affordable".*

Additionally, each of the three parents were not resident within a Flying Start locality and lamented this fact, with for example, one parent stating:

"As for Flying Start, to be honest, it is [in my opinion] *unfair… unless you live in area you miss out.* ***I am not sure, but I heard that it will open up for more people?"***

4.5 All three participants believed that a virtual online e-session was a good way of them learning more about their childcare options and *"sharing ideas and experiences".*

Two of the three participants explained how they were aware of the FIS and that this had *"made information easier to find".*

However, all three participants agreed on a factor that, in their opinion, there should a greater profile of information being provided by health visitors to new mothers.

[2] https://www.dewis.wales/ResourceDirectory/ViewResource.aspx?id=18728

5 Parents that are intending to enter studying or training

5.1 Two parents that were studying and training attended this virtual e-session at the booked time. Between them they were raising eight children – four children each. Both were working full-time and, however, looking to pick up or access a course of study later in 2022.

Both outlined their current reliance on informal childcare (i.e. grandparents), with one reason being the cost of registered childcare at a day nursery; however, one parent had been accessing a registered childminder which she had been very pleased with. The other parent had in the past considered accessing a childcare, but was concerned about reliability if a childminder had to take time off sick. This other parent had – supplementary to her informal childcare usage – been accessing a place at a local (what she termed) *"nursery school".*

5.2 Both parents explained how important registered childcare was to their current lives and routines, plus how important it would be when they decided to attend a course and future training. They both expressed concerns about how flexible childcare could be, including aligned to opening times. One factor that both agreed was an issue was how school half-terms may differ from eventual half-terms or full-terms at wherever they chose to study or train.

5.3 One parent was currently a teaching professional. She reiterated how she envisaged being reliant on her mother for informal childcare as she was concerned about the fees associated with registered childcare – in particular her *preferred* option of accessing a day nursery. Her belief was that she would eventually seek to work part-time and study part-time, an arrangement for which she was *"weighing up the childcare pros and cons".*

She also outlined an opinion that:

"I can see why parents chose not to go back to work, as 'finances wise' it doesn't really 'add up".

5.4 The second parent was thinking that her future intentions aligned to studying may be best supported by accessing a registered childminder as an option – and both parents in conversation coalesced around this as their preferred option/solution. It was evident that neither had been able to decide on any firm arrangements of choice to help support the forthcoming element and component of studying in their lives.

5.5 As an interesting finale, both parents agreed that (in their experience) the out of school childcare options were more accessible for local families – particularly breakfast clubs and after school clubs and both participants were advocates of Torfaen Play Service, which they also agreed had developed a *"very flexible offer and reputation".*

6 Parents interested in Welsh-Medium childcare

6.1 Despite concerted efforts to promote this virtual e-session including with WESP partners and via the Local Authority, of five parents that were booked to participate only one parent logged on to this Zoom e-session [3].

The one participant however provided excellent feedback and a very informative discussion was recorded.

The parent had one child aged 3 years. She worked part-time and her partner was working in full-time employment. Her child was accessing a bilingual childminder and also was attending a Welsh-medium school-based nursery. The parent accessed the Childcare Offer and this was split each week with 17.5 hours being apportioned to the childminder and 12.5 hours being apportioned to the school nursery.

6.2 The parent was very happy with and supportive of the Childcare Offer, particularly how this helped with her household finances. She was also pleased with the support provided by her childminder. She described her childcare *"journey"…*

"At beginning of the childcare journey, we didn't really want him to be attending a bilingual ***setting****. At the time there were only two childminders who offered Welsh-medium services and they were 'full'. Off the back of the suggestion from the one of the childminder we were told of a third childminder… The childminder was able to provide a bilingual service (she is not fluent in Welsh) with the support of the other two childminders. We took a leap of faith as we wanted him to receive as much Welsh language teaching as possible. She is aware of our 'personal campaign' as a family and how we wanted to ensure he had many opportunities to speak Welsh. He* [her son] *then started going to the Cylch Meithrin when he was two years of age and then onto the Welsh-medium nursery… As a parent, I think it is fantastic that there are providers offering Welsh-medium provision in the county".*

6.3 The parent continued her narrative by outlining how "…*If I could not have accessed Welsh provision, I would have taken my campaign to the Welsh government. In my opinion, more 'upskilling for staff' to use Welsh within a childcare setting is needed… As the Strategic Officer in another Local Authority area, I just think there is so much more effort needed to reach the Welsh Government target of one million speakers by 2050. Torfaen, however, is doing fantastically. Within another county I know, there is no childminders who provides services in Welsh. There is more that needs to be done overall in increasing the use of Welsh language".*

[3] For all of the e-session, all parents/participants that were registered to attend, however did not were contacted and provided with an offer to participate in a one-to-one e-session.

6.4 The parent believed stridently that choice was essential around the theme of Welsh-medium childcare provision and she also explained how:

"If it had not been possible to access Welsh provision, I would have had an 'internal battle' on whether to give up work or wait until my son could attend the local Cylch Meithrin… I am aware of other friends who are dealing with similar issues. This is not just an issue for Torfaen residents!".

