

Gingerbread Briefing: Holiday childcare – tackling the blind spot in childcare manifesto commitments

Introduction

The childcare policy environment

Childcare is an issue of increasing political importance. Politicians from all parties have recognised the need to offer an integrated childcare offer for parents, in order to tackle the growing childcare crisis in England and Wales: costs have risen 27% in the last five years whilst wages have remained stagnant, and local authorities are struggling to provide enough childcare spaces to meet demand – 51% currently do not have enough childcare for working parents.¹

At the time of writing, in addition to existing childcare provision and support, each of the main political parties has focused their childcare offer on the following areas:

- **The Coalition government** is extending the 15 hours of free early years education to disadvantaged two year olds; has introduced a Childcare Payments Bill which will deliver a tax-free childcare scheme worth up to £2,000 per child each year to support working families from autumn 2015; and plans to increase the childcare support available to parents on universal credit so that they will have 85% of their childcare costs paid for from April 2016.²
- **The Labour Party** has committed to increase free early years education for 3 and 4 year-olds from 15 hours to 25 hours per week for working parents; and has also pledged to ensure wraparound childcare provision for all children from 8am to 6pm in primary schools.³
- **The Liberal Democrats** have pledged to extend the current 15 hours free childcare available every week to disadvantaged two year olds to cover every child of that age.⁴

The missing link: holiday childcare

While these are all welcome commitments, it is notable that little or no attention has been paid to the role of *holiday* childcare: but with 13 weeks of school holidays a year this is a need that must be addressed. Holiday childcare presents its own unique set of challenges:

- Schools are closed, meaning that parents have to find additional childcare for children up to their early teens during the working day.

¹ Rutter, J., Stocker, K. (2014) *Childcare Costs Survey 2014*. Available:

<http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=ac441f45-32fa-468f-b76b-d38579d1af3e>

² Gov.uk. (2014) *Improving the quality and range of education and childcare from birth to 5 years*. Available: <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-the-quality-and-range-of-education-and-childcare-from-birth-to-5-years>

³ Balls, E., (2013) *Ed Balls MP's speech to Labour Party Annual Conference 2013*. Available: <http://press.labour.org.uk/post/62052732090/ed-balls-mps-speech-to-labour-party-annual-conference>

⁴ The Liberal Democrats (2014), *Free childcare for all 2 year olds*. Available: http://www.libdems.org.uk/free_childcare_for_all_2_year_olds

- The entitlement to free early year's education – for all three and four year olds, and for some two year olds – is also only available during school term-time, meaning that parents have to find childcare for under-fives as well.

Single parents face a unique set of challenges

All parents are familiar with the challenges of finding affordable, quality childcare; for single parents, however, this is an even more complex challenge:

- **Time:** Single parents cannot rely on the “shift-parenting” patterns that couples can adopt, for example where they split their annual leave or divide responsibility for picking up and dropping-off their children at childcare.
- **Money:** It is that much more difficult to afford childcare costs from one salary rather than two, and the rising costs of childcare are therefore hitting single parents especially hard. It also means that any cuts in income as a result of having to leave work or take sick-days to look after children during the holiday impacts very hard on their family finances. This is in the context that the poverty rate for single parent families where the parent works part-time is already 30 per cent, and 22 per cent where the parent works full-time;⁵; and 25 per cent of single parents have experienced a drop in wages in the last 6 months.⁶
- **Work:** over two-thirds of single parents who are in work are employed in the three lowest paid industries.⁷ Such jobs rarely offer the flexible hours at a decent income that parents require during the holidays in order to balance their childcare responsibilities with the need to earn an income.

Why do we need to act now?

Year-on-year the challenges presented by holiday childcare have continued to mount. Whilst we welcome the increasing political attention on childcare in general, we are concerned that the specific challenges of holiday childcare are currently being overlooked. A number of trends are making the need to act ever more urgent:

- The provision of holiday childcare has halved since 2009. Whilst 34 per cent of local authorities in England and Wales had enough holiday childcare for parents who worked full-time in 2009, in 2014 that figure has fallen to 16.5 per cent. For children aged 4-7 the figure has fallen from 44 per cent of local authorities to just 15 per cent; for 8-11 year olds it has dropped from 41 per cent to 18 per cent.⁸
- Cuts to local authority funding are impinging on the ability of councils to provide the funds that will guarantee affordable holiday childcare places for local parents.⁹
- Since 2009 the average weekly cost of childcare in the maintained sector has risen by 17 per cent.¹⁰

⁵ Households Below Average Income (HBAI) 1994/95-2011/12. Table 4.5db. DWP, June 2013

⁶ Rabindrakumar, S., (2014) *Paying the Price: The long road to recovery*. Available:

<http://gingerbread.org.uk/content/1940/Findings#recovery>

⁷ Newis, P., (2014) *Making the Grade: How government investment in further education can benefit single parents and the state*. Available: http://gingerbread.org.uk/file_download.aspx?id=8992

⁸ Rutter, J., Lugton, D., (2014) *Holiday Childcare Survey 2014*. Available:

<http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=bafef946-4bd2-4a1c-aaf4-42933254a5f9>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

- As a result of these challenges, single parents are having to go to extraordinary lengths to manage their holiday childcare requirements. Our recent research¹¹ found that half of single parents struggled to find childcare during the recent summer holiday; over a third had to cut back spending on household essentials like food and bills; almost a quarter had to take unpaid leave; and nearly one-third had to reduce their working hours.

