

Playschemes and affordable summer childcare getting harder to find ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents bracing themselves for the six-week summer challenge of holding down a job while keeping their children busy are facing rising childcare costs and a growing shortage of places on holiday playschemes, according to a new report.

The study by the Family and Childcare Trust (FCT), published on Thursday, claims that almost nine out of ten local authorities in England do not have enough holiday club spaces to meet the demands of working parents as schools break up for summer.

The problem is particularly acute for parents of children aged 12 or over and those living in rural areas, while parents with disabled children are severely affected, with 88% of local authorities in England and all in Wales unable to meet demand for holiday childcare for disabled children.

Deprived areas are particularly affected, because holiday schemes are generally concentrated in wealthier areas. The report says there are 39 holiday clubs in Bristol, for example, but almost all of them are located in the more prosperous areas of the city.

The report says the number of available places in holiday playschemes has fallen significantly since last year: in 2014, 73% authorities did not have enough holiday childcare, but that has risen to 87%. In Wales, that figure is 95%. In Scotland, three local authorities said they were confident they had enough childcare places for working parents.

Meanwhile, costs have risen, with the average price of a week's full-time (ie 50 hours) holiday childcare up from £114.51 last year to £123.49 in 2015, a 7.8% increase. The report estimates that the cost of a holiday club place has gone up by almost a quarter in the past five years.

Despite recent government promises to make childcare more affordable – including 30 hours of free childcare for three- and four-year-olds – the findings of the Family and Childcare Trust's 14th annual holiday childcare survey reveal the wider challenge facing parents of school-age children looking for affordable holiday childcare for their children to enable them to carry on working.

Stephen Dunmore, the FCT chief executive, said: "These are worrying findings at a time when the government is pushing through its ambitious and welcome plans to make childcare more affordable for parents.

"It is time for action on the Cinderella service that is holiday childcare. Otherwise, many parents will struggle to hold down a job or find their summer plans in tatters. Local authorities must be supported in their market management to stop the decline in childcare places so that all parents have the access to childcare that they so desperately need.

"We are also calling on the government to make sure there are no further delays in the rollout of tax-free childcare so that this vital support is available to parents as soon as possible."

The government's tax-free childcare offer was due to begin in September, but has been delayed until early 2017.

The FCT says one in five families with children under 14 use this type of group-based holiday scheme, with 81% of provision run by private and not-for-profit organisations. Typically, a child is booked into activities for two or three weeks; otherwise, families "shift-parent" with parents taking leave at different times to cover the school holidays or call on relatives.

According to the report, 28 local authorities in England, 13 in Wales and four in Scotland have a shortage of places, affecting an estimated 1.5 million children aged between four and 15. Parents may also be having difficulties finding up-to-date information with 47% of local authorities providing details about holiday clubs and activities on their websites.

A spokesman for the Local Government Association, responding to the report, said: "Councils across the county are working hard to support families in need of holiday childcare including working with schools to open their facilities and with local businesses to encourage them to offer more flexible hours for mums and dads.

“Work also continues with private and independent providers to encourage them to offer more affordable schemes. There is no legal obligation at all for councils to provide their own holiday childcare and the duty placed on them to ensure there is sufficient childcare available states ‘only as far as is practicable’.”

The FCT carried out its survey in May and received responses from 187 out of more than 200 local authorities, giving an overall response rate of 93%.

-reprinted from The Guardian

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