



# Family Information Service

**Focus group report**

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## Executive summary

The Lancashire Family Information Service (FIS) aims to provide quality, accessible and impartial advice and guidance on a full range of childcare and family support services.

Focus groups were used to help understand how people use childcare in Lancashire, what the barriers to using formal childcare are, what people want from the Family Information Service and how people think the FIS should be advertised. The groups were also used to test some poster ideas for a campaign to promote free early years entitlement.

## Key findings

The main findings from the focus groups are:

### *Use of childcare*

- Many participants use formal childcare to enable them to work or attend training
- Some participants that don't work still use some formal childcare to improve their child's social development.
- Participants have issues with the high cost of their childcare arrangements and the hours that providers are available not fitting with their work arrangements.
- The main barriers to using childcare are a lack of suitable places available, high cost and lack of trust. In particular, participants who are first-time parents are wary of leaving their child in formal childcare until the child can talk and let them know if there are problems.

### *Sources of information on childcare*

- Participants used the county council/FIS, Yellow Pages, recommendations from other providers, recommendations from friends and support groups and the internet to get their information on childcare.
- The main issues with the information on childcare available is the accuracy of the information and the amount of information provided upfront (eg online or through leaflets). Participants also struggled to find OFSTED reports for childminders and to easily compare prices of providers as each provider includes different things in their quoted price.

### ***Family Information Service***

- Participants, particularly those that work full-time, felt that the FIS provides a useful service which should be promoted as many hadn't previously heard of the service.
- Participants would like to see a searchable database of childcare providers on the FIS website as well as information on family activities, school holiday clubs and funding for childcare.
- Several participants that had used the FIS had found the information provided to be either insufficient in detail or inaccurate.

### ***Campaign testing***

- Several respondents questioned the use of promoting the free early years entitlement as they felt that this is already widely known about. Some felt that the groups that aren't currently taking up the offer could be targeted more directly, through leaflet drops to specific areas for example.
- All groups preferred the photo version of the poster (appendix 1) to any of the illustrated options (appendix 2).
- The illustrated versions split the groups with some liking versions that others felt sent the wrong message
- Groups felt that the clear message of the poster should be '15 hours of free childcare a week for all three and four years olds for 38 weeks of the year'
- Some parts of the text on the posters tested were thought to be confusing or misleading and should be altered eg needing to ring the FIS to claim your place, 'limited places available' and the use of the term 'part-time'.

### **Recommendations**

- Look at promoting the Family Information Service among parents as awareness among participants was low but the service available was felt to be very useful.
- The way that the FIS and directgov websites are linked needs fixing so parents are clear about where and how to get the information they need.
- The FIS should explore how it can ensure that it ranks highly in, as a minimum, internet searches for childcare in all districts ie "childcare Pendle", "childcare Lancaster".
- Although some staff in libraries and children's centres are aware of the FIS, it was suggested that it would be useful to give these groups more information so they could properly promote the service. Explore ways to improve

promotion of the FIS to children's centre and libraries so they in turn promote the FIS to their customers.

- Set up a basic search facility of childcare providers on the FIS website.
- The accuracy of the data currently held on providers by the FIS needs improving to make it easier for parents to find childcare to meet their needs. A minimum level of information, that is kept up to date, was requested by parents. The burden of keeping provider information up to date should not be placed on the FIS. The FIS should promote to providers the benefits of providing accurate details ie reduced number of people contacting them unnecessarily. The FIS may wish to consider removing providers from the database that don't provide a minimum level of detail or that don't update their details on a regular basis.
- In the future, the basic search facility could be enhanced with Amazon style reviews or the option to search a user-specified area on a map rather than just by radius from a postcode.
- For the free early years entitlement campaign, the Communications Service should consider using the photo version as this was the preferred version in all four focus groups. The text used should give the clear message that what is being promoted is 15 hours of free childcare a week for all three and four year olds for 38 weeks of the year.

## Introduction

The Lancashire Family Information Service (FIS) aims to provide quality, accessible and impartial advice and guidance on a full range of childcare and family support services, resources and issues led by the needs of children and their families, carers, employers, professionals and local and national government and their agencies.

This research was commissioned by the FIS and the Communications Service to help understand how people use childcare in Lancashire, what the barriers to using formal childcare are, what people want from the Family Information Service and how people think the FIS should be advertised. The teams also wanted to test some poster ideas for a campaign to promote free early years entitlement (FEYE) to childcare.

