

Shortage of childcare places puts pressure on parents ^[1]

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Source: The West Australian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Mar 2016

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EXCERPTS

When Joanne Forster had her first child 16 months ago, the new mother thought she had her bases covered when she put her baby's name on waiting lists at five childcare centres.

Mrs Forster was on maternity leave when she signed up her daughter Saige at the centres nine months before Mrs Forster's return to work date.

Two weeks before she was due to go back to work in September last year and after months of stressing, Mrs Forster still did not have a place.

"We thought five centres in different locations would have been ample," she said.

Mrs Forster, who lives in Nollamara and works in the mining industry, discussed the possibility of extending her leave from work with her manager, which added extra stress about the family's income to the mix.

"Because we weren't getting paid towards the first year of maternity leave ... we needed to go back to work for financial reasons," she said.

Fortunately for Mrs Forster, she found a place for Saige in an Osborne Park centre shortly before she went back to work. But the stress of her first experience with childcare in Perth was something the new mother could have done without.

Willagee mother Gillian Corker had to wait about six months for a spot for her 14-month-old son Charlie to come up at her local childcare centre.

Ms Corker was in the midst of starting a business from home while her partner worked fly-in, fly-out and was looking to put Charlie into child care once a week. When Ms Corker visited a childcare centre near her home, she thought it was a perfect fit.

But she was shocked to be told she would have to wait six to eight months for a place.

"In our neighbourhood there are two childcare centre within reasonable walking distance and that was important to me," she said. "We looked at the first place that I really wanted him in and they were saying the wait list was six or eight months.

"So we went to another centre and I felt terrible for the kids there, it was so poky and so depressing I was really upset at the thought of it," she said.

With strong family support, Ms Corker was able to manage without child care until she secured a spot at her preferred childcare centre just weeks ago.

"I really held out, but I appreciate not everyone is in the position where they can do that," she said. "It's a huge relief that he's somewhere where he is happy and I'm happy leaving him."

The Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services 2016 for Child Care, released last month, showed long day care was the most popular form of child care in WA.

Last year, 54,235 children aged 12 and under attended a government-approved long daycare service, compared with 12,936 children who attended family day care.

As WA's population has grown, the number of children in childcare services in the State has soared – from 58,465 in 2006 to 92,653 last year. The commission's data shows a 22 per cent increase in childcare services in WA over the past two years.

The Department of Local Government and Communities, which regulates childcare services, said there were 1104 services Statewide in June 2015 and this had increased to 1143 last month.

But the experiences of some families and childcare providers on the ground in Perth suggest it is still not enough.

Australian Childcare Alliance WA executive officer Rachele Tucker said it had asked government for a return to structured approval of childcare places to prevent a glut of places in certain areas. “Many years ago, to be approved for childcare benefit for your families, the onus of proof that the area needed additional childcare places was on the provider,” she said.

“As the policy now stands, approvals for childcare benefit are no longer based on where there is current demand.”

Samantha Page, chief executive of Early Childhood Australia which advocates for young children, called on governments to make information available to providers that might influence decisions about where and when to open new services.

“There is also the potential for more direct involvement through service approval mechanisms and the process of approving development applications,” she said.

“Another option is to provide low-cost loans in areas of chronic undersupply to support new or existing providers to open new services and expand existing services quickly in response to community needs,” she said.

The Federal Government’s \$3.5 billion childcare benefit and subsidy reforms, which come into effect in July next year, are intended to direct more financial help to parents who use child care to return to work.

Federal education and training minister Simon Birmingham said almost one million families nationwide will benefit from the reforms.

But if the Government’s plan to encourage more parents to return to work by using child care works, the problem with Perth’s childcare shortage “hotspots” could get worse.

-reprinted from The West Australian

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