Providing Access to Childcare and Employment (PACE)

Impact report (2016-2020)

Prepared by Artevelde University of Applied Sciences

An Raes, Wendy Eerdekens, Jan Naert

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Content

Introduction

PACE was part of the **Interreg 2 Seas 2014-2020 programme**. This is a European Territorial Cooperation Programme covering England, France, the Netherlands and Flanders (see Figure 1). The programme's objective is providing innovative answers to cross-border challenges in the 2 Seas area. The programme is part-financed by the European Regional Development Fund and has a total of €241m ERDF to co-finance projects in the 2014 - 2020 period.[1]
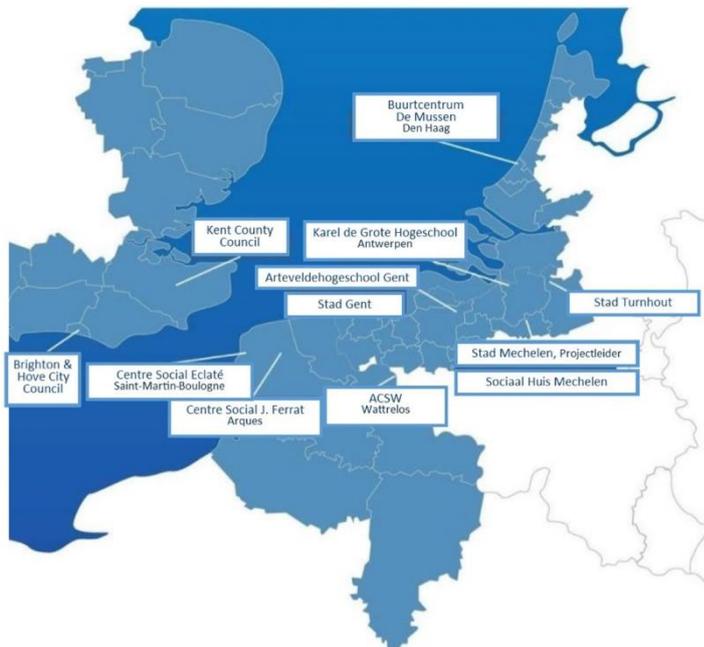
Figure 1. The PACE partnership in Flanders, France, the Netherlands and England (UK) – the INTERREG 2seas region is marked in light blue.

PACE was a **social innovation** project focused on installing a new approach in childcare and employment. In social innovation projects, an international partnership pilots and tests new approaches. These approaches are innovative and can even be disruptive. If successful, they can be upscaled and disseminated further (see Figure 2).

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[1] Based on the information on the INTERREG 2Seas website, retrieved from
https://www.interreg2seas.eu/en/content/about-programme
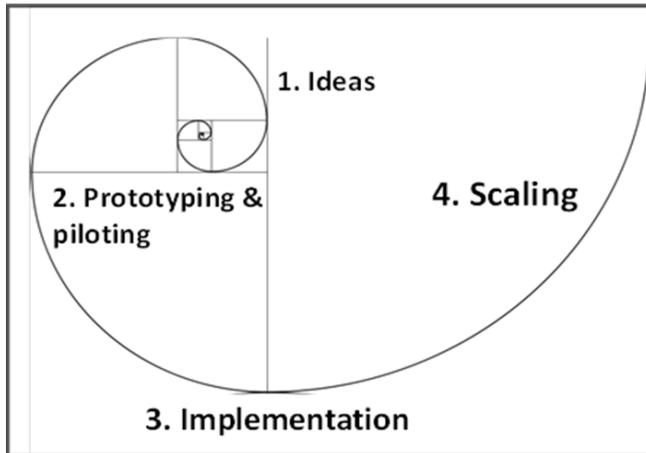
Young Foundation, Social innovation Exchange (Murray et al., 2010)

Figure 2. Spiral model of social innovation showing the four stages.

The PACE partnership consisted of 13 international project partners (see Figure 1). **Cross-border learning** is one of the cornerstones of INTERREG 2 Seas projects. Project partners share practices, expertise and experiences and come up with new answers to societal challenges.

Flanders (Belgium)	France	The Netherlands	England (UK)
City of Ghent	Centre Social Eclaté (Saint-Martin-Boulogne)	Buurtcentrum De Mussen (The Hague)	The Education People (Gravesham, Kent)
City of Mechelen (38 Volt) Sociaal Huis Mechelen	Association de centres sociaux (Wattrelos)		Kent County Council
City of Turnhout	Association Community (Arques)		Brighton & Hove City Council
Artevelde University of Applied Sciences			
Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences & Arts			

Acknowledgements

1 Back to the beginning: what is PACE all about?

The main purpose of the PACE project was to establish tested methods to **improve access to childcare** and to **facilitate access to employment** from within childcare.

In this impact report, we travel back to the original **programme theory**. This programme theory is the way in which the project's logic was made explicit at the very start: what is the project about, what activities will make a change for the target group and what will be the outcome of these activities? Important, the word 'theory' does not refer to academic theory in contrast to the frontline work. It refers to the logic or theory that is expressed in a certain policy and practice (Piessens, 2008). The project's application form, which was drafted in 2016, delineated how the PACE project would achieve its main purposes. It was our main source of inspiration to develop the programme theory.

We define this programme theory in line with the realist(ic) evaluation approach, developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997). In this approach, you start from a programme theory that proclaims how people in policy and practice think a project will work. Then, you start testing this theory against reality through performing quantitative and qualitative research, preferably from a multi-stakeholder perspective. The results of this research will refine and adjust the programme theory and give insight in how a programme or a project works: in which contexts does it work, for whom and how.

> Realist(ic) evaluation looks for contextualised answers to the question whether and how a program works. it is well suited for evaluation and impact research in complex project environments.

In this impact report, we will test the programme theory against the reality of the PACE project in four steps.

1. First, we describe the childcare and employment context in the 2Seas region in detail, based on the available literature and legislation and interviews with project partners. Based on this information, we will refine and adjust the programme theory.
2. Second, we describe the quantitative results of the PACE project. During the project, all project partners have been collecting information from the families involved in the project. We will use this information to refine and adjust the programme theory.
3. Third, we will refine and adjust the programme theory according to the view of parents that were involved in the project. During PACE, interviews and focus groups with parents were performed. The results from these focus groups and interviews provide us with crucial information on how parents have experienced PACE: what made PACE work for them, how did it make a difference in their lives?
4. A fourth and final adjustment will be made based on the factors that have been identified by the researchers as crucial for the project, based on careful analysis of quantitative and qualitative research materials. The research identifies factors from the organisational perspective (i.e., what can organisations do to make a real change for families in access to childcare and employment?).

On the next page, we present the original PACE programme theory, based on the information in the application form. The programme theory is presented in a so-called C(context) – M(mechanisms) – O(outcomes) configuration (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

STEP 0: The original PACE programme theory

Context

- Formal and informal barriers to childcare; unequal access with families in poverty having lower access to (high quality) ECEC

- Childcare system is oriented towards regular attendance which is an additional barrier for families with no or unstable employment

- There is room for upskilling early years practicioners in parental involvement and working with vulnerable families

- Lack of collaboration and communication between childcare-employment- welfare systems

- Vulnerable families have limited understanding of the childcare and employment systems

Mechanisms

- Flexible and occasional childcare places will make childcare more accessible for families with a distance to childcare and employment

- Involving parents in childcare will make childcare more sustainable and can be a first step to volunteering

- Training early years practicioners will lead to increased parental involvement and sustainable childcare solutions for vulnerable families

- Volunteering in childcare can be a first step to employment

- Collaborative approach between welfare, employment and childcare will overcome barriers to employment

- Training and coaching parents on soft and labour market skills using a PDP within childcare will bring parents closer to employment

Outcomes

- Increased access to childcare for 550 families; sustainable childcare solution and parental involvement for 550 families; 50 childcare workers able to work on parental involvement or voluntary engagement

- Less distance to the labour market for 550 parents, with 110 being in sustainable employment

- Increased collaboration between childcare, employment and welfare services including 110 new collaborations with welfare services

- Adapted childcare policy: more flexible and occasional places, integrated approach

- Impact on child poverty in the 2seas region

Some clarification to the programme theory

The **context** factors describe the challenges in the 2Seas areas that make the programme worthwhile. These factors or elements are the answer to the question "why do we actually need this project?".

