



Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Childcare Sufficiency Assessment
Executive Summary

June 2022

1) Introduction

Under the Childcare Act 2006 Local Authorities have a statutory duty to secure sufficient childcare for the needs of working parents/carers in their area for children up to 1st September after they turn 14 years, or until they reach the age of 18 in the case of children with a disability. Under the 2016 guidance, Local Authorities are now required to conduct a Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) every five years to assess a range of factors affecting childcare locally including supply, demand, costs, workforce and the views of a range of stakeholders about the local childcare market. Previously CSA's were conducted every three years and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has produced them in 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2017. The CSA provides the information required to enable the Early Years Childcare and Play team and partners to identify gaps in provision and areas for development. The Action Plan is then developed to drive forward actions required. Progress against actions within the Action Plan will be reported annually in June of each year and further actions agreed, before the next full assessment is undertaken in 2027.

2) The Assessment Process

The Early Years Childcare and Play (EYCP) team conducted the assessment, using various methods, from July 2021 to April 2022, collecting a range of data from;

- Parents/carers
- Children
- Childcare Providers
- Local Employers
- Other Local Authority Departments (Education, Planning and Regeneration)
- Schools
- Further Education College
- Umbrella organisations

The collection of data presented a number of challenges to the team with low levels of responses to all surveys issues, despite a great deal of promotion being undertaken. The parent survey was undertaken at an All Wales level, with Local Authorities promoting the survey in their localities. Despite heavy promotion on social media and visits to play and leisure sessions in October half term to directly target parents, there was a disappointing response with only 233 parents/carers completing the survey. The response rates for all Local Authorities in Wales were similarly disappointing.

There were also some issues with the data provided through the Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS) process, with some providers not having submitted any information and some information being missing or inaccurate in some cases. Some of these issues with provider data were resolved locally by using local data systems to identify gaps and fill in missing information.

The assessment process is designed to take a snapshot of the childcare market at a given point in time, July/August 2021, in this case. The assessment does, however, take account of developments that have happened since and a full account of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is also presented in the assessment.

The assessment process is designed to take account of both current and future demand to assist in the planning and development of childcare in the future. Whilst parental demand data can be derived from parental questionnaires where there is a good sample size, it can also be derived by looking at trends and developments that can impact on childcare uptake. The EYCP team were only able to draw general observations from the parental survey due to the low sample size, but have accounted for developments that could/will impact on childcare demand in the assessment document and action plan.

Unfortunately, the timing of this assessment has not allowed for updated Census data to be used and so this will be accounted for in the Progress Report and Updated Action Plan for 2023, if there is any meaningful change that could impact on the sector/actions already included in the Action Plan.

The assessment of supply and demand has been considered in relation to Community Planning Areas this year, as per the 2017 assessment, they are; Sirhowy, Ebbw Fawr, North Ebbw Fach and South Ebbw Fach.

3) Findings

The population in Blaenau Gwent, especially the 0 to 15-year-old group has been in decline for several years and is projected to remain in decline up to the end of this decade. In itself, that could suggest the need for childcare is likely to decline. However, there are other factors outlined in the assessment, that are expected to impact on the childcare sector. These include growth in the housing market, potential growth in the employment sector and the expansion of key Welsh government programmes (Childcare Offer and Flying Start).

Parent/Carer Survey

In common with the last assessment the most common form of childcare used in Blaenau Gwent, as reported by parents/carers completing the questionnaire, was informal care provided through family and friends.

A significant majority of parent/carers reported being either very or quite satisfied with their current childcare provider (95%).

For those not happy with their childcare, the following improvements were suggested in order of the most prevalent;

- More affordable
- Extend opening hours/More hours available
- More flexible sessions
- Better quality provision
- Different location
- Childcare better at meeting child's needs
- Overnight and evening care

Parents were asked specifically about barriers to accessing Welsh medium childcare and the reasons given included: distance to provision, availability, insufficient hours and cost.

Parents were asked why they didn't use childcare and in common with the last assessment, the primary reason given was affordability of childcare. Over half of parents surveyed were using informal childcare through family and friends, although some of those were using formal childcare too.

Comments from parents/carers made it clear there is still a strong feeling about the perceived 'unfairness' in the limited and geographical nature of the Flying Start programme.

In terms of future demand, the survey indicated most parents/carers expected to use more childcare in future or that their needs would stay the same. The stated types of childcare required in future demonstrated a

continued reliance on informal childcare, followed by a need for breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and full day nursery places.

Supply

At the time the data was collected in July 2021, there were 56 providers in Blaenau Gwent an increase of one provider since the assessment in 2017. However, there have been some providers that have closed since then (one after-school club and four childminders), so we now have four fewer providers. Since 2017 there are now more providers registered to offer full day care, with an increase from ten to sixteen providers. Some providers changed their registration from sessional to full day care to support the Childcare Offer pilot and others to assist with the Covid-19 response. This is positive as it offers parents more flexibility with childcare hours offered, but it has resulted in a small decline in overall registered childcare places. (Sessional childcare having been counted previously by the number of both afternoon and morning places).

There are concerns at the loss of providers and places, especially in childminder and after-school provision. This concern is echoed by the Umbrella Organisations that support those sectors.

Covid Impact

This latest assessment required Local Authorities to include a section on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The assessment notes the efforts made by the sector from the earliest days of the pandemic to support key worker families and vulnerable families. Blaenau Gwent had one of the lowest closure rates in Wales, with over 65% of providers remaining open.

Whilst the pandemic has had an undoubted impact on all providers, the impact has been most acutely felt by the after-school sector, with stand-alone clubs based at schools having to remain closed from the onset of the pandemic until Summer term 2021 in Blaenau Gwent. Some clubs have not reopened at all due to concerns around sustainability and difficulties with recruitment.

The number of grant schemes brought in to support settings is acknowledged as a positive and these grants have no doubt have played a big part in the largely positive outlook of the sector with regard to their future sustainability. In Spring 2022, there were remaining concerns regarding the impact of the pandemic on quality and safety, financial stability, recruitment and retention, but most providers indicated they expected to be in business for a year or longer.

4) Gap Analysis

Taking account of all the information gathered, gaps in the following areas were identified;

- Childcare for parents working atypical hours
- Welsh medium provision
- Provision suitable to meet the needs of children with Additional Learning Needs
- Full Day Care provision in Brynmawr
- Childminder provision in Sirhowy and Ebbw Fach
- Childcare for older children (after-school and holiday provision)

The Action Plan

The action plan seeks to address gaps identified in the assessment and builds on the previous CSA action plan for 2021-22. It acknowledges that some of the gaps identified were already known and plans to close the gaps were already in place, largely through Capital Programme projects. Actions include;

- Delivery of all capital projects (Swffryd Flying Start hub, Glyncoed Full Day Care, Blaina ICC extension, Welsh medium seedling school, Brynmawr Full Day Care)
- Work to attract new childminders to set up in Sirhowy and Ebbw Fawr
- Work to establish feasibility of After-School/Holiday Clubs at primary schools
- Improve inclusion in settings
- Promote Welsh language use and learning within existing settings
- To attract new Welsh language providers to take up tender opportunities in Blaenau Gwent
- To develop more robust data capture from parents/carers with childcare issues
- To develop a workforce development plan addressing recruitment and retention concerns

The full assessment and action plan, along with this Executive Summary, are to be submitted in draft to Welsh Government on 30th June. The final document will be submitted to Welsh Government following a public consultation period planned for July/August and approval by the Executive, by 30th September 2022.