

Jersey Child Care Trust (JCCT) Focus Group Report 2014

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of focus group research for the JCCT 2013/2014.

The JCCT is a registered charity which was set up in 1997 with the ethos to promote high quality, affordable childcare for all. It provides information and services for childcare providers, families and other professionals. They commissioned this research to enable the views of their stakeholders to be heard.

Parents were asked to participate in focus groups which were based around 'What is life in Jersey like for your family?'. The groups were comprised of both full and part time working parents as well as non-working parents of both nursery and school age children.

The JCCT undertook the recruitment of the groups through a variety of methods to ensure that they engaged with their stakeholders.

Following recruitment, 37 parents attended a number of focus groups and gave freely of their views, experiences and opinions to enable the compilation of this report and to them the gratitude of the researcher is gratefully expressed.

Some very rich data was elicited from the participants which has been categorized into 4 themes which show areas that have either been an issue for parents or are currently a concern for parents.

- Affordability of Childcare
- Choice of Childcare
- Accessibility of Information
- Work / life balance

Each of the themes is developed with sub-themes to show more specifically the areas within these that are issues for parents in Jersey.

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1.0 Background

In the Autumn of 2013 the JCCT commissioned a follow on set of focus groups to develop on the work undertaken in 2012 which focussed on 'What is life in Jersey like for your family?'. This research entailed focus groups covering both full and part time working parents of both nursery and school age children. In the research for 2013/2014 the JCCT asked for the focus to be extended to include non- working parents in an effort to gain the views of a wider group of parents in Jersey.

It was felt that focus groups worked well as a data collection tool last year and would again be used as they enable identification of what people think as well as how and why they think that way. They also work well in this situation due to them being non-discriminatory in terms of those who cannot read or write and also in an effort to facilitate the expression of ideas and experiences that may otherwise be overlooked. This would again enable the JCCT's stakeholders views to be ascertained and then the analysis of the data collected would uncover emerging themes and therefore enable the JCCT to continue to evolve to meet the requirements of Jersey's constantly changing population.

Focus group work was undertaken with stakeholders during November and December 2013 and January and February 2014. A total of 7 focus groups took place. A small number of parents asked if they could provide a written submission if they thought of any further comments following focus groups and this was accepted. Participants were invited through a flyer and notifications via facebook and through word of mouth. Groups were organised that covered both full and part time working parents of both nursery and school age children as well as non-working parents of nursery and school age children. One group was also organised that was specifically for Portuguese speaking parents with an interpreter. The seventh group was also formed which gave a new dimension to the research which targeted a group of new parents. The focus groups took place at 'The Bridge', St Paul's Centre in St Helier and at Communicare, St Brelade. Some of the groups offered free childcare with qualified practitioners to provide babysitting for the parents to enable their participation.

1.1 Recruitment and Conduct of the groups

The JCCT handled the recruitment for all focus groups with the use of facebook and contacts. For each of the meetings, an agreed topic guide was used and the discussions were recorded during the session. Respondents were assured that the final report would be written in such a way that views could not be attributed to individuals and participants and their workplaces would not be identifiable.

The recruitment steps were as follows: the JCCT used a list of key contacts. The JCCT e-mailed a flyer to invite those on the list to attend a focus group. The JCCT also has a contact page on facebook where the same flyer was

placed. Where insufficient responses were received, JCCT followed up by telephone.

Each group meeting followed a standard format, with the facilitator delivering a brief overview of the reasons behind the research and a brief presentation of confidentiality and what was expected of the participants, before opening the meetings up to discussion and debate. A topic guide was also used by the facilitator in order to guide the discussion and ensure that all relevant issues were covered. Group members were offered refreshments whilst attending the meeting.

The composition of the focus groups varied at each session. Those recruited who attended comprise the following:

Focus Group composition	
Total adults	37
Working Part time	9
Working Full time	6
Not working	22
School age children	19
Nursery age children	45

Parents had between 1 to a maximum of 4 children, with a mixture of nursery and school age children ranging from 6 weeks to school leaving age.

2.0 KEY FINDINGS

This section summarizes the comments on the main topics made by each of the groups, comprising both non-working, full and part time working parents of both nursery and school age children. It also contains the results of the group of new parents. The detailed transcripts for each group are contained in an appendix due to the confidentiality of the contents.

2.1 Note on qualitative research

Qualitative research provides a way to probe underlying attitudes and obtain an understanding of the important issues. It must be noted, however, that when interpreting these findings that they cannot be stated as statistical evidence. It is also important to note that we are dealing with perceptions, not facts. Although some participants may hold views based on incorrect information, the perceptions are reported in the following report without analysis or comment.