The **mechanisms** describe how the project foresees to make a change. As can be seen from the figure above, these mechanisms are concrete activities rather than the implicit (psychological) mechanisms that are responsible for a change. When refining or adjusting the theory through qualitative and quantitative research, it will be possible to also indicate which are the implicit mechanisms that make the project work.

The **outcomes** are the results that the project aims for. Again, these are very concrete and practical, and can be further refined once we have tested the theory against research data.

In line with other researchers (e.g. Lauwers & Piessens, 2013) we choose to define 'terms and conditions' for the programme theory. We outline what we see as important and even necessary conditions to make the programme theory work. Again, for the original programme theory, we derive these terms and conditions from the application form.

> **"Terms and conditions"**
>
> - **Families are mapped and contacted:**
>   *Parents will need to be found and convinced to start childcare and employment support*
> - **The integrated approach is supported by staff:**
>   *Early years practitioners get additional support from social workers or volunteers*
> - **The integrated approach is supported by the infrastructure:**
>   *Childcare and employment are physically linked, transport and physical barriers to employment support are removed as much as possible*

2 Context: Childcare and employment in the 2seas areas

This part of the report delineates the general context on childcare and employment in the 2seas area. We highlight the main characteristics of the childcare, employment and activation systems with a focus on accessibility. Next, we describe the context factors that are identified as crucial according to the PACE project partners. This part is concluded with a first update of the PACE programme theory.

2.1 A cross section of the childcare field[2]

An overview of the childcare schemes in the four countries (see Table 1) shows that the PACE quartet has two pairings in play: there are mainly similarities between Flanders and France on the one hand, and between the Netherlands and England on the other.

One of the reasons for the dichotomy is that childcare for children under the age of three developed faster in Flanders and France than in the Netherlands and England. At the end of the 1980s, 20% of children (0-3 years old) in Belgium and France received a subsidised place in childcare. In the Netherlands and England, this was only 2% at the time (Kamerman, 2007). Still today, full-time use of childcare is higher in Flanders and France. In the Netherlands, however, more families use part-time childcare (see Table 1).

Both Flanders and France work with a well-developed public provision in combination with subsidised private places. This allows subsidised early years providers to keep their provision to parents affordable. Most nurseries and childminders work with income-based fees: parents who earn less, pay less for childcare. Who earns more, generally pays more.

In addition, Flanders and France both have a system of childminding that provides a significant proportion of childcare places. Both countries also have a recognised and subsidised provision of flexible and occasional care. In Flanders, some nurseries and childminders offer occasional places in addition to a regular provision. A number of providers also offer evening and weekend care and others work entirely occasionally. In France, families can take their child to an occasional nursery called *halte-garderie* for up to three half-days a week, where they can go for regular or occasional childcare. *Halte-garderies* are usually aimed at families with no, or only one, working parent and are mainly there to give parents time for non-family tasks and at the same time give children the opportunity to get to know another environment beside the home one. In addition, there are *multi-accueils* that combine regular and occasional care. *Multi-accueils* determine how they keep both systems in balance, in cooperation with a committee which includes local residents. There are very few providers that work both occasionally and flexibly. Most *halte-garderies* in France, for example, offer occasional childcare but also have strict opening hours and waiting lists, which makes it more difficult to actually use them flexibly. Some are even closed for a period around lunchtime. We also see that the objectives of occasional childcare vary greatly: from getting to know a nursery at your own pace to emergency childcare for parents in crisis situations.

In England and the Netherlands, a strong "maternalistic ideology" prevailed for a long time, which discouraged employment among women (with young children) (Lewis, 1980). For a long time, the prevailing policy did not tend to intervene or support families in reconciling work and family life. In the Netherlands, policy changes encouraged part-time work from the 1980s onwards. Many mothers made use of this scheme. In combination with informal childcare, many families managed to combine family and work on their own. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that the number of childcare places in the Netherlands and England really began to increase (Bonoli, 2013). Most of the places in England and the Netherlands were set up by private companies. Parents have to apply for financial compensation themselves, through tax rebates (in both UK and the Netherlands) or through a system of funded free entitlement hours (in UK). In both countries, childcare is expensive. This is the

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[2] Text from the PACE-handbook by Raes, Piessens & Dietlinde, 2020 (Part 1, Chapter 4); with slight variations.

main reason why parents who are need of childcare do not use it. In Flanders and France, the main obstacle is a lack of places. Occasional and flexible childcare is not covered by the regulations in the Netherlands and England. The countries do not forbid to organise this type of childcare, but the guidelines and financing rules make it challenging: there are fixed childcare plans that can only be established per school term in England and the emphasis is on continuity.

Table 1. An overview of the childcare situation in the four PACE countries.

	Flanders	France	The Netherlands	England
Age at which all children are entitled to a free place	2.5 years old (preschool, part of the formal education system) (compulsory from the age of 5)	1067 years old (preschool, part of the formal education system) (compulsory from the age of 3)[3]	4 years old (preschool, part of the formal education system) (compulsory from the age of 5)	Term after the child turns three years old (childcare, 15 hours a week) (start compulsory primary education from the age of 5)
System for children aged 0-6 years	Separate system for children aged 0-3 years old, 3-6 years old Separate ministries and (pedagogical) guidelines. Professionals in childcare are less educated.	Separate system for children aged 0-3 years old, 3-6 years old Separate ministries and (pedagogical) guidelines. Professionals in childcare are equally highly educated.	Separate system for children aged 0-4 years old, 4 years old and thereafter. Separate ministries. Higher training requirements from pre-school education onwards, no pedagogical guidelines in childcare.	(semi-)integrated system – 1 ministry but different setting and different level of education The Department of Education funds local authorities for childcare provision, and sets curriculum and regulates childcare qualifications
% of children 0-3 years old attending childcare for at least a few hours per week (2017 figures) and average number of hours per week	52.9% (31.1 hours per week)	50.5% (31.1 hours per week)	61.6% (16.7 hours per week)	33.2% (16.5 hours per week)

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[3] Compulsory pre-school education from 3 years of age since September 2019

				For 2019: 41% of children aged 0-2 use formal childcare, and 89% of children aged 3 and 4. Average hours of childcare used per week for children aged zero to four, is 22 hours per week.
Average monthly price in PPP[4i]	258 (285 euro)	121-274 (133-301 euro)	511 (572 euro)	1090 (1067 pounds)
Regulated prices?	Yes	yes	no	no
Childcare places in families	Highly developed and regulated 30% of childcare 0-3 years old	Highly developed and regulated 57% of childcare 0-3 years old	Highly developed and regulated 18% of childcare 0-3 years old	Highly developed and regulated 18% of total number of formal childcare places (Ofsted, 2019)
Child/childcare worker ratio for 2 years old children in group care (**the family care ratio is at the bottom in italics**)	1/9 (if several childcare workers are present, otherwise 1/8; 1/14 during breaks) *1/8*	1/8 *1/4*	1/8 *1/4*	1/4 *1/3 (with max. 1 child under 1 year old)*
Private, self-financing places[5] **/public subsidisation**	Approximately 10% of the places are non-subsidised or	Mostly subsidised places.	Mostly private initiatives within a	Free funded sessions for children at start of term after they

[4] PPS = purchasing parity standards (PPS). PPS is a common currency unit used to compare prices in a way which is not distorted by price level differences between countries.