What needs to happen?

As they finalise manifesto commitments for the 2015 general election, we know that political parties will include a focus on childcare, which is welcome. As part of these commitments, we are calling on all parties to address the blind-spot on holiday childcare and develop dedicated policy proposals accordingly. These must take into account and tackle the unique challenges presented by the shortage of affordable holiday childcare and enable all working parents – including single parents – to balance their work and caring responsibilities for 52 weeks of the year.

The evidence: what does the research tell us about holiday childcare?

We have undertaken secondary analysis of existing studies conducted by the Family and Childcare Trust, and own original research into single parent experiences of finding holiday childcare, to demonstrate the urgent need for substantive policy proposals on holiday childcare.

The state of holiday childcare provision¹²

- The number of local authorities in England and Wales that have enough holiday childcare for working parents has halved since 2009 – from 34 per cent to just 16.5 per cent in 2014.
- In Britain, the average cost of one week's full-time (50 hours) of holiday childcare is £114.51.
- Since 2009 the cost of holiday childcare in the maintained sector has risen by 17 per cent.
- Local authority youth service budgets fell by an average of 4.9 per cent between 2012/13 and 2013/14, putting particular pressure on services available for older children.
- Only 18 per cent of local authorities in England and Wales had enough holiday childcare for 8-11 year olds in 2014, and just 8.5 per cent had enough space for 11+ year-olds. Both of these figures are down significantly on 2009 figures.

The impact on single parents

To understand how these changes are impacting on the lives of single parents, Gingerbread undertook a survey of single parents in July and August 2014 to ask about their experiences of finding childcare places for the recent summer holiday. The survey uncovered some alarming findings. For example:

- One in three (34 per cent) single parents had to cut back on spending on essential household items in order to pay for childcare this summer.

¹¹ Online survey of 614 single parents between 21/07/2014 and 01/09/2014. Respondents were self-selecting. A full set of our survey results can be made available on request.

¹² Data retrieved from Rutter, J., Lugton, D., (2014) *Holiday Childcare Survey 2014*. Available: <http://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=bafef946-4bd2-4a1c-aaf4-42933254a5f9>

- One in four (24 per cent) single parents found the experience of booking childcare “very difficult” and were unable to book their child into any or much childcare for the summer.
- Serious impact on ability to work:
 - 29 per cent of our survey respondents reported having to reduce their working hours in order to look after their children
 - 22 per cent had to take unpaid leave
 - 16 per cent had to stop looking for work or turn down employment so that they could be at home with their children.

In addition, we asked single parents to tell us about some of the most extreme lengths they have had to go to in order to ensure their children were looked after during the summer holidays. Here is just a selection of their responses:

- “Get a visa for my mother to visit from Ghana and look after my kids while I work.”
- “Take out a £400 loan.”
- “Forced to take on an illegal zero hours contract which didn’t have sick pay, bank holidays or leave entitlements.”
- “Stopped paying essential bills...”
- “I sold personal possessions to pay for childcare...”
- “Only eating one a meal a day to ensure my children were looked after properly and they still had food...”
- “Driving 200 miles to drop off my child with my mum on a day off, and turning around again to be back in work the next day. I didn’t see them for the next 6 weeks.”

Recommendations

We are calling on political parties to develop dedicated policy proposals on holiday childcare that tackle the unique set of challenges presented by the shortage of affordable holiday childcare. In particular, these will need to address:

- The increasing shortage of holiday childcare places overall
- The particular shortage of holiday childcare places for the 11+ age group.
- The rising cost of holiday childcare
- The impact local authority cuts are having on their capacity to ensure adequate provision.

Any strategy that is developed must offer a holistic approach. As the quotes and polling results from our single parent survey reveal, the holiday childcare challenge is exacerbated by a number of factors that go beyond the immediate issues of whether childcare is available and whether it is affordable. Any future holiday childcare strategy therefore needs to:

- Work with employers to improve the availability of flexible working – helping parents stay in work during the holidays whilst finding the time necessary to look after their children.
- Extend the right to request flexible working from the point of job offer onwards.
- Consider the potential for using school buildings as childcare facilities, and supporting schools that are willing and able to provide childcare during the holiday season.
- Ensure that holiday childcare pressures are taken into account by the Jobcentre’s and/or Work Programme’s job-search regime so that advisors systematically consider the availability of local childcare when setting expectations for parents’ ability to find and take up work during the holidays.