2.2 Emergent themes

Four themes have been identified through analysis of the interview transcripts. These are:

- Affordability of Childcare
- Choice of Childcare
- Accessibility of Information
- Work / life balance

Each of these themes will be developed with sub-themes in the subsequent sections, to show more specifically the areas within these themes that are issues for parents in Jersey.

2.3 Affordability of Childcare

Having a family in Jersey was generally recognised to be a costly experience and the maternity grant given to expectant mothers irrespective of income was very much appreciated and utilised by all. The 20 hours free nursery provision for all was also very much welcomed however there were some suggestions relating to the timing of this. The importance and benefit of family living locally or a close supportive network of friends to help out was again crucial to many being able to cope financially. It was also suggested that some coped purely due to the fact that they had prepared financially before the baby was due. Currently parents are trying to make savings wherever they can, on basic essentials like shopping and heating and also on luxuries such as holidays. Many are trying to make extra income with more than one job or setting up businesses, which in some cases allows them to work and be with

their children. Childcare in general was felt to be a great expense to parents to the extent that it was prohibitive to many involved in the focus groups.

'you have to save a lot beforehand' (6)

'you have parents here to help you, that's so invaluable' (4)

'trying to figure out what else we can do for extra income but we are struggling around different ways to make income' (4)

'Everybody is desperate to earn extra money' (4)

'My husband and I both work and we find it difficult....you have to forsake things like holidays' (3)

'I'm really worse off for working than I've ever been so it's really hard' (1)

2.3.1 Nursery

Although most parents expressed a wish for their child to attend nursery due to the socialisation benefits, for some, being able to achieve this either due to prohibitive costs or finding a suitable place was impossible. The cost of nursery places is felt to be expensive, especially as many felt that they had to pay for a full time place even if they did not require it. This coupled with what was often felt to be the requirement of high non-refundable deposits or paying for places up to a month before necessary to secure them or paying the full months fees at the beginning of the month was putting many parents in difficult financial positions. Many expressed that they were either working to pay the nursery fees or that their salary did not even cover the nursery fees which overlaps into 2.6 Work / life balance.

'I think there's such a demand for the nurseries, they can basically call the shots' (7)

'we had to pay a month's deposit....and I wasn't working at the time' (6)

'the month they start you have to pay the full amount so that can be a difficulty because you don't get your salary until the end of the month' (6)

'once your place is guaranteed, £200 as a deposit' (6)

'I didn't have the £500 deposit to hold the place' (3)

'to have your name on the list you have to pay a non-refundable £200' (6)

'nurseries over here are too expensive for the kids so I prefer to be at home... it's not easy to be a mum in Jersey' (5)

'my salary is not suffice to pay for the creche'(4)

'I'd love to get him in nurseery I just can't afford it' (4)

'I never used childcare when the children were small, it was cheaper to stay at home' (4)

'it's not affordable for me to go back' (7)

'can't be late to pick up or they're charged an extra hour' (6)

'we really can't put our kids in nurseries because it's too expensive and if we pay for the nursery then we won't have money for other things, for food, nappies....' (5)

'nurseries are too expensive...you don't know if your child is well treated or not' (5)

2.3.2 Family child carer

The flexibility of family child carers was highlighted and was the choice of some. The benefit of these individuals to families as a whole was very heartfelt and they were felt to be good value for money. For families with more than one child at nursery age needing childcare, family child carers were felt to be more affordable.

'She's amazing, she ticked every box, she's so flexible' (6)

'when there's two of them.... I might have to look for a childminder' (4)

2.3.3 20 hours free

Without exception, there was a very positive response to the 20 hrs of free nursery care provided by the States of Jersey for children in their pre-school year. Some expressed that the financial benefit of this would be more helpful earlier, at the point of returning to work. A small number of parents did have difficulty with the hours available at their chosen private nursery. However, all very much appreciated the financial help and some recognised that this was the first time that they would be able to return to work or study.

'I need to wait till they are in nursery and then I can look for a job' (5)

'I would love to have my daughter in nursery as well because I would like to study... I am waiting for the 20 hours I can't afford to pay' (5)

2.3.4 Wrap around care and Holiday care

Clubs that are run at some States Primary schools including, breakfast, afterschool and holiday clubs are very highly praised as being good value and also for the continuity of care that the children are offered. Parents in general, felt that these were affordable and that they were happy that their children were in a safe, familiar environment. They were also highly commended for being flexible in terms of charging only when used. As children get older parents expressed a need for more clubs, whether they be educationally based such as IT clubs, youth clubs and sports clubs that were accessible financially for all. A gap was identified for children in school years 5 - 9 where they were too old for some clubs but not yet old enough for other activities.