[5] Private, self-financed places do not receive public subsidies, but derive their income mainly from parental contributions. There are also private places that receive (part of) their subsidisation through subsidies. This private provision coexists with a public provision organised by a national, regional or local authority.

	receive only the basic subsidy		market-driven system	became two (if eligible) or three (universal). Mostly non-public initiatives in which (some) parents can make use of subsidised places. The non-public initiatives vary in nature, these can be charities, voluntary or private settings.
Type of subsidisation: supply (subsidising the places) or demand (subsidising the parents e.g. via tax benefits)	Supply side + demand side (recuperation via the tax application)	Supply side	Demand side (via parents)	Demand side (via parents)
Measures to increase access for vulnerable families	Children in high need[6] have priority. Children in poverty have priority and pay less[7].	Children in high need have priority. Children in poverty have priority and pay less.	Price reductions for families that meet a number of risk factors that predict a possible educational disadvantage (complex system)	Low-income families can receive 15 hours of free childcare per week for their two-year-olds if they apply for it themselves. The local authority can offer support to apply and take up the free places.

2.1.1 Childcare accessibility: a place in childcare for every child?

There have been European efforts to make childcare more available and accessible. More childcare places have been a major spearhead of the EU. An example are the 2002 Barcelona targets. The targets were to have formal childcare provision for at least 90% of the children above 3 years and 33% of the children between 0-3 years old. All countries involved in PACE meet these targets. Another example is the European Quality Framework. This framework that is used in childcare practice in various ways[8] puts accessibility forward as a key element of childcare quality.

In spite of attention from the European policy level, access to high-quality childcare remains socially stratified in Europe (e.g. Stahl, Schober & Spiess, 2017; Vandenbroeck, De Visscher, Van Nuffel & Ferla, 2008), but also in countries such as the USA (Barnett, Carolan & Johns, 2013) and Australia (Baxter and Hand, 2016). The main

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[6] Children in foster care, or children of whom the parents are temporarily unable to look after them.
[7] Early years facilities must either prioritise vulnerable families or reach out to them proactively. The nature of the obligation depends on the subsidies received.
[8] A Dutch example is the EQF quality scan: https://www.nji.nl/nl/Download-NJi/Publicatie-NJi/High-five-quality-scan.pdf

barriers to childcare differ between countries. In Belgium and France, availability is a major barrier. Families are confronted with a lack of places and with waiting lists. In the Netherlands and the UK, it is easier to find an available place in childcare, but most places are expensive (see Table 1). In addition, the formal childcare system is not adapted to the requirements of the current labour market. On the labour market, we see a shift towards more flexibility and non-standard work, accompanied by increased polarisation between precarious, low-paid and low-skilled jobs on the one hand and high-paying jobs demanding high-skilled workers on the other hand (European Commission, 2018). A large body of research has established that the implications of the mismatch between the organisation of employment and childcare are most apparent for low-income families. Parents with a low education level, living in challenging circumstances (e.g. immigration background, living in poverty) more often work non-standard hours, sometimes on irregular schedules compared to highly educated parents (e.g. Enchautegui 2013). In most cases, this situation is involuntary, because these parents have limited possibilities on the labour market (Chaudry et al., 2011; Danziger & Boots, 2008; Enchautegui, Johnson & Gelatt, 2015; Kimmel & Powell, 2006). This type of work, often referred to as "precarious" or "unstable" work, is difficult to reconcile with a childcare system that asks for long-term planning, fixed schedules and works with day-time opening hours.

In the summer of 2017, the PACE project partners performed 157 interviews with mothers and fathers experiencing a distance to childcare and employment.

What are the main barriers to childcare identified by these parents?

Childcare services	Parents' expectations
Long waiting lists	Lack of trust in others or professionals taking care of children
Difficult administrative procedures	Fear of being judged by staff
Low flexibility	Role of parents in society: parents (especially mothers) should take care of the children, certainly when they are 'at home'
Lack of occasional places High cost	

The interviews performed in 2017 revealed that access to childcare is a struggle for families living in vulnerable conditions (Piessens, Raes, & Van den Bosch, 2017). On the **side of the services**, parents are confronted with waiting lists. This is especially the case in Flanders and in France. Newcomers are often not acquainted with the childcare system, waiting lists and the childcare system. This lack of knowledge and information poses an additional barrier for these families. The pace of the childcare system is in disaccord with the pace of other systems. For instance, public employment services sometimes expect parents to start employment on short notice.

Even when childcare is available, parents report that it is difficult to find a setting that offers the opening hours and flexibility that they need.

> *"I cannot use the 15 hours in the holidays." (parent from Brighton & Hove, UK)*

Strict timeslots make it difficult for parents to return to work. For parents on non-standard working hours or changing schedules, childcare can be a major barrier.

> *"Having access to a daycare centre adapted to the working hours would help a lot. Employers also expect long work experience, they are quite competitive and the competition is tough." (parent from Wattrelos, France)*

> *"The hours are not adaptable (example, for catering jobs)." (parent from Arques, France)*

Another pertinent barrier is the cost of childcare. It is a barrier especially in the Netherlands and the UK but even in Belgium, where many settings offer income-related childcare, the monthly fee can be too expensive.

> *"I have never accessed other types of childcare like childminders apart from what my children are offered at the appropriate ages. I have always thought that childcare is an expensive venture which will amount to paying all you earn to sustain it, so I decided to stay a home and mind my children instead. But if I could change anything, I will offer full time (6 hours [per day]) to children from age 3 and 3 hours to children age 2." (Parent from Gravesham, Kent, UK)*

> *"For one child, I can pay. For two children, I must stop. I cannot pay". (parent from Gent, Belgium)*

Additional costs for materials, food, … enhance the cost and make it even more difficult.

> *"Lunch money [in the childcare setting] is very expensive so I have to pay on top." (parent from Brighton & Hove, UK)*

Other barriers are mobility barriers specifically in rural areas or regions with a poor public transport offer. In some areas covered by the PACE project, having an early year setting at 1,5 km was a problem for some families. If there is no car and no public transport, families with young children are forced to go on foot. 1,5 km is a lot if you have to travel that far with two or three small children.

Other obstacles were administrative barriers and lack of information of the system.

> *"Administration is complicated, especially when urgent childcare must be done". (parent from Arques, France)*

Parents also find it hard to estimate the impact of childcare on their income.

In addition to structural barriers, we see **barriers on the demand side** as well. We see that some parents are not confident about childcare, had bad experiences in the past or are not acquainted with the system.

> *"I do not have any confidence to others for confiding my children". (parent from Arques, France)*

> *"I do not have a good feeling with childcare centres, except at De Mussen, where I know the teachers personally, but I would never use a centre I am not familiar with". (parent from Den Haag, NL)*

Parents, especially mothers, are also confronted with cultural expectations on parenthood. A parent, and certainly a parent who is currently not working, is supposed to stay at home with the children.

> *"Nurseries propose an interview and demand a valuable reason when someone has no job". (parent from Arques, France)*

> *"Other people taking care of babies and elderly people is very strange and it cannot be done". (parent from Ghent, Belgium)*

2.1.2. Why flexibility is an issue

The childcare system focuses on regularity and predictability. This applies to group-based care in particular. Nurseries and other group settings often work with a pre-arranged childcare plan and fixed hours to bring and collect children, coupled with an obligation for parents to pay for a half or a full day even if they only need a few hours (Brady, 2017; Campbell-Barr, 2009). The financing system is also based on the idea of fixed sessions. Organisations must live up to occupancy rates. If a new family arrives, there is administration that needs to be taken care of. In Flanders, for example, this includes an online procedure for parents[9]. This makes it challenging for settings to choose for more flexibility towards parents. This especially effects parents with irregular or precarious lives. These are parents who are unemployed, have unpredictable working hours or work non-standard hours (Brady, 2016; Nowak, Gaude & Thomas, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2015). They use formal childcare less often and if they do, it is often expensive because they have to use and pay more hours than they actually need.

The level and type of flexibility that parents need varies along with the flexibility that they have in other areas of life.[10] The preference of families is to find some form of flexibility in each area of life. In the case of childcare, this flexibility might mean that it can be planned shortly in advance, that the schedules are adaptable and that families make varying use of childcare – sometimes more, sometimes less. Parents who work shifts may only need childcare in the morning on week one, for three full days on week two, and only on the weekend of week three. Few countries have a solution for this. In Sweden and Finland, parents who work shifts or do night work can count on 24-hour childcare. Their children can be dropped off at a nursery early in the morning, late at night or during the night. This form of childcare is certainly supportive for single parents or those with a limited informal network.

