

'Patchy' local offer restricting SEND children's access to childcare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

According to Childcare for all: the role of the local offer published by the Family and Childcare Trust and funded by the Soebel Foundation, families with disabled children are being left in the dark on childcare because of 'patchy' and varying information and guidance from local authorities.

Under the Children and Families Act, local authorities are required to publish a local offer which sets out information about services and support – including early education and childcare, for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in their area.

However, a review of the online local offer of each local authority in England between September and October 2016 by the Family and Childcare Trust reveals that one third are not providing basic guidance for parents about accessing childcare for children with disabilities.

Just a quarter of local authorities explained providers' duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' for children with disabilities under the Equalities Act 2010, and only 16 per cent included information for parents about how to raise concerns about a childcare provider.

The Trust also found that only half of local authorities (51 per cent) had a directory of childcare listings that included information from providers about their individual 'local offer', outlining details such as accessibility arrangements and specialist staff training. The quality of these listings varied widely and most did not include details of when they were last updated.

To understand more about local authorities' experience of implementing the local offer, a survey was sent to a sample of them by the Family and Childcare Trust.

Responses revealed that local authority staff were generally positive about the impact of the local offer on the scope and quality of information available about childcare for children with SEND.

Just over half of respondents felt that the local offer had helped identify gaps in childcare provision for these children, however few felt it had helped to address the issue.

In light of the findings, the Family and Childcare Trust is now calling on local authorities and the Department for Education (DfE) to take a number of additional steps for improvement.

It wants local authorities to:

- make sure they deliver the key elements of an effective local offer, including clear information and guidance for parents on finding, choosing and paying for childcare ;
- address any technical or institutional barriers to collaborative work, including making sure that Family Information Services and local offer IT databases are compatible;
- make sure that officers managing the local offer work collaboratively with Family Information Services and early years and childcare quality improvement teams provide high-quality information and guidance for parents and providers;
- form collaborative local offer working groups which include relevant officers.

It wants the Department for Education (DfE) to:

- use best practice guidance and future revisions of the SEND Code of Practice to make sure that local authorities use the local offer to provide information about childcare for school age children as well as early years services;
- clarify the route of redress when parents experience difficulty accessing the entitlement to free early education and childcare;
- Consider providing a model template for each provider's SEND local offer to promote a better understanding of the purpose of the local offer and improve the standard and consistency of information available to parents;
- Make sure that guidance supporting the Children and Families Act and the Childcare Act is consistent and mutually reinforcing. In

particular, the DfE should revise statutory guidance to make sure the local offer is used to support the duty to provide sufficient childcare for disabled children.

Ellen Broome, deputy chief executive of the Family and Childcare Trust, said, 'High-quality information and guidance increases parents' confidence that suitable childcare is available and helps them to overcome barriers to accessing a childcare place. The current lack of information adds yet another obstacle to the struggle families often face when looking for childcare that gives their children the best start in life and helps parents to work.'

'Our report shows that while some local authorities are providing parents with excellent information, very few provide the comprehensive information and advice parents need. Most local authorities have clear areas for improvement. Local and central Government must work together to make sure that every family is able to get the information they need to access high quality childcare.'

Mencap said the findings highlighted 'yet another struggle in a long list of factors that restrict parents' access to high-quality childcare.'

The charity's policy and strategic lead for children and young people James Robinson said, 'For many parents with a disabled child, including children with a learning disability, finding childcare can be a particular struggle. These findings highlight yet another in a long list of factors that restricts parents' access to high quality and appropriate childcare.'

'Local authorities have a legal duty to publish a local offer to ensure families of disabled children know about the childcare and other services on offer locally. Despite this, they are still not doing enough to alleviate unnecessary strains on families. This needs to change.'

'Families are already heavily disadvantaged by a lack of childcare services that can meet a disabled child's needs and the higher costs of paying for the appropriate care their child requires. We need to see families better supported to access the childcare services they need. Ensuring families know about the support available, and how to access it, is vital in supporting the development of every child with a learning disability and helping families to have greater flexibility over their work.'

Responding to the Family and Childcare Trust's report Councillor Richard Watts, chair of the Local Government Association's Children and Young People Board, said, 'We were clear with the Department for Education (DfE) at the time that implementing the SEND reforms in the Children and Families Bill, including maintaining a local offer, was significantly underfunded by the Government and this has been borne out in reality.'

'Councils are determined to do all they can to help children with SEND, and their families, receive the support and opportunities that they need to flourish, but with demand increasing every year, this is proving extremely challenging.'

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, said, 'We share the Family and Childcare Trust's concerns about the lack of information on childcare available to parents of disabled children.'

'The requirement for councils to publish a local offer was part of a wholesale reform of SEND provision that was supposed to tackle the barriers to accessing childcare that many disabled children and their families face. And yet, more than two years later, many local authorities still do not have an accessible and effective local offer in place with providers reporting that, even in areas where there is a service in place, parents are often unaware of its existence.'

'It is vital, therefore, that Government works with local authorities to tackle the issues highlighted in this report, and ensure that all families are able to access high-quality care and education when they need it.'

A Department for Education spokesperson said, 'We are doing more than ever to support families, including those with children with additional needs, to access high-quality, affordable childcare. This is backed by a record £6 billion investment per year by 2020.'

'Our reforms to special educational needs and disabilities support – the biggest in a generation – made it clear that councils must provide details of the support available locally, so that parents can access the information they need. We are supporting councils to do this by giving them £223m of additional funding over four years to implement the reforms.'

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