'after school club until 5.30 and because it's a States school it works out about £35 per week' (3)

'A States school do a breakfast club from 7.30 and then after school club till 4.30 – 5 o'clock for £8 a day' (3)

'sometimes the clubs are too expensive' (5)

'sports clubs that don't cost the earth' (3)

'I can't afford to work in the Summer holidays....and pay for childcare' (1)

2.3.5 GP costs

The cost of taking an under 5 to the GP was felt to be prohibitive by some and to be the cause of many using the A&E department. Others however, reported GP's to be reasonable, only charging once with repeat visits for the same complaint being free. The benefit of having employment in a large company that gives health insurance to your family was recognised and seen as an incentive to return to work.

'the cost of taking a 2yr old to the Doctor is just ridiculous, it makes things completely unmanageable' (4)

'that's one of the reasons it's worth staying in a job.... If your company provides healthcare insurance' (4)

2.3.6 Tax relief

The benefit of childcare tax relief was recognized but it was also noted that the childcarers had to be registered for this to be received. The lack of help to those who were trying to buy their own home was felt to be counterproductive and gave the message that the States of Jersey does not encourage people to get onto the property ladder.

'they used to give you tax relief on your mortgage but they phased that out...you only get child care credit if you both work....also JCCT approved child minder or nursery which means some people are cheaper maybe aren't options.....' (4)

'if you work and you own something you're stuck' (4)

'you kind of feel you're penalised for working or trying to own a house rather than renting' (4)

2.3.7 Social Security

There is some overlap with this section into section 2.5 (accessibility of information) but it is reported here as respondents were mainly discussing issues relating to financial assistance.

Some issues were identified surrounding the lack of clarity of benefits and how things were calculated for individuals or what they were entitled to. Other issues related to the perceived insistence of social security advisers to get parents into work and there being no provision for those parents over the age of 25 who were either undertaking or wishing to enrol in further education. Some respondents reported feeling victimised and many felt that they were spoken to in a condescending manner for a variety of reasons, including their choice of job and requests for financial assistance.

'when I hit crisis point I was going down there trying to get help but I couldn't get any information....they had all the forms under the counter' (2)

'they make you feel like a criminal' (2)

'just the whole humiliation' (2)

'if you go to college they stop everything anyway' (2)

'Social security won't pay the Childcare component for people who are accessing education' (2)

'If you're not performing to their requirements, they don't perceive you're job hunting enough... you get warnings and then lose an adult component.... And the fourth one you're out of the whole system. (2)

'both parents need to be 5 years in the Island so they (social security) can help' (5)

'Social security and they take for income tax....I don't understand how they calculate things' (5)

' I have heard people say if you are single, if you are on your own with your we will help you with everything but if you're with your partner we won't' (5)

'social security used to give me money to help towards (after school club) which is good' (5)

'income support it's just ridiculous, the amount you're meant to live on.....I don't know how they work it out' (3)

'they don't understand the value of education...doing a degree has been horrendous.....the only option I have is ending up having a work placement' (2)

2.4 Choice of childcare

There are a number of factors that came into the choice of childcare, from a nursery perspective these being: a nursery that 'felt right'; which nurseries were open at times that suited parents working schedules; and whether the parents had started looking early enough, which was suggested to be necessary before the child was born. Taking these factors into consideration, some parents then got to the point of feeling forced to look to nannies or childminders despite wanting the socialisation of a nursery facility as there was simply a lack of availability. Others chose a nanny or childminder over a nursery as they preferred this and often felt that there was greater flexibility over the nursery environment. The issue of nurseries not being regulated and controlled was discussed and it was felt that as they are independent businesses they are not accountable to anybody and when issues arose there was nothing that parents could do apart from remove their child.

'firstly it's really difficult getting them in for the hours that you want and nurseries that are available probably aren't your preferred choice' (1)

2.4.1 Personal feeling

Although many parents felt that they had a forced choice, others spoke of 'knowing' it was the right place as it 'felt right'. The choice of childcare is not an exact science and what is right for one family is not for another. Parents try where it is possible to make informed choices, but it is clear that this is still a difficult process due to the lack of information (which overlaps into 2.5). However, even with a short list of recommended nurseries which offer what parents are looking for there is an instinctive 'gut feeling' of what is right for a family.