There is no entitlement to childcare outside standard opening hours in any of the PACE project countries, even though activation policies oblige many parents to work irregular hours. What parents can do is pay for an at home childcarer; only in exceptional cases businesses or hospitals organise their own childcare provision (during the day or at night).

Moreover, work is not the only area of life that necessitates flexible childcare. Other children's care needs may also be a reason, as became clear during the PACE project.

> *'I needed the flexibility to take my older child for medical appointments.'*
> *(Anissa, Gravesham, 2019)*

Flexibility can take many forms, partly depending on the policy rules. Table 2 shows how the regulations in the four PACE countries describe and give shape to flexibility. We compare these interpretations with the everyday reality in these countries.

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[9] The request of the "child code", for which you need an eID card preferably, see https://www.kindengezin.be/contact-en-help/vragen-over-mijn-kind-en-gezin/registreren-op-mijnkg/registreren-met-digitale-sleutel/default.jsp
[10] This part of the text is taken from the English translation of the PACE handbook on flexibility in childcare by An Raes, An Piessens & Dietlinde Willockx (Part 1 – Chapter 3, 3.4).

Table 2. Flexibility in childcare in the four countries involved in the PACE project.

	Flanders	France	The Netherlands	England
Do the regulations mention flexibility?	Yes, mentioned in legal texts.	Yes, though that term is not used. And only France mentions the opposite concept: *accueil regulier* (regular childcare).	Yes, mentioned in the Department of Education's statutory guidance for local authorities.	No, not mentioned in legal texts.
Forms of flexibility explicitly mentioned by the regulations	Childcare in a home setting: *Childcare at atypical hours* Childcare in a group setting: *Childcare at atypical hours, extended opening times, namely before 7am or after 6pm, at weekends or on public holidays.*	The regulations refer to *souplesse* (adaptability) rather than flexibility: *'Childcare provision shall be adaptable and able to meet occasional childcare need.*[11]	The regulations link flexibility to the needs of parents: *childcare at times which fit with the times that parents need in order to work or increase their hours of work.*[12] Flexibility is desirable for the free hours for two-, three- and four-year-olds. Within certain limits, local authorities may require this flexibility.[13]	The government website mentions the term only once.[14] It means *childcare on varying days*.
How childcare providers provide flexibility	Childcare outside normal opening hours and days.	Different forms: short-term childcare, emergency childcare, care	Parents can schedule childcare sessions flexibly.	Children not going to nursery on the same days every week.

[11] From a practical guide to childcare – a secondary text published by the government. Accessed at https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Accueil_de_la_petite_enfance.pdf

[12] '*Children are able to take up their full entitlement to a free place at times that best support their learning and development, and at times which fit with the needs of parents to enable them to work or increase their hours of work if they wish to do so*.' Department of Education, 2018: 15

[13] The flexibility requirement can be imposed by means of brokerage. The limits are as follows: a maximum of two sites for a child in a single day, no session to be longer than 10 hours, no minimum session length, not before 6.00 am or after 8.00 pm. The aim is to guarantee as much stability as possible for providers, while at the same time offering maximum flexibility to parents. Statutory guidelines for local authorities, accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-education-and-childcare--2

[14] The term is mentioned in a section on childcare quality requirements. The new requirements state that every child must have a personal mentor. This is an employee who monitors the child closely. The requirements contain the following phrase: '*children who go to childcare on varying days (flexible childcare)*' – accessed at https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/kinderopvang/kwaliteitseisen-kinderopvang-en-peuterspeelzalen

	Families with a flexible childcare plan if the early years provider agrees.	on varying days/times or at atypical times. In addition, there is flexibility in regular childcare: parents can reserve 100 hours of childcare without determining in advance when they will use it.	Parents can spread the funded hours over days and weeks.	The interpretation of flexibility is limited, as the quality requirements are predicated on continuity and regularity. There is a fixed-face criterion for children under one year of age.[15]
Can all parents make use of the flexibility?	Parents depend on the local provision of flexible childcare.	Parents depend on the local provision of flexible childcare.	Parents depend on the local provision. Some authorities require wider provision of flexible childcare.	Very limited. Flexible childcare is only possible at the highest prices.

Occasional childcare

Adapted or varying opening hours are not the solution for all childcare needs. Parents are sometimes confronted with unexpected situations that require a different form of flexibility, in particular a day or longer period of childcare that could not have been foreseen.

> *'I needed to attend an interview and had no childcare.' (Susanna, Gravesham, 2019)*

Most countries call this type of childcare occasional childcare. Like flexible childcare, occasional childcare is interpreted differently in the regulations and day-to-day reality of childcare in the four PACE countries.

France sees occasional childcare as any form of incidental childcare. Such care is temporary and the need for it is a one-off occurrence and only known shortly in advance. The regulations contrast this type of childcare with regular childcare, where there is a recurring need for childcare that is known about well in advance. This means that France also sees childcare on varying days as regular childcare, if those days are known well in advance.[16]

In Flanders, the regulations include a specific interpretation of occasional childcare. This type of care lasts for a maximum of six months and is reserved for families in specific situations.

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[15] '*Children under the age of one year must have at least two permanent employees who supervise them at the childcare facility. This is called the fixed-face criterion. A permanent employee knows how a child is developing, what causes it stress and what it needs*.' – accessed at https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/kinderopvang/kwaliteitseisen-kinderopvang-en-peuterspeelzalen

[16] Under the August 2000 decree (Decree 2000-762 of 1 August 2000) of the Public Health Code.

- The parent is not working and starts training.
- The parent is not working but suddenly finds work.
- The parent attends a job interview.
- The family faces an acute crisis.
- The family needs a break from family or other responsibilities.
- The child needs childcare outside the family for social and/or pedagogical reasons.

In the Netherlands and England, the regulations do not mention occasional childcare. This type of care is not prohibited, but the funding system makes it extremely difficult to provide occasional childcare. The pedagogical guidelines also make occasional childcare provision difficult because they place emphasis on continuity and supporting children's development and learning.

Core beliefs on childcare flexibility

One of the elements that make it difficult to introduce more flexibility in the childcare system is that the system is also part of the 'childcare mindset'. As described by Raes, Piessens and Willockx (2020), there seems to be a mix-up of pedagogical stability, continuity and stability in the system. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that children need stability in activities, in the group and in caretakers. This type of stability, however, is not the same as stability in the planning and in the system. A focus on stability in that area paradoxically makes childcare less stable and less accessible for families who cannot live up to the expectations of this system. These are families with unpredictable work schedules or unpredictable lives in general. They are the group that end up with a patchwork of childcare solutions, with children being moved from nursery to a grandparent to a friend's home (e.g. Enchautegui et al., 2015; Scott, London & Hurst, 2006).

Still, we see that childcare practitioners have concerns about flexible and occasional childcare. It is important to take these concerns seriously because they will impact on the leeway that settings experience in trying to make changes. One main concern is, as previously mentioned, the concern about stability for children. 'Is it good for children?' is the main question here. Other main concerns relate to practical, organisational and financial aspects (Rönka et al., 2017; Statham & Mooney, 2003). Even in countries where flexible childcare is 'normal', early years practitioners have these concerns (e.g. Peltoperä et al., 2018).

In 2018, researchers from Artevelde and Karel de Grote University Applied Sciences (and Arts) explored Flemish early years practitioners' beliefs on occasional and flexible childcare.

The participants

A paper and pencil questionnaire were completed by 113 practitioners (five men). Their age varied between 19 and 65 years. 38.9% were nursery workers, 39.45% worked as setting managers and 9.7% as pedagogical coach. The others worked as trainee or as childminder. Most participants worked in a setting receiving funding for income related childcare[1].

More or less half of the participants (48.7%) had no experience with occasional or flexible childcare. We had participants from small settings, with less than 19 childcare places (18.4%), middle-sized settings with 19-49 places (45.6%) and big settings with 50 places or more (35.9%).

The questionnaire

The questionnaire started with two concrete case descriptions of occasional childcare, followed by ten statements on occasional and flexible childcare. The statements explored participants' vision on occasional and flexible childcare, and sought their beliefs on the practical, financial and pedagogical aspects of this type of childcare.