The parent also wished to feedback on key points for the facilitators to feedback to the Local Authority:

- Work with childminders within the Torfaen locality should incorporate an encouragement to enhance their Welsh-language abilities
- More consultations are needed to find out actual numbers of parents/carers who want and need childcare through the medium of Welsh. Is there enough out there?
- *"Taking part in this webinar is fantastic as give opportunities to feedback in Welsh. Not everybody is doing that, and it has been fab".*

7 Pan-Torfaen families session

7.1 In mid-March 2022, Place Group and Torfaen County Borough Council took a decision to organise and facilitate what was termed a Pan-Torfaen virtual e-session. Parents who had booked to attend other e-sessions however had been unable to were invited to register to attend this session, as were other parents from a range of backgrounds, ethnicities and faiths. The e-session was, once again, stridently promoted including via social media and direct emails to gateway partner organisations.

7.2 Although a number of parents were registered to attend (and they received a reminder to attend leading up to the 6.30pm start time on Thursday 17th March, two parents eventually attended and gave feedback.

7.3 This session effectively enabled the facilitators to triangulate some of the feedback and opinions that has been provided at the previous thematic sessions, including for example that:

- Torfaen Play Service is very appreciated and parents generally believe it is a valuable service offering superb support during the school holidays – particularly the free playschemes
- Whatever type of formal childcare arrangements are in place, there frequently remains a reliance on an element (too) of informal childcare, in particular grandparents. One participating parent stated that:
  "If I didn't have the support of my family, I may have had to give up work entirely, as my husband would unlikely be in a position to pick my daughter up from nursery. Luckily we are not in that position, however, with our parents being elderly this could be an issue if it 'gets too much for them'".
- Childminders appear to work together and communicate in the locality. This is appreciated and recognised as is there identified attempts to co-ordinate and communicate with setting-based childcare providers and localised Cylch Meithrins, including from a pick-up and drop-off perspective
- There is a notable incidence of childminders being viewed as a frequent source of registered childcare during the school holidays, in the Torfaen locality
- The theme of accessibility and childcare opening times is of vital and recurrent importance, with Torfaen-situated families regularly having to plan carefully how both can synergise with their work routines and when they are expected to start work and leave work – and that this is also a key issue for families from the localities rural areas
- The Childcare Offer has been a very positive development
- School holidays – and accessibility to childcare at this time remains a key issue, if one participating parent believing *"I think if more informal outdoor opportunities like rugby or football that would be good and also it would be good if there was more summer provision for Torfaen's 3-5 year olds"…*
- Participants also concurred that a Welsh-medium fluent workforce could also be enhanced for childcare during this period…

Key Conclusions

The qualitative e-sessions have raised a number of issues which provide food for thought as clear themes have been evident and when reading the narratives it can be reasonably concluded that:

1 Among the parents, carers and guardians who participated in the virtual e-session, including from specific backgrounds, there was an evident consensus that the childminding sector and profession remained in their thoughts and as an option, in particular aligned to its ability to be flexible and to be potential more cost-friendly. This reinforces how essential it could be for Torfaen County Borough Council to reenergize that sector, including through the twin facets of recruitment and retention. Childminders received a very 'good press' during the qualitative research undertaken as part of the Torfaen localities' 2022 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment.

2 The participating parents also recurrently outlined how the dynamics of school holiday time childcare provision were given positivity by the role of the Torfaen Play Service. However, they also recurrently highlighted how – in their opinions – cost and fees for this period of childcare was a barrier and that there could ideally be a more pronounced incidence of Welsh-medium childcare during this period.

3 Informal childcare is a vital component and element to support Torfaen locality-resident family routines, particularly grandparents, and it is availability is fundamentally essential to enable both parents, in two parent families to work – and to enable one parent families to have a household income.

4 Participants basically triangulated a key finding of the Welsh Government October 2021 parental demand survey, which was that: childcare fees and costs is a primary barrier to parents and carers being able to access registered childcare of their choice.

5 The Childcare Offer (frequently referred to as 'the 30 hours' by a number of parents and carers who participated in the virtual e-session) has numerous advocates among working families and its forthcoming extension should be welcomed by the Torfaen community, particularly the other backgrounds of families and parents and children which that extended offer will seek to support.

6 Responsive opening times of breakfast clubs is vital for Torfaen-locality resident families, particularly those with pronounced travel to work times, or a need to start work before 8am or at that exact time.

7 Universal credit for childcare is repeatedly referred to among parents as *"the 85% payment of childcare costs".*

Appendices

Specimen promotional copy:

Share Your Views!

If you are a parent/carer of
a child/young person and

use childcare in Torfaen or are thinking about it

then please join us online to have your say:

Thursday 17th March @ 6.30pm - 7.30pm

All participants will receive a £15 Amazon E-Voucher

To register your interest please visit

https://bit.ly/3Co0Zlq
or scan QR Code

Please note that we are only able to accommodate
30 people in this session so entry on the night
will unfortunately be on a first come first serve basis

Place

TORFAEN COUNTY BOROUGH / BWRDEISTREF SIROL TORFAEN

Place Group are facilitating these sessions on behalf of Torfaen County Borough Council

Rhannwch eich Barn!

Os ydych chi'n rhiant/ofalwr
i blentyn/berson ifanc

ac yn defnyddio gofal plant yn Nhorfaen neu'n ystyried ei ddefnyddio

ymunwch â ni ar-lein i gael dweud eich dweud:

Nos Iau 17 Mawrth @ 6.30pm - 7.30pm

Bydd yr holl gyfranogwyr yn derbyn E-Daleb Amazon gwerth £15

I gofrestru eich diddordeb,
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https://bit.ly/3Co0Zlq

Noder mai 30 o bobl yw'r uchafswm y gallwn eu derbyn i'r sesiwn ar y noson felly y cyntaf i'r felin gaiff falu

Place

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Mae Place Group yn hwyluso'r sesiynau hyn ar ran Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Torfaen