'it was more the feel of it when we looked around.... We visited 3 but as soon as we saw that one, we fell in love with that one' (6)

'I chose it because it was close to home and because I had a very good feel about it' (4)

2.4.2 Availability of Childcare

Many were caught in a situation which did not give them a choice due to their being limited places that suited their needs.

'it's just whether you can get the childcare to start when you need it to start' (6)

'I started ringing around nurseries and they were kind of laughing at me.....saying.... we've got places for the year after you want but not now' (6)

'they were very flexible about dropping a day' (4)

'we didn't have much choice, there weren't many nurseries with places' (6)

'I think you have to put their names down as soon as you find out you're pregnant' (6)

'I was 15 weeks and they were saying.....we cannot even conceive whether or not you can even have a place because it's just too late' (6)

2.4.3 Nursery issues

As mentioned in 2.3.1 the socialisation benefits of a nursery have been discussed, however, some parents took this to a deeper level looking at it from a safety/ safeguarding perspective where they felt more comfortable that any issues with caring for their child would be more open and regulated in a nursery than with an individual. However, despite the childcare being a positive aspect to nurseries, some felt that the lack of regulation of the nurseries as businesses was a cause for concern.

' if it's a school or a nursery you've got more people around and it's a professional operation' (4)

'the care of the children is regulated but the nurseries can actually run themselves as completely independent.....whether or not that's actually right' (2)

'I think it would be good to have a system like that (OFSTED)for the nurseries and the schools because there's nowhere you can go and get a clean cut answer that they have been inspected and you know that they meet those standards' (7)

2.4.4 Sickness

A major problem for parents with children in nurseries is when children are sick as the parents are under great pressure to be at work and are often taking their own sickness leave to cover the sickness of the child.

'I used all my holidays for 2 years....for my daughter being off sick' (1)

'He was off the crèche for at least 3 days a month and I was taking holidays but I was feeling so guilty... thinking that people would see me as unreliable' (4)

'when they call you to come and pick them up, you've got to go' (4)

'with the new work policy we have no way of collecting them unless we take unpaid or annual leave' (3)

2.5 Accessibility of Information

The accessibility of information is a major problem to parents who took part in this research. Information relating to childcare choices, nurseries in particular, the availability of help and support, which in general was felt not to be accessible until parents were having trouble or even at 'crisis point'. Information pertaining to benefits or forms of financial information was also felt to be difficult to obtain as was information about maternity rights. The earlier the information was available was felt to be the best solution. This is especially true from the 'support' perspective, knowing that there is help out there for various things so that they do not have to reach rock bottom and not know where to turn. Information that was accessible to parents came mainly from social media.

'I feel there isn't enough information over here to let people know what's accessible to them' (1)

'nobody's willing to give you information, you've got to dig deep or just hear on the off chance' (1)

'I didn't think there was anywhere I could go or anyone I could speak to to get any information about my rights to do with maternity' (7)

'a lot of places don't know about The Bridge....and Social Security have nothing, no pamphlets nothing' (1)

'should be a leaflet that they give out at Maternity, when you leave hospital' (1)

'information needs to be in the most sensible ports; hospitals, doctors, even the weigh in clinics' (1)

'facebook and there's a great group the Mums in Jersey Group, where so much information goes through it's brilliant' (4)

2.6 Work / Life Balance

There was a split between parents who were in professions where they felt it impossible to take a career break and needed to carry on working otherwise they would lose their position in the company or would be too out of touch and never re-gain their present level. Some of these parents however were in the situation of working to simply pay for the childcare and found it very stressful. Others wished to work but also to be the one picking up their children from school and being able to be with their children in the school holidays and many expressed a wish for part-time term-time work.

'I've been working full time and had to stop to stay at home during the day. I'm doing part time but it's eveningthen my partner stays at night' (5)

'I would like to be at home but if I do, I won't ever get my job back' (3)

'there's not enough part time term time jobs out there' (3)

'I'm going back to work because it's better for me to stay in the system' (2)

'I was actually working for nothing, plus the fact I had to get up, prepare everything.....looking back I think I missed out quite a bit' (1)

'Even if I could afford it, I don't know if I'd want it because I enjoy picking up from school and having that time with them...' (1)

'but it just seems unfair that in Jersey it's just not geared towards families, it's geared towards businesses' (7)

2.6.1 Barriers to working

Some parents find that even when their children are in full time education work that fits in with school hours is difficult to find and the need for wrap around care between the end of school and work finishing and also school holidays mean that they find it impossible to find work. The need for more flexi time and job share opportunities was felt more likely to enable people to work.

'It is so difficult to find part-time, term-time work....something that fits into school hours' (1)

'sometimes the money is not enough so it's not worth it just to go to work to pay a nanny' (5)

'would like to go back to work when she starts school' (5)

'better with friends because you never know what is going to happen' (5)

'drop out of a job I enjoy because we just can't afford to put our children into nursery' (4)

'Summer holidays I'll struggle' (4)

'I think they need to be more flexible really for people....swap days or make up hours.....they just weren't prepared to be flexible at all' (3)

'more job share options.... Women with school aged children want to work just the school terms' (3)

2.6.2 Employers

Some parents felt that they were well looked after by their employers, with them listening to their needs, being flexible and giving various benefits. Others however, felt that being a mother was not well accepted by their employer and in many cases they felt pushed out of the workplace.

'I was still breastfeeding so my work were fantastic' (4)

'At my work place they are really family friendly' (3)

'My place in the company diminished' (4)

'it's very much like they 'manage' you out' (7)

'we will give you the flexible hours you want but you have to do this..., if you want to be at your level you have to work full time' (4)

'they were point blank, this is what you're going to do otherwise that's it' (7)

2.6.3 Maternity leave

The need for some kind of statutory requirement for maternity leave however meagre was felt to be better than no law at all. There had been a great diversity in experiences with maternity leave, some positive and some negative. Various suggestions were put forward as to what minimum legal guidance should be and one group settled on 16 weeks to enable the mother to be with baby until all of the vaccinations were completed.

'to actually put a proper law in where mothers are given actual rights when they have a child because it is not a crime' (7)

'I had a very generous employer compared to most others who pays 13 weeks full pay' (6)

' 12 weeks paid and another 6 unpaid....the actually give the same for adoption as well' (6)

'In healthcare you are pushed to take your maternity at 32 weeks' (4)

'the maternity cover / policy is good...paid in full for 3 months, in part for 6 months, then nothing for the last 3 months' (4)

'I've been sacked twice for being pregnant' (3)

'To be reasonable it can't be anything less than 3 or 4 months....babies have injections at 8, 12 and 16 weeks..... I mean, absolute minimum time you have to have off is 16 weeks, until they get past those really sort of critical stages' (3)

'it doesn't encourage women's rights to go back to work' (7)

2.7 In an ideal world.....

Suggestions made by the respondents regarding what would make life easier for parents in Jersey were varied but reflected the emergent themes of the focus groups as a whole, with financial, support and childcare being highlighted.

'why not create a day nursery...more affordable nursery?...a free nursery' (5)

'my suggestion is that rather than give a grant only from 3 years on (20hours free nursery care) trying to give a grant from 6 months...or whenever the States think it's appropriate for a mother to go back to work, that would help' (4)

'Adopt a Granny' (4)

'For mothers who don't have any family... the possibility of having some sort of respite.... time for myself' (4)

'They could do up those derelict buildings in the centre of town by the Millenium park and have it for mums and toddlers and the older generation in the day time and as a youth club in the evening' (3)

'Decent, honest, reliable child care and easy access child care' (2)

'Something flexible just for an hour or so...something like respite...a bank of babysitters' (2)

3.0 Discussion

Parents who participated were very willing to share their views and experiences and this is very much appreciated. Financial issues have again been the main topic of discussion. The cost of private nurseries including the hidden costs of deposits, upfront payments and late pick-up charges makes life very difficult for many and is prohibitive to others returning to work. The 20hours free nursery care provided by the States was seen for many as the door to them being able to return to work as it would be financially viable at this point. However, the wish of many to work part-time, term time was great as although they want to work, they also want to be able to be with their children – picking them up from school and spending time with them in the school holidays. To enable more parents to return to work there would need to be cheaper childcare and more flexible working hours. There was a lot of praise for the school based clubs in terms of reasonable costs and also in terms of continuity of care for the children, but it was noted that they were not available in all States Primary schools. The need for clear, unambiguous information concerning financial issues, childcare choices and what is available in terms of help, guidance and support for parents, openly available and accessible to all was fundamental, as was the need for a well thought out Maternity law. The issue of financial help for those who were either in or wishing to access further education was profound. One aspect of this could be addressed by exploring the possibility of Highlands setting up a nursery for students which would be at a reduced rate to take students children and also to provide some academic benefits, possibly even giving experience to students on relevant courses. The issue of these individuals being forced to choose education over financial assistance is however something that can only be addressed at a political level.