The results

The majority of participants beliefs that more settings should offer flexible and occasional childcare. At the same time, they see a lot of elements that make this difficult. The **childcare regulations** are the biggest threshold, with three quarters of participants stating that these make it difficult to organise. There was less agreement on financial and practical aspects. Sixty percent of the respondents agrees that occasional childcare is good for parents, but less so for children. At the same time, almost 60% agrees with the statement that this type of childcare might be good for the children as well if you take the long term in account. Half of the respondents also states that they would have difficulties to work in a setting offering occasional childcare. The majority (61%) agrees that no matter what, there should be an intake and settling in before childcare starts.

2.1.3 Conclusions

What is good for children, depends on the perspective you take. Are you looking at the child's well-being at a specific moment in time? For instance, when a child has difficulties adapting to childcare. Or are you looking at the long term? The start in childcare might be challenging, but the family might thrive on the long term because parents has found employment or time to cope with personal problems.

The survey also included questions on what participants saw as the biggest advantages and challenges of occasional and flexible childcare. Here we see the same pattern appearing: it is mostly good for parents, and for society. It is less good for children and it is challenging for settings and practitioners. Participants were also asked whether they would be willing to work in an occasional childcare setting. Interestingly, those who answered 'yes' focused more on the long-term reasons and on fundamental reasons, like the benefits for the family as a whole. The respondents who answered negatively focused more on practical and organisational reasons. We could say that the first group focused mainly on the *why* whereas the second focused more on the *how* and *what* of occasional and flexible childcare.

No black or white, but many shades of flexibility in childcare

Despite efforts on the policy level and of many individual settings and professionals, inequality in accessibility remains a fact also in the 2Seas area. For parents living in vulnerable circumstances, more flexibility is welcome to accommodate their childcare needs. We see that:

- Childcare regulations and funding systems make it difficult for settings to provide flexibility.
- Pedagogical requirements can increase this complexity by putting the emphasis on continuity and stability in care and translating this into the organisation of care (e.g. fixed days, predictable schedules).
- Early years practitioners have concerns on whether flexible and occasional childcare are good for children.
- There is not one type of flexibility that can act as a "passe-partout" for all families. Families look for different kinds and shades of flexibility depending on the flexibility they have, or don't have, in other life domains.
- Several Matthew effects enlarge the impact of an inflexible childcare system for families living in vulnerable circumstances. These are the families in precarious work, with unpredictable schedules, less possibilities to plan far ahead, lack of financial means to pay for 'special types' of childcare such as nannies and sometimes less need for a full childcare schedule but with need for reliable care solutions for specific appointments or for stressful moments.

2.2 Employment and active labour market policy & practice in the 2Seas area

In this part, we give an overview of the employment situation in the 2Seas area. The text below is an updated version of the employment context described in the gap analysis by Piessens, Raes and Van den Bosch that was published in 2017 as part of the PACE project.

2.2.1 Overall social situation

Since the economic crisis in 2008, most European countries have seen a moderate economic recovery. Employment rates are rising overall. Still, labour market recovery remains incomplete, unemployment is still high(er) for certain vulnerable groups and a portion of structural long-term unemployment remains. This situation carries the risk of exacerbating social exclusion, particularly for vulnerable people. Also, significant differences among Member States remain. The risk of poverty has even increased in some Member States, amongst them PACE partners the Netherlands and the UK (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Chart out of Employment and Social Developments in Europe. Annual Review (European Commission, 2019, p. 49)

2.2.2 Employment: A right or a responsibility? [17]

Job creation and tackling (long-term) unemployment are crucial targets for the European Union and its member states. Paid employment is increasingly valued as the highway towards full participation in society and access to the labour market is seen as a crucial way to create a fair and well-functioning society. In some policy documents, employment is described or presented as a 'right'. For instance, the active inclusion policy aims towards full participation of all citizens, notably the most disadvantaged and proposes employment as a way out of poverty, tackling social exclusion etc. So, employment is considered as a right that we should try

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[17] Based on the introduction of the D2.2.6 PACE milestone report by An Raes (2018)

to achieve for all, by tackling structural barriers and providing support to those who need it. The European Pillar of *Social Rights*, a set of 20 key principles and rights to support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems, showcases the same mindset: access to the labour market and making sure everyone can work is presented as a central element. The slogan behind the European Pillar that was presented in 2017, is 'building a more inclusive and fairer European Union'. It is also stated that the Pillar is 'about delivering new and more effective rights for citizens' (European Commission, 2017). It is noteworthy that the labour market is now presented as the ultimate solution for creating a socially fair and inclusive society, while it is at the same time one of the causes and corollaries of many social problems. Using employment to make society more inclusive and fair is not a workable strategy unless several preconditions have been fulfilled, such as a job market with jobs for everyone, a social security system based on solidarity so people do not prefer benefits (too little money but certain of an income) over paid work (more money but uncertain) and those who are unable to work are not pushed into poverty, and a labour market that is adapted to people's real lives (e.g. providing childcare or giving flexibility instead of only asking).

Several if not all Member States have shown great enthusiasm for a policy that is based on the idea that everyone should work. The challenge to give vulnerable groups with weak labour market attachment the opportunity to access sustainable employment is common to all countries involved in this project, although the (extent of these) barriers faced may differ across region, as do policy options. But in all countries the importance of activation policies is understood, in line with EU policy.

> *Activation should seek to support and incentivize job search and job finding; as well as productive participation in society and self-sufficiency by reducing dependency on public support. (OECD, 2013, p.5)*

Activation policy can take different forms: in pursuit of the same goals, policy makers can draw on a range of tools including (conditional) income support, financial incentives and active labour market programmes (Bonoli, 2013).

However, instead of considering (sustainable) paid work as a right that is not easily accessible for everyone, some member states seem to consider being in paid work as a matter of personal choice and responsibility. Being in employment then becomes a duty rather than a right. Following this line of reasoning, some governments put less emphasis on supporting people towards work and more on sanctioning those who do not (want to?) work. Maybe this is an unintended consequence of a broader (European) policy and communication on work as the way out of poverty. Still, the premise that labour market participation is economically and socially advantageous for the individual and for society does not imply that therefore everyone who does not participate is unwilling to contribute or should be pushed and even sanctioned in order to do so. However, this way of reasoning can be understood in a context of neoliberalist thinking and policy that emphasises responsibility and celebrates individual freedom and choice, in contrast to an approach that considers structural constraints and barriers within the system (note: the European Commission does recognise structural constraints). Unfortunately, different Member States seem to be holding a more and more negative view of those who are unemployed or inactive and relying on social protection systems (benefits).

In some Members State policies, such as in the UK, we see a clear push towards paid work and welfare conditionality with welfare reforms being aimed at 'getting people off benefits and into work' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010). The vision behind this welfare conditionality is that welfare systems should function not as much as a protection for individuals against the risks of for instance illness, unemployment… but rather as a 'lever for changing behaviour'. In other words, the welfare states have become less concerned with human needs and suffering and more with keeping society safe and orderly (Rodger, 2008). This switch in welfare policy is nourished by the conviction that the provision of welfare and benefits without (enough) conditionality will lead to unwanted behavioural effects, creating a group of people unable or unwilling to work, or becoming 'choosy' about jobs because they have a well-paid alternative for working (e.g. Mead, 1986; Perkins, 2016). Another factor that might be behind the push towards paid work is the fact that our social welfare system is

under pressure. The population is ageing rapidly and this means that there will be less contribution to the social welfare system in the future. At the same time, the expenditure on social protection in Europe is increasing rather than decreasing (European Commission, 2018). With emergent changes in the job market, caused by digitalisation and automatisation, it is difficult to predict how the contributions to social welfare systems will evolve in the upcoming years. Therefore, it seems 'logical' that governments and societies encourage people as much as possible to be financially independent, not relying on benefits or social welfare. Europe's Strategic Plan on Employment, social affairs and inclusion for 2016-2020 is honest in stating that "*Making sure Europeans can fully participate in society and equipping them for modern working life is a key social concern, but it is also crucial for our productivity and ability to compete globally.*" (p. 7). In other words, Europe needs its citizens to work to maintain a competitive market economy.

Conditioning welfare is not new. In 1834 already, queen Elisabeth reformed the Poor Law in an attempt to discourage reliance on welfare support. Watts and Fitzpatrick (2018) describe welfare conditionality in a historical context and state that an ongoing wave of more and less conditionality and responsibilising has been going on for centuries (see also Brodkin and Larsen, 2013). If we only take the recent history into account, however, we do see a clear trend towards more intensified welfare conditionality, with more severe sanctions for those who fail to meet the requirements.

A specific activation scheme, called Universal Credit, was introduced in the UK during the PACE project. The idea of this scheme is that people receive all their benefits at once. They get a lump sum once a month, for all benefits they are entitled to. The sum replaces six previous payments: Income Based Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit (Wright et al., 2018). The scheme is combined with a Benefit Cap. This is a limit to the total amount of benefits that people of working-age can receive. If someone is claiming Universal Credit and is not earning at least the amount one would get for 16 hours a week at national minimum wage, the total benefit of that person will be limited. At the introduction of the scheme in 2017, it was believed that this should motivate people into work because most families will clearly be better off in work than in unemployment. However, research performed after the introduction of this scheme shows that the system brings more harm than good (Wright et al., 2018). One of the reasons is that people, who are mostly motivated to go (back) into work, do not get the support they need to find employment. They are left to 'do it yourself' online job searching and hover in and out of work (Stewart & Wright, 2018; Wright et al., 2018). Researchers have concluded that welfare conditionality systems such as the Universal Credit system in the UK can have *disproportionate effects*, as Watts and Fitzpatrick call it, for several groups within the general population, such as ethnic minorities (Dwyer, 2009; de Vries, Reeves, & Geiger, 2017; Schram et al., 2009), people with mental health problems or disabilities, low qualifications, and lone parents (e.g. Fording et al., 2013; Johnson & Blenkinsopp, 2018; McNeill et al., 2017). In the UK, conditionality and sanctions are now even applied to people who are already in paid work but *work too few hours* or *earn too little*. If people fail to meet up to the standards (e.g. work a minimum of 16 hours a week at minimum wage) they risk losing their in-work benefits (Dwyer and Wright, 2014).

As stated by Watts and Fitzpatrick (2018), there is also a broader range of welfare domains in which conditionality is being applied, such as the domain of social housing, homelessness and child protection and welfare. For instance, in Flanders (BE), one of the conditions to rent social housing is that the tenants either speak Dutch or show willingness to learn the language. In 2014, the largest political party in Flanders stated that this is not sufficient, and that people would have to demonstrate that they actually speak the language. Another tendency in the domain of social housing is to move from open-ended contracts to shorter fixed-term contracts, which we see in both the UK and continental Europe. In the discussions surrounding or preceding these policy changes, politicians often refer to the "rights and responsibilities" story, which is built on the (neoliberalistic) premise, already mentioned above, that people have the opportunity to make rational choices and that those who do not, are unwilling or unknowing and should be pushed into the right direction.

Is everybody to be activated? Do we expect everybody to work or do we make exceptions?

Does being a carer for a small child, say under 3-4 years of age, exempt a person from having to be available for work, if this parent is entitled to some kind of income support? We see that there are marked differences between countries in norms and traditions concerning the role of mothers, and thus in the treatment of young unemployed mothers as well.

In France and Belgium no exceptions are made: every person that applies for an unemployment benefit or social assistance support has to be willing to work (full-time availability is demanded), even when there is a small infant to be cared for. In Belgium it is even made explicit that the care for children can never be an argument for not having to accept an employment, although the broader context, the complexity of one's situation can be considered.

In the Netherlands, although a lot has changed since the Participatiewet[18], the view still remains that mothers stay home for the care of small children or work part-time. In that respect, it belongs to the authority of the municipality to grant exemption from the availability condition to work.

In the UK, there have been significant changes throughout the PACE project. At the start of the project in 2016, lead carers did not have to be available for work when caring for children until the youngest child was 5 years old. This has changed. Now, lead carers have to take active steps to work when their youngest child is two: "*You will be expected to take active steps to prepare for work. This will involve having regular work-focused interviews with your work coach, agreeing a programme of activities tailored to your individual circumstances which might include some training and work preparation activities (for example, writing your CV).*" (DWP, 20202) When the child is three or four, parents are expected to work at least 16 hours a week at minimum wage or spend 16 hours a week looking for work.

Is being in work good enough?

Is finding a temporary job with a duration of one week enough, enough to pull a vulnerable person out of poverty ? The literature shows that it is not the case. To give people a real perspective and to avert the risk of a setback and further marginalisation, sustainable employment is an important condition.

What do we mean by sustainable employment? Is it primarily a matter of long-term employment? Term is an important aspect but it is not the only one. The right to qualitative employment is an important aspect as well. It is not just about having a job but also for a qualitative employment that involves a better quality of life for the person and his family (e.g. McCord & Slater, 2015). Sannen, Castermans, Van Regenmortel and Lamberts (2011) have done extensive research into sustainable employment and sustainable activation of people living in poverty. According to them, employment is sustainable if it answers to four elements.

- **Sustainability in time**: Getting work is not enough. Keeping the job is the intention. A job that provides perspective, security in the long haul, but also a job that meets a number criterion, making vulnerable people endure the work.

- **An improvement in the living situation**: this involves both a financial component (ensuring that work has a stable financial basis) as an organisational component (e.g. a viable work-family balance) but also a social component (e.g. a good working environment) and a psychological component (e.g. through the employment, the person feels better). This is related to the following aspect.

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[18] https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/participatiewet

- **Quality of work**: Sustainable employment aims at a quality job that ensures a higher quality of life. A high-quality job shows quality in working conditions, work circumstances, work content and relationships at work.
- **Work on empowerment and employability**: by enhancing the strength and employability of people in poverty, they become stronger in the labour market (Sannen et al., 2011)

So, work in itself is not enough. Employment should be sustainable, especially when people living in vulnerable conditions are concerned. But what is the reality of the job market? What is the demand and what are the possibilities?

Can everyone work?[19]

There is no clear-cut answer to the question whether everyone can work. The labour market is still recovering from the economic crisis in 2008, but as indicated by the Annual Review on Employment and Social Developments in Europe (European Commission, 2019) the economic recovery is ongoing and employment rates are rising. Overall fewer people in Europe are currently (2019) more at risk of poverty and social exclusion than in 2017. On the other hand, income inequality is still rising in some Member States. Also, the number of people that get out of poverty is smaller than what could be expected based on the 2020 targets (European Commission, 2018).

We also see that the **type of work is changing**: more tasks are being automated, which leads to job loss but also to the creation of new kinds of jobs, mostly flexible and non-standard jobs. These jobs are less accessible for low educated people. In addition, we see a **trend towards less full-time open-ended contracts** and less full-time permanent employees. Unfortunately, less income security and more income volatility are often associated with this type of jobs (European Commission, 2018). Preparing people for these new types of jobs asks for new forms of education and skills trainings. At this point, we suspect that while some people (mostly highly educated and higher income) have no problems with changing jobs and contracts, for other people this new type of flexibility often implies precarious work. Another challenge is that **national social insurance systems have not been adapted to the new reality of flexible contracts** and a less clear-cut difference between employment and self-employment. As stated in the European Commission's report on p. 17: "This [i.e. existing] model provides social insurance primarily for employees who work full-time in an open-ended contract with a single employer. These insurance systems pool the risks of large groups of workers, some of whom receive income support when they lose earnings because of involuntary unemployment, maternity, sickness or disability. Workers and employers together make a major contribution to the financing of social protection. In effect, part of the labour cost is earmarked for this purpose." Ironically, people with insecure job contracts are also the ones who are insecure when it comes to social security. In some Member States, for instance, self-employed people are excluded from social security. We might assume that this pushes some people towards the decision to claim benefits, even when they are actually too little as an income, instead of being unsure of an income from paid work (mentioned already above). Of course, the solution then is not to decrease the benefits even further, but to make work more attractive by providing more job and income security. As a report of the OECD (2018) indicates, the situation of unequal social protection might also lead to a bias in firms and employers: they might feel tempted to hire people in more precarious contracts because these are cheaper.