## Research objectives

The objectives of the research were to understand:

- the childcare market and the place of Lancashire County Council in people's decision-making;
- attitudes and barriers towards using formal childcare;
- what support and information people need from Lancashire County Council to help them make informed decisions relating to childcare;
- how potential customers would prefer to contact Lancashire County Council regarding childcare; and
- the effectiveness of different campaign messages to support take-up of the free early years childcare places.

## Methodology

To satisfy the objectives, four focus groups were held. Focus groups are effective in exploring perceptions, feelings and motivations, making them ideally suited to this project. In addition, focus groups, by their very nature, encourage discussion and debate among participants.

The focus groups were completed with members of the public. Conducting four groups enabled the research team to validate findings, improving confidence in the research and recommendations.

Members of the public were recruited from a number of sources: the existing Living in Lancashire panel used by the Corporate Research and Intelligence Team, which is a representative cross-section of the Lancashire population; people who have contacted the FIS in the past year; and people who attend children's centres. This

allowed a cross-section of opinion to be gathered and minimised recruitment time for the focus groups.

Between three and eight participants attended each session. Up to eight people is an ideal number to manage and facilitate the group effectively and still gather a broad range of responses.

A range of participants were invited to attend with a geographical spread across the county. Sessions were run in:

Nelson – daytime (1.30-3.00)

Preston – evening (6.30-8.00)

Chorley – evening (6.30-8.00)

Lancaster – daytime (1.30-3.00)

Participants represented a broad mix of demographics and included: male and female participants; different socio-economic backgrounds; single parents; white and BME participants. Participants' children ranged from newborn to secondary school age.

Each participant was given a cheque for £20 to cover their time and transport costs, and childcare was made available at the daytime sessions. Previous focus groups run by the Corporate Research and Intelligence Team have offered £20 and have been successful, although up to £50 is more usual in the private sector.

To minimise costs, the research team carried out the focus groups in district council and satellite county council offices or children's centres in the respondents' local areas.

### Limitations

The nature of focus groups, and indeed qualitative research in general, means that only a small number of respondents from the population in Lancashire can participate. This means that the focus groups do not offer results that are statistically representative for all people in Lancashire; they only offer indicative or illustrative results. Results are therefore attributed to participants only and not the wider public.

The advantage, however, of focus groups is that they can explore issues and perceptions in detail, so a wealth of quality, descriptive information can be obtained, which was ideally suited to the needs of this research.



## Main research findings

### Use of childcare

To start the discussion, groups were asked what childcare arrangements they have and why.

Participants use a wide range of childcare options including formal options such as childminders, nurseries, before and after school clubs and more informal arrangements eg grandparents or friends looking after children. Participants also use children's centres and groups for parents and children (eg mother and toddler groups).

There were participants who aren't currently using any formal childcare because they are still on maternity leave or because they have chosen to look after their children themselves.

The main reason participants said they use childcare is to enable them to work or attend training. Some participants who choose not to work also use some formal childcare in order to help the development of their children. While some participants see their child benefitting by attending formal childcare, others said that if they didn't need to work they wouldn't use formal childcare at all.

“For my son, we were starting to realise that he was lacking social interaction and especially mixing with other children” – male, Preston, two children under 8 years old

### *Issues with formal childcare*

Participants who use formal childcare were asked if they feel there are any issues with their childcare arrangements.

The main issues were the high cost of childcare and the lack of providers that have places available at times that fit around people who work full-time. In Lancaster, one respondent said that for several years she was paying more in childcare than she was earning.

“I was actually working at a loss for three years because childcare cost more than I was earning but I needed to go back to work to maintain my career” – female, Lancaster, two children under 9 years old

Others felt that they would like to use more formal childcare but couldn't afford to.

“I'd like to put him in full-time, but I can't afford it” – male, Preston, two children under 8 years old

The times that parents can drop off and collect their children from formal childcare providers was also raised as an issue by participants. Some had to alter their working patterns or reduce their working hours to fit around childcare.

“I have to fit my work times around the childcare because they don't work after three” – female, Lancaster, two children under 8 years old

While this is possible for some, others found that the inflexibility of their employer meant they couldn't fit work around childcare and had to find childcare that would fit around work.

Several participants mentioned needing to use informal childcare to support formal childcare for example grandparents pick up the children from nursery and look after them until the parent has finished work.

Another issue is with school holiday clubs, times available don't always fit well with people who work a standard 9 to 5 day.

“What's the point of running a group from 10 till 2? Most people are at work longer than that” – female, Chorley, four children under 17 years old

In Chorley, several participants brought up the issue of needing to find childcare in an emergency if, for example, their usual arrangements fell through or they were delayed getting home from work. In these cases many felt they would be unable to cope if they didn't have other family members to rely on. This was also mentioned in Lancaster with participants having to use up their leave allowance to cover emergencies.

“What do I do if my childminder is ill? I have to take a day off work” – female, Lancaster, two children under 9 years old

### ***Barriers to using formal childcare***

As well as issues with their current childcare arrangements, participants were also asked if they experienced any barriers to using formal childcare.

A big issue here was lack of availability. One couple in Chorley had been advised to start searching for childcare before their child was born because getting a place is so difficult. One participant in Lancaster described having to follow up multiple recommendations in order to find a facility that could accommodate her needs.

“I found that I’d ring a childminder who didn’t have space but they knew someone who might do, so I’d call them and so on. I went through about ten recommendations to find one that could accommodate me” – female, Lancaster, 6 month old twins

With some participants, particularly first-time parents, they were cautious about using formal childcare until they felt their child was old enough to let them know if anything was wrong.

“I want to put my child into childcare because I want to go to work but I don’t know, something might happen. He can’t talk so he can’t tell me what’s going on because he’s only a baby so I’m thinking I might wait” – female, Pendle, 9 month old child

For parents of older children, finding childcare during school holidays is a problem as not all childcare providers are available during school holidays and, as discussed in the previous section, the hours that childcare is available is not always designed to fit in with a working day. One participant in Chorley found it particularly difficult having children in different schools.

“My daughter’s school have a holiday club but they won’t take my son because he goes to a different school” – male, Chorley, two children under 14 years old

In Pendle, one participant described a problem that her friend had with finding childcare because English is not her first language.

“She wasn’t sure because of the language barrier she has, she doesn’t really understand...she was a bit dubious about sending her 8 month old daughter to the nursery” - female, Pendle, 3 year old child

## Information on childcare

### *Sources of information*

Participants were then asked how they got the information they wanted when they were looking to make a decision about what childcare to use.

In Pendle particularly, participants hadn't heard of or used the Family Information Service. Instead they used the Yellow Pages or recommendations from friends. This group also took advice from church groups and other parents at mother and toddler groups.

Other participants asked for advice at the library or local children's centre, or, as described in the previous section, followed recommendations from other childminders.

The internet is a popular source of information. Participants used the internet to search directly for nurseries and childminders and to access OFSTED reports for facilities that they were interested in. In Lancaster, participants mentioned Mumsnet, Baby Maze and daynurseries.co.uk as specific sites that they had found useful. Lancaster participants also mentioned a local childminders network that they could access.

While some participants had 'shopped around' to find the best option in their area, others had just gone to their local nursery.

Some participants that hadn't used formal childcare yet said they weren't sure where to start to get information about childcare.

“If I had to start now, I actually wouldn't know where to start, where to get the information from. I would probably go to Yellow Pages but....other than that...I wouldn't know where to go or what to look for” – female, Pendle, 1 year old child

### *Issues with finding information*

In the experience of participants the information that they wanted on childcare was not always easy to find.

In Chorley, participants felt that comparing prices for different childcare options was very difficult because of the different ways providers set out their prices with some including things that others charge extra for. This makes it hard to compare providers like for like.

“It’s a nightmare...unless you are good at maths” – female, Chorley, 4 children under 17 years old

Several groups mentioned that they found OFSTED reports useful in making a decision about childcare but, while obtaining reports for nurseries was fairly straightforward, getting a report for a childminder is difficult as you need to have the childminder's code first.

“You have to do a lot yourself to piece it all together” – female, Preston, 3 year old child

In Preston, one participant said she it had taken a lot of effort to find information on help with funding childcare.

“I had to look for different ways to get someone to fund [nursery] while I did my education. So it was looking on the internet, constant phone calls. People would say ‘ring this number’ and then they were like ‘well ring this one’. It took a good few months for me to get anywhere” – female, Preston, two children under 9 years old

## Family Information Service

Having discussed general sources of information on childcare, participants were then asked specifically about the Family Information Service. Few participants were aware of the FIS. Those that had heard of the service had found out about it through leaflets in nurseries and children's centres, through the directgov website or through an internet search for childcare.

Although some participants had been recruited because they had contacted the FIS, most did not realise that this was the service they had contacted, they only knew that they had been in touch with the county council and had obtained a list of childcare.

### *Use of Family Information Service*

Those that had used the Family Information Service were asked about their experience of the service.

In Lancaster in particular, the phone service received from the FIS was praised.

"The help I got from the FIS on the phone was really good. I was being very specific and they really helped me narrow down what would be of use to me. Afterwards they sent a list – so she'd obviously done some more searching after she'd got off the phone with me" – female, Lancaster, two children under 9 years old

Several participants said that, while the list of childcare they received from the FIS was useful as a starting point, too much of the data was out of date or inaccurate. In particular, for childminders some found that they were given contact details for providers that were no longer operating.

Participants found that the level of detail given by each provider varied greatly. Several felt that there wasn't enough of the information that they wanted (eg what days they worked, whether places were available) for many entries so they either spent a lot of time phoning contacts which turned out to be inappropriate or they dismissed contacts that didn't give them enough information.

"You don't want to waste providers' time contacting them if they're not appropriate and you don't want to waste your own time having to ring round so many providers" – female, Lancaster, two children under 9 years old

"If they didn't have enough information on, I just didn't bother ringing. With some they put so little information on, it felt like they didn't want you to call" – male, Chorley, 6 week old baby

In Lancaster, one participant felt that some providers were just using a standard 'personal statement' and weren't taking the time to explain fully what they could provide.

“Some of the blurbs that were provided seemed to have been cut and pasted from each other. You'd read one and then a couple of items down you would read the same thing with a few details changed. That didn't fill me with confidence” – female, Lancaster, two children under 4 years old

Participants in several of the groups had found the FIS website confusing as it had linked them to the directgov website which then linked them back to FIS.

In Lancaster, where there is also a childminder's network which provides information, participants found that some childminders that were part of the network weren't on the lists provided by the FIS which led to questions about how complete the FIS list is.

### ***Requirements of the Family Information Service***

Having explained the role of the Family Information Service, all participants were then asked what they thought the FIS should provide and how.

Most participants, particularly working parents, felt that there is a need for the FIS as there is no other 'central hub' where you can get all the information on childcare required.

“At the moment it's the only place where you can get this information” female, Chorley, two children under 3 years old

“People don't have time to search round themselves...everything needs to be in one place...it's the way we live now” – female, Chorley, four children under 17 years old

Many participants felt that, given the experience of participants who had used the service, one of the most important requirements is to keep the information provided up to date. One participant suggested that all listed providers should have to check their details on a regular basis in order to stay on the list.

Participants also felt that providers should be required to give a minimum amount of information in order for the list to be useful.

“Childcare providers should have to include certain information if they want to feature on the list” – female, Chorley, two children under 3 years old

Participants had a long wish list of information that they wanted to find out from childcare providers. While some were things that they would want to find out from a shortlist of providers by going directly to the provider, other information was deemed important to know upfront so they could make a decision about which providers might be suitable for their needs. Participants felt this information should be available on the lists provided by the FIS.

This need-to-know information included:

- hourly and daily price and also the price for any extras (eg charge for late pickup, bank holiday charges, lunch). The FIS should preferably use a consistent pricing structure making it easy to compare different providers;
- opening hours;
- which days the provider is available and whether the provider is available during school holidays or term-time only;
- whether the provider currently has places available and what days and times those available places are;
- the age range of children that the provider can take;
- a personal statement from the provider;
- whether the provider can take children with additional needs; and
- what area the provider is in.

“Area is so important. The road name isn’t enough because then I have to look them up to see if they are in my area. I need to know from the start: are they in Scotforth, are they in Skerton because if they are there’s no point in me ringing them” – female, Lancaster, two children under 4 years old



The more in-depth information that participants wanted from shortlisted providers included:

- OFSTED reports;
- references from other parents;
- how much experience the provider has;
- whether the provider can do pick-ups from schools;
- whether there are discounts available;
- what the carer to children ratio is;
- what is provided by the facility and what parents need to provide eg nappies, lunch; and
- whether an outside play area is available.

As well as the basic information that participants felt should be available on providers, participants suggested other features that would be useful including:

- a calendar of availability that each provider could update to show when they have places available;
- an Amazon style review system for parents to fill in for providers they have used; and
- the ability to search not just within a radius but along a specific route.

"I wanted to be able to narrow my search to just childminders or nurseries along the A6 between Galgate and Preston, like you can do on RightMove when you're looking for a house. If I'd done that as a radius it would have included hundreds of options" – female, Lancaster, two children under 9 years old

As well as finding out information to decide on a regular childcare arrangement, participants were also looking for other information on childcare. Participants with school-age children in particular were interested in information on extra-curricular activities available in their area eg musical instrument tuition, scouts; holiday clubs and suggestions of family activities and what is available for families during the school holidays. Other participants wanted information on nannies, how to get help

funding childcare (eg Kiddivouchers) and local support groups eg mother and toddler groups.

“It’s not just about nurseries, it’s very much about activities to do with your children. I’d love to be able to just go to a central point” – female, Preston, 3 year old child

“Information on what activities are available for families would be useful. What’s on in museums for example” – Chorley, male, two children under 14 years old

While participants appreciated being able to phone the FIS, most groups wanted the ability to search the FIS website for providers themselves before phoning up for more information if required.

"You should be able to put in your details and then it brings back all the providers that match what you want" – female, Chorley, four children under 17 years old

"That's a good idea. You could put in your number of children, their ages, dates and times that you need care for so it just gives you ones that are relevant" – female, Chorley, two children under 4 years old

In Lancaster, participants mentioned that when you do an internet search for childcare in your district, the FIS website should feature prominently.

“You need to make sure that when you Google childcare in Lancaster it’s near the top of the list” – female, Lancaster, two children under 9 years old

One participant pointed out that, although the FIS number is free from a landline, many families are now choosing not to have a landline.

“I work in health and I know that a lot of people with limited funds are choosing to use a pay as you go mobile instead of a landline. 0800 numbers aren’t free on mobiles so that might be worth considering” – female, Lancaster, two children under 9 years old

### ***Promotion of the Family Information Service***

Participants were asked how the county council could best promote the FIS to parents. It was felt that it would be useful to do this as many participants were not aware of the service before the focus group but agreed that it was potentially a very useful service.

“You’ve got to know about the service first though haven’t you? It’s like a hidden service I’d say” – female, Preston, 3 year old child

Suggestions were to use flyers and posters at locations that parents commonly visit for example primary schools, libraries and GP surgeries and to advertise in local magazines eg Chorley Smile.

Several participants mentioned getting health visitors to let parents know about the service or using children's centres to cascade information.

Drop-in sessions at children's centres or groups such as mother and toddler groups would be a good way to reach parents.

Although some staff in libraries and children's centres are aware of the FIS, it was suggested that it would be useful to give these groups more information so they could properly promote the service.

In Lancaster, participants suggested advertising on local parenting websites eg Baby Maze.

## Campaign testing

The FIS and Communications Service want to promote the Free Early Years Entitlement (FEYE) to childcare for three and four year olds. All children are eligible for 15 hours a week of free childcare for 38 weeks of the year. The FIS want to promote this as not all parents are currently taking up this offer.

When this part of the discussion was introduced, participants in the Pendle and Preston groups both asked whether this had anything to do with FEYE for two year olds.

Most participants already knew about the scheme for three and four year olds and were surprised to hear that there were parents that didn't know about it. Given the high level of awareness, some participants suggested that sending letters or leaflets to the groups that aren't taking up the offer or using a very targeted campaign would be more useful than a general poster campaign. Others suggested putting something in the council tax leaflet, which everyone receives, or targeting appropriate community and voluntary organisations.

In Preston, participants suggested that families that struggle to pay for childcare may not take up the offer of FEYE as they would also struggle to pay for transport to get their child to a provider. They suggested that providing pick-ups for these groups may improve take-up.

The Communications Service has designed two styles of poster to promote FEYE – a traditional style with a photo (see appendix 1) and a series of four illustrated designs (see appendix 2).

The groups were shown each poster and asked for their opinion on what they liked or disliked about each one and how effective they felt it would be.

### Poster text

The wording on each poster was slightly different and so, as well as commenting on the overall look of each design, participants were also asked to give their views on the effectiveness of the wording.

Participants in Pendle felt that the focus of the poster should be the fact that the childcare places are free as that is what would interest them the most. They felt the word free should either be bigger or in a different colour to the rest of the text.

“...what people are interested in is the *free* childcare” – female, Pendle, 9 month old child

In Chorley and Lancaster, participants felt that it needed to be made clear that free places are available to all three and four year olds. They felt that some people would ignore the phrase 'free childcare places' assuming that there would be some eligibility criteria.

“With my tax bracket I’m usually not eligible for help so when I see free I assume it won’t include me” – female, Chorley, two children under 4 years old

In Lancaster they felt that it wasn't necessary to use the phrase 'in your area' as this would be assumed by people.

All groups felt that the offer available needed to be made clearer and that the important points were:

- that free childcare is available;
- the number of hours per week it is available;
- the number of weeks a year it is available; and
- that it is available to all three and four years olds.

“The poster should explicitly say '15 hours of free childcare for all 3-4 year olds for 38 weeks of the year’” - male, Chorley, two children under 14 years old

Using the term 'part-time' put some participants off. Although parents can use the free place to cover part of full-time childcare, participants in Chorley felt this wasn't clear from the posters.

“I need full-time childcare. For me, seeing part-time would make me think ‘that’s not for me’” – female, Chorley, four children under 17 years old

The phrase 'limited places available' confused participants. This is intended to mean that places at each provider are limited and parents may not be able to take up their free place with their first choice of provider. Some participants felt this implied that places were only available to certain people or that you had to ring early in order to get one of a limited number of places for free childcare.

Participants in Lancaster felt that suggesting you should ring or email the FIS to 'claim' your free place is slightly misleading as that is not the only way to get a free place.

"My son has a free place at the moment but I've never had to ring that number. I just went in to the nursery to ask" – female, Lancaster, two children under 8 years old

In Pendle participants pointed out that a link to a translated version of the poster would be useful for people who can't read English.

### Option 1 – photo (appendix 1)

Option 1 shows a central photo of a child in a childcare setting with text above and below the photo.

Participants liked this option as they felt it was simple, colourful and attracted your attention because of the 'cute child' used in the photo. However, in Preston they felt that, while it was ok, it wouldn't 'turn your head'.

Many participants mentioned that the message was clear because there was less to read than the other posters.

"It's not overloaded with information, just what you need" – female, Pendle, two children under 4 years old

Several groups felt that using a group of children in the photo rather than just one child would be better as it would show the interaction and social benefits of using childcare.

All groups felt that this was the best of the poster options shown.

## Option 2 – illustrated (appendix 2)

Option 2 is a series of four illustrated posters each with a different message to capture different possible reasons for using childcare.

Initially, black and white illustrations were used. Following feedback from the groups in Pendle and Preston that the black and white options were 'boring' and needed to be colourful in order to catch your attention, colour versions were also produced to be used in the Chorley and Lancaster groups. All versions are shown in appendix 2.

“It needs some nice bright colours, make it eye-catching” – male, Preston, two children under 8 years old

In Chorley and Lancaster, the colour versions were preferred to the black and white option although groups still preferred the photo version of the poster (option 1).

Most participants felt that all illustrated options took their attention away from the message of the posters which is the free childcare places.

“You’re adding more words to an already wordy poster” – female, Chorley, four children under 17 years old

“This doesn’t make sense because straight away you only see this [the illustration] you don’t see that [the message about free childcare places]” – female, Pendle, 1 year old child

### *Play time*

The first illustrated option promoted 'play time'. All groups felt that at first glance they would assume this was for a play group and probably wouldn't look any further at it.

“We’d walk past that thinking ‘oh it’s another play group’” – female, Pendle, 1 year old child

“I’d just walk straight past that” – female, Preston, two children under 9 years old

### ***Learn time***

The next option was for 'learn time'. While some participants liked this option as it promoted the benefits for the child in attending childcare, others felt that, at age three and four, the learning aspect shouldn't be pushed on children.

"This is promoting it differently, as a stepping stone to school" – male, Chorley, 6 week old baby

"If you do 'learn' it seems like forcing it on them. It should come naturally through play" – female, Pendle, four children under 13 years old

Some groups felt that the term 'learn time' didn't make sense and that the message should instead be 'learn through play'.

### ***My time/me time***

The third option was 'my time'. Following a suggestion in the Pendle group, this was changed to 'me time' for the colour version.

"Even though it's bad English it should say 'me time' not 'my time'...as a mother you can relate to it better" – female, Pendle, four children under 13 years old

This option strongly split the participants. Participants in Pendle felt this message could appeal to some groups.

"Even though there might be a lot of mums who are thinking about their children first, there are some that would think 'you know what I could do with the saucer and the cup [referring to the image]'...I don't think that's too bad" – female, Pendle, 1 year old boy



However, many participants felt that using childcare to give the parent some time rather than for the benefit of the child was the wrong message to promote.

“I don’t think that the council should be promoting it for that reason. I actually think that’s wrong” – female, Chorley, four children under 17 years old

“It’s important for the children’s social development...it’s not really about parents is it” – female, Pendle, two children under 4 years old

“It’s basically trying to say you’re trying to get rid of your kids” – female, Preston, two children under 9 years old

In Chorley, one participant felt that the poster could be seen as offensive to some groups.

"I'm struggling to pay for childcare in order to work full-time, sending out the message that free childcare is available so that parents can put their feet up and have a cup of tea is actually quite offensive" - female, Chorley, four children under 17 years old

### ***Need some time***

The message on the final illustrated option was 'need some time'. Some participants felt that this could work with parents who may be stressed out and need a break but, again, others felt that the focus should be on the benefit of childcare for the child rather than the parent.

“That might work for people that don’t work and just want some free time” – female, Chorley, two children under 4 years old

“You’d think that’s something for us to go to” – female, Pendle, 9 month old child

## Key findings and recommendations

### Key findings

The main findings from the focus groups are:

#### *Use of childcare*

- Many participants use formal childcare to enable them to work or attend training
- Some participants that don't work still use some formal childcare to improve their child's social development.
- Participants have issues with the high cost of their childcare arrangements and the hours that providers are available not fitting with their work arrangements.
- The main barriers to using childcare are a lack of suitable places available, high cost and lack of trust. In particular, participants who are first-time parents are wary of leaving their child in formal childcare until the child can talk and let them know if there are problems.

#### *Sources of information on childcare*

- Participants used the county council/FIS, Yellow Pages, recommendations from other providers, recommendations from friends and support groups and the internet to get their information on childcare.
- The main issues with the information on childcare available is the accuracy of the information and the amount of information provided upfront (eg online or through leaflets). Participants also struggled to find OFSTED reports for childminders and to easily compare prices of providers as each provider includes different things in their quoted price.

#### *Family Information Service*

- Participants, particularly those that work full-time, felt that the FIS provides a useful service which should be promoted as many hadn't previously heard of the service.
- Participants would like to see a searchable database of childcare providers on the FIS website as well as information on family activities, school holiday clubs and funding for childcare.
- Several participants that had used the FIS had found the information provided to be either insufficient in detail or inaccurate.

### ***Campaign testing***

- Several respondents questioned the use of promoting the free early years entitlement as they felt that this is already widely known about. Some felt that the groups that aren't currently taking up the offer could be targeted more directly, through leaflet drops to specific areas for example.
- All groups preferred the photo version of the poster (appendix 1) to any of the illustrated options (appendix 2).
- The illustrated versions split the groups with some liking versions that others felt sent the wrong message
- Groups felt that the clear message of the poster should be '15 hours of free childcare a week for all three and four years olds for 38 weeks of the year'
- Some parts of the text on the posters tested were thought to be confusing or misleading and should be altered eg needing to ring the FIS to claim your place, 'limited places available' and the use of the term 'part-time'.

### **Recommendations**

- Look at promoting the Family Information Service among parents as awareness among participants was low but the service available was felt to be very useful.
- The way that the FIS and directgov websites are linked needs fixing so parents are clear about where and how to get the information they need.
- The FIS should explore how it can ensure that it ranks highly in, as a minimum, internet searches for childcare in all districts ie "childcare Pendle", "childcare Lancaster".
- Although some staff in libraries and children's centres are aware of the FIS, it was suggested that it would be useful to give these groups more information so they could properly promote the service. Explore ways to improve promotion of the FIS to children's centre and libraries so they in turn promote the FIS to their customers.
- Set up a basic search facility of childcare providers on the FIS website.
- The accuracy of the data currently held on providers by the FIS needs improving to make it easier for parents to find childcare to meet their needs. A minimum level of information, that is kept up to date, was requested by parents. The burden of keeping provider information up to date should not be placed on the FIS. The FIS should promote to providers the benefits of providing accurate details ie reduced number of people contacting them unnecessarily. The FIS may wish to consider removing providers from the

database that don't provide a minimum level of detail or that don't update their details on a regular basis.

- In the future, the basic search facility could be enhanced with Amazon style reviews or the option to search a user-specified area on a map rather than just by radius from a postcode.
- For the free early years entitlement campaign, the Communications Service should consider using the photo version as this was the preferred version in all four focus groups. The text used should give the clear message that what is being promoted is 15 hours of free childcare a week for all three and four year olds for 38 weeks of the year.

## Appendix 1 – campaign option 1

# Free childcare places in your area



To claim your free part-time  
place for 3 and 4 year olds call:

**0800 195 0137**

[www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare) [lancsfls@lancashire.gov.uk](mailto:lancsfls@lancashire.gov.uk)

Lancashire Family Information Service. Providing information and services to children and families.  
\* Limited places available.

[www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare)



## Appendix 2 – campaign option 2

### Play time

# Free childcare places in your area



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place for 3 and 4 year olds call:

**0800 195 0137**

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\* Limited places available.

[www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare)



# Free childcare places in your area.



Free part-time places for 3 and 4 year olds  
for 38 weeks of the year.\*

0800 195 0137

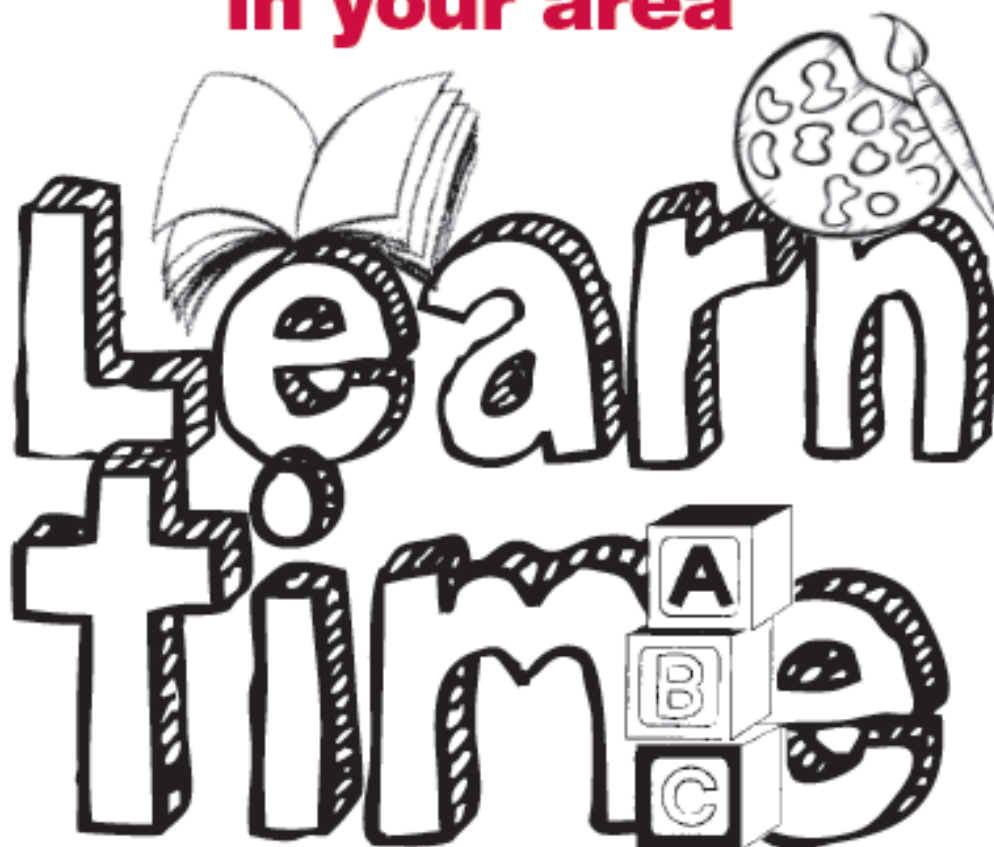
\* Limited places available.

[www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare)



## Learn time

# Free childcare places in your area



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## My time/me time

# Free childcare places in your area



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## Free childcare places in your area

for 3 and 4 year olds.\*

0800 195 0137

\* Limited places available.  
For 38 weeks of the year.

[www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare)



## Need some time

# Free childcare places in your area



To claim your free part-time  
place for 3 and 4 year olds call:

**0800 195 0137**

[www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare) [lancsfls@lancashire.gov.uk](mailto:lancsfls@lancashire.gov.uk)

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