How well do you know your community? Has your community changed and grown? Does your service need to follow suit? Are you thinking about establishing a new service?

Why do you need to do a community needs analysis?

Whether you operate an existing children’s service or intend opening a new service, the success of your business will depend on your ability to cater to the needs of families in your local area. To understand what those needs are, you will need to conduct a community needs analysis. The purpose of a community needs analysis is to gather information that will help you understand matters such as:

- Changes to the demographics of the local area
- Parent needs and preferences in relation to services for their children
- Gaps in meeting the government priority for children in the year before school to access 15 hours of preschool
- The feasibility of starting up a new service and what type of service this should be
- Preferences and needs of priority families including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

To make the most of any analysis that you undertake it is important to start with a mindset of being open to new ideas and to making changes to your service. Such a mindset will allow you to make the most of the data you collect and develop creative ways of responding to the findings. This can help you to find ways of offering something different to other centres in your area.

This factsheet examines the steps involved in carrying out a useful community needs analysis. These steps include the following:

1. Define the scope of your analysis
2. Collect the information and data
3. Determine the findings
4. Set goals and determine an action plan

Define the scope of your analysis

Firstly, you must clearly identify the issue you want to analyse and the questions you want answered. For instance, if you are an existing service and you want to maintain high utilisation into the future, you may want answers to the following questions:

- How many families are there with children in the target age group currently living in the local area and how is this predicted to change in the future?
- How can our service continue to meet the care and education needs of local families with children under school age in the future?

Well defined questions will help you to decide from where to source relevant information and determine the geographical area from which to draw data.

Collect the information and data

The sources of information and data that you access will be dependent on your time, funds and resources. However, if you are looking to make a major investment of funds (for instance to build a new child care centre), it may be worthwhile recruiting someone to assist with the data collection and needs analysis. This assistance may help you to decide on the best way forward for your new business and save you money in the long term.

Internet search

The best way to begin your needs analysis is to gather information that has already been researched. The easiest place to find this information is on the internet. Internet searches can help you to find valuable statistical and trend data about your local area. For instance you may find existing reports compiled by local councils that contain much of the information you are seeking. The websites below are a good starting point for your search.

<table>
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<th>Website</th>
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| **Department of Education and Communities**
[dec.nsw.gov.au/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care](dec.nsw.gov.au/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care) | This website provides information on education and care services for children from birth to school age. The website also provides some funding information and links to resources to support working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families |
| **Australian Bureau of Statistics**
[abs.gov.au](abs.gov.au) | Demographic information: • Population by age group • Average income • Employment statistics • Types of employment • Population that speak languages other than English at home |
| **My Child**
[mychild.gov.au](mychild.gov.au) | Information about existing services: • Location of services including long day care, preschools, family day care, outside school hours • Age groups of children the service caters for • Fees, hours of operation, vacancies |
| **Preschools NSW**
[preschoolsnsw.org.au](preschoolsnsw.org.au) | Information on existing preschools: • Location of preschools • Hours of operation • Fees |
| **Australian Early Development Census**
[aedc.gov.au](aedc.gov.au) | Information about the learning and development needs of children in communities around Australia. It can assist with providing targeted support to children and families. |
They can be distributed using a variety of methods such as the Survey the public links with institutions carrying out research projects that can beneficial for both organisations. You may also be able to make shared use of facilities. These sorts of arrangements can be a variety of people. For example, there may be ways of working and benefits can be gained from seeking to make contact with area of interest. However, developing relationships is important. Keep in mind that local officials will be speaking from their own mind are:

- What will be the incentive for parents to attend?
- Where and when will you hold the group?
- Where will you find enough suitable participants to make the group worthwhile?

Depending on time, funds and interest you may wish to hold a number of groups. Remember that the information gathered will be the perceptions of the group and not necessarily fact. You will need to compare the information with other data that you have collected.

### 3 Determine the findings

When you have gathered all the information, you will need to sort this information to determine the key findings. Key findings can be separated into categories depending on the original scope of your analysis. Categories could include the following:

- Strengths in current operations
- Opportunities for the future
- Challenges in meeting community demand and expectations
- Gaps in services in the local area

### 4 Set goals and determine an action plan

From the analysis of your findings you will be able to identify specific needs and issues that you want to address. Using this information you can prioritise your goals, determine a plan of action and formulate the best business model to move forward. See the factsheet Building a Business Model for guidance on how to create an effective business model for your service.

**References**