An increasing group of workers has moved into what is called '**precarious employment'**. With this, we mean part-time work, marginal part-time work (<20 hours/week), fixed-term contracts, temporary agency work, (ostensible) self-employment, zero hours contracts, internships. This type of work has many negative

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[19] This part is based on the introduction of the D 2.2.6 milestone report of 2018 by An Raes

consequences on the personal level (Van Aerden et al., 2017), but also on the macro level. For instance, it enhances socio-economic inequalities (Pulignano, 2019).

An engagement in this kind of work often means (Scheele, 2002):

- short-term employment or a high risk of losing the job;

- no opportunity for employees to control working conditions, wages etc;

- less protection and social security coverage provided by law or collective agreement;

- less training opportunities;

- a low income, which is linked to poverty;

- a low level of social integration.

Moreover, the likelihood of working in a precarious job increases when you are a woman, young (up to 35) and in low-skilled work, so the perspectives for our target group are rather poor in obtaining a sustainable job (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017).

Within the four countries that collaborate in the PACE project, the 2017 mean employment ratio in the age group 20-64 is close to the European Area 19 mean percentage of 71% in Belgium (68.5%) and France (71%), but significantly higher in the Netherlands and the UK (both around 78%) (based on statistics from the Annual Review on Employment and Social Developments in Europe, European Commission 2018). The mean **percentages of unemployment** show a similar pattern, with 4.4% and 4.9% of the labour force being unemployed in the UK and the Netherlands, and higher numbers in Belgium (7.1%) and France (9.4%). The percentage of people in the country living in households with low work intensity (age range 0-59) is around 10% in France (8.4%), the Netherlands (9.7%) and the UK (11.3%), but 14.6% in Belgium (based on statistics from 2016). On most indicators, the 2-Seas region countries are close to the European (28 Union or 19 Area) mean numbers. Still, it is important to note that these mean numbers do not necessarily reflect the situation in the areas implicated in the project. For instance, the three French community centres are located in regions that show higher unemployment rates than the national level (11.3-14.1% in 2017 – based on statistics of the French national institute of statistics and economic studies (INSEE)).

When we look at the unemployment rates more in detail, we see that **some groups are more vulnerable**, despite of the changed labour market situation. Labour market structure and opportunities can be expected to be quite different according to the region in which the project partner is active. In general, the employment rate of mothers with young children has improved since 2005. This is not the case, however, if we look at low-skilled mothers. As can be seen from Figure 4, the employment rate for low-skilled young mothers is woefully low and has declined over the years, except for the UK. Belgium in particular shows a severe decline with an employment rate of just 29% in 2017 (still 35% in 2005). The lack of low-skilled jobs will not be a surprise, as will the low wages, which means that work does not pay off quickly if childcare costs have to be charged[20].

In addition, levels of precarious work and underemployment are increasing. The precise patterns vary amongst Member States (Broughton et. al., 2016a; Broughton et al., 2016b).

- Marginal part-time work is increasing. It is particularly high in the Netherlands (22% workforce), also in the UK (13% workforce). In the Netherlands, part-time and marginal part-time sums up to about 40 % of total employment (22 + 18) and thus plays the dominant role among all types of contract in the Dutch labour market.

- Fixed-term contracts are quite widespread in France (8% workforce = about EU average). Short-term contracts (up to three months) are predominant in Belgium, while a duration on average of 6m to a

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[20] With thanks to Katrien Van den Bosch for this figure and the basis for this paragraph

year is more predominant in France, UK and the Netherlands. Only in the UK fixed term contracts often serve as a steppingstone to a 'permanent' job.

- Undeclared work is a major issue in the Netherlands.

- Zero hours contracts are specific to a few Member States, such as the UK (5% of the workforce!), the Netherlands (which have increased from 164,000 in 2010 to 228,000 in 2014), where they are concentrated in sectors such as retail and hospitality. As zero hours contracts have no guaranteed minimum hours of work the risk of precariousness can be high for some individuals if they are in need of guaranteed hours of work and income levels.

- The main type of employment relationship in the EU is full-time permanent contracts, with 59 % of the share of employment, down from 62 % in 2003. Logically, if this trend continues, standard contracts might become at the longer term a minority form of contracting, and it could be argued that this is already so in the case of young people and in some sectors.

Underemployment is also a phenomenon which is increasing. Underemployment happens when people that would like to (re)start to work, have given up looking for a job. There can be many different underlying causes, but a lot of them has to do with barriers that vulnerable people are confronted with when they are looking for a job. When their distance to work is too big, discouragement and frustration can become so that they withdraw from the labour market altogether.
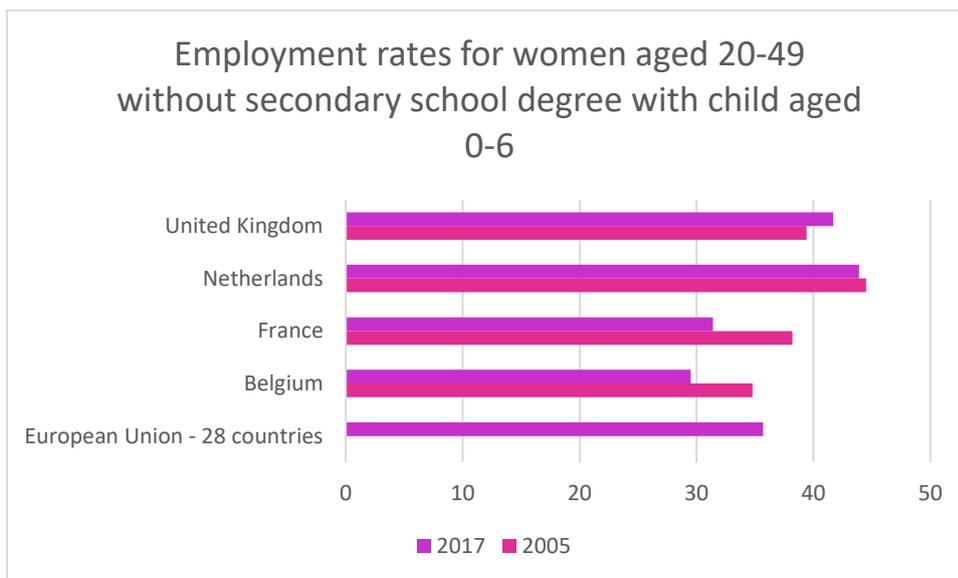

Figure 4. Employment rates for low-skilled mothers aged 20-49 with a 0-6-year-old child

Specific local conditions worsen the prospects of labour market positions of vulnerable groups.

Examples from the PACE project

Arques in Nord-Pas de Calais was known for the large factory Cristal d'Arques which provided employment to up to 12.000 workers. Everyone in that area could find work. Since the enterprise closed down, the region is struck by high unemployment rates and a high level of deprivation.

Brighton & Hove (UK) is a booming area. The city is home to two large universities. In recent years, housing has become increasingly expensive. Landlords prefer to turn their houses into student housing. This yields more revenues than renting out to families. This way, students are 'pushing' families, especially vulnerable families, out of certain neighbourhoods. The same happens on the job market: students are eager to take flexible, temporary jobs in retail, hospitality or catering. Fewer jobs remain for low-skilled workers. If a working parent has difficulties to be flexible at all times, employers can pick a student for the job instead.

2.2.3 Conclusion: Employment and activation, between a right and a duty

Paid employment is broadcasted as the highway to every citizen's full participation in society. It is an important element of Europe's social policy. However, we see that:

- Individual Member States invest in active social policy programmes in which benefits become conditional and being in work is no longer a right, but also a responsibility.
- There is an increase in flexible contracts, underemployment and precarious work. The flexibility also influences the number of stable, open-ended contracts and exacerbates socio-economic inequalities in Europe.
- People are pushed into work, but without appropriate support from Public Employment Services or other types of services.
- There are not enough jobs and not enough good jobs for low- skilled and otherwise vulnerable people who mainly find employment in sectors such as security, care and hospitality, cleaning and retail. Those are traditionally sectors with a lot (and more and more) part-time work, zero hours contracts (in some countries), and a lot of shift work and atypical hours (OECD, 2017).

2.3 Why "combining childcare and work" is worth an INTERREG project

Childcare is a main barrier to employment. If there is a lack of childcare that is available on short term, parents moving from welfare into work cannot follow trainings, do job interviews or start working. Expensive childcare or rigid funding schemes make it difficult for families with low incomes to move into work, or even start considering a trajectory into work. As described above, most of the childcare offer is based on stability, continuity and planning ahead. This excludes families who have irregular lives, little income and little possibility to look and plan ahead.

On the other hand, **unemployment can also be a barrier to childcare**. Being employed gives prioritised access to childcare and childcare can be more expensive if you do not work (enough). In the Netherlands and England, for example, childcare becomes more expensive when you are not in employment. Dutch parents can recover part of their childcare costs through tax-return, but this is only possible for working parents. In England, parents who work at least 16 hours a week on minimum wages are entitled to 30 hours of free funded

childcare for their three-year old. People who work less, only get 15 hours of free childcare[21] (Raes, Piessens & Willockx, 2020).

The **combination of care and employment duties** is challenging for most families, let alone for families who are challenged by life in many ways. Still, it is up to the families themselves to combine a myriad of expectations and responsibilities into one life. If families are not aware of their rights and of the possibilities, it is very challenging to do this.

A PACE case

The Nzeogwu family registered for an integration programme. Both parents have been invited to start a course the following week. Together. They have one week to find a childcare solution for their two children. It is not clear to them whether one of them can postpone the course (example from the PACE project, Turnhout, Belgium, 2018) (Raes, Piessens & Willockx, 2020)

The parents do not know that they have the right to postpone or rearrange the planning of the integration course. No one has told them so. The fact that they cannot arrange childcare for them both to start the course together is stressful, the stress of leaving their child in childcare for the first time comes on top of that.

Their situation is not an isolated case. It is the result of services and organisations approaching families in a segmented manner, focusing on their own offer and targets. Making sure these parents start their integration trajectory is the main consideration of the integration service. Childcare, on the other hand, thinks about the occupancy rates and the importance of an adaptation period. Another example from PACE, here below, illustrates the same dynamic.

A PACE case

Maria, a single mother, is called upon by the Flemish Public Employment Service to start an education in Brussels. The training begins at 8am. Maria has no car. If she wants to get to Brussels by public transport in time, she must be able to leave home before 6am. The nursery does not open until 7:30 am. The employment service thinks that Maria should find a solution, or that the childcare should adapt. (example from the PACE project, Mechelen, Belgium, 2018) (Raes, Piessens & Willockx, 2020)

In some cases, parents manage to craft or glue a solution together. There is a grandparent or a friend who can take care of the children. Sometimes, there is an official who makes an exception and postpones the course or gives the parent temporary exemption for a training or course. In these cases, parents are given a favour and are often given that message clearly. In other cases, the parent is seen as being difficult by both the childcare and the employment or integration services. Or the services point fingers towards one and another for the impossible expectations they have.

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[21] For 3- and 4-year-olds only: https://www.gov.uk/30-hours-free-childcare. For parents of a 3-year-old, only if they work 16 hours or more per week or earn the equivalent of 16 hours of employment at National Living Wage. In addition, 15 hours per week of free childcare is offered for all 2-year-olds who meet certain conditions (parents must fall below a certain income limit) and are registered. See https://www.gov.uk/help-with-childcare-costs/free-childcare-2-year-olds for details.

Before better-case scenarios are uncloaked, we have a look at the main stage of the PACE project. According to the project partners, what are the main context factors that make the combination of work and childcare challenging for families?

With families, we mean families with young children who are ready to get back to work or training and have no childcare solution (yet).

Families in PACE

The PACE project partners are diverse. They are situated in different countries and region. Some project partners are city or county councils and others are local community centers. The target groups they primarily work with also differ.

In **Flanders**, the majority of PACE families has a non-European background. They use childcare either in the context of an integration or an activation trajectory. Many parents are still learning the language. Part of the families are refugees. For these families, separating from their child and leaving it in childcare is a particularly big challenge. Many families do not have previous experiences with childcare. Most parents are low-skilled and have limited work experience.

The **UK** target group is defined as parents who are not working or are part of a household on a low income who are eligible for 2, 3 or 4 year old funding and are ready to get back to training or into work. Parents who are participating in the PACE project in the UK are partly British (in birth) and partly immigrants from European and non-European countries. Many of these parents are motivated to get back to work, some of them have degrees from their home countries which are not recognized in the UK. There is a mix of low-skilled and higher educated parents, the latter group are mainly immigrants. Many parents have been at home for an extended period of time to take care of young children.

In **France**, the centres sociaux that are part of this project work with families that have a distance to work and to childcare. The majority of parents are families that were in reach of the community centre already before PACE. Most parents are from France originally, except for Wattrelos, where there is a large community of families from North Africa. There is a mix of low- and higher educated parents. Similar to the UK, many parents in PACE have stayed at home for years in a row to take care of young children.

The project partners from **the Netherlands** is located in a multicultural neighbourhood in the city of the Hague, called 'Schilderswijk'. This project partner works with vulnerable parents from the 'Schilderswijk' who do not have a job, have children up to the age of 12, and use formal or informal and/or occasional child care.

2.4 Setting the stage: key context factors for the PACE project

🔑 **How and what**

The key factors depicted below are the result of action research by the researchers of Artevelde University of Applied Sciences and Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences. A list of key factors has been drafted in 2019 as key context elements based on repeated study visits, interviews and focus groups with parents and professionals and desk research. In 2019 and 2020, this list has been discussed with professionals from the PACE project during local interviews.

2.4.1 Context factor 1: Work is flexible, childcare is not.

The observation that work is becoming increasingly flexible while childcare is becoming more rigid, is one of the key conclusions from the gap analysis of social demands that was performed in the context of PACE in 2017 (Piessens, Raes & Van den Bosch, 2017). This observation is recognized by the professionals involved in the PACE project.

Childcare is organised to accommodate parents with standard working schedules. The agencies that check the quality focus on pedagogical standards, rather than on accessibility.

> *"Private nurseries are more directed to fulltime and part-time employees. Also, there is a big pressure on childcare from Ofsted and the Early Years Foundation stage. Their focus is narrow."* (PACE professional, Brighton & Hove, 2019)

> *"Childcare is more accessible and prioritized for working people, certainly in private settings."* (PACE professional, Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2019)

> *"Childcare is all focused around the child."* (PACE professional, Brighton & Hove, 2019)

At the same time, there is a shift towards more flexible and precarious work. Changes in the benefit system, such as the benefit cap in the UK, urge people to get back to employment. Parents who are unemployed are contacted by the Public Employment Services and urged to start training or start working immediately. In most cases, the parents' own interests are not considered. Many parents feel pressure to start working.

> *"A mother was referred to PACE. She needed a place in childcare for a training. She had to take a training in electricity just because there are jobs available in that sector. The mother is not at all interested in this job. Still she has to do it."* (PACE professional, Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2019)

> *"There is pressure. Everyone should work. But the employment services forget that some people have many problems."* (PACE professional, Arques, 2020)

Several professionals point out that work is becoming more flexible, but at the same time is not flexible enough. Parents in low-skilled jobs often have very little employee-driven flexibility. They need to be flexible themselves but cannot take flexibility in return. Professionals state that jobs are not flexible enough in the

sense that parents are not allowed to choose their working hours to make it possible to combine them with a job.

2.4.2 Context factor 2: Childcare and employment services do not work in an integrated manner

Childcare and employment systems mainly exist alongside each other and making the combination is mainly the families' responsibility.

> *"There is a lack of "transversalité" (in French). Services each have their own specific goal and not a holistic approach."* (PACE professional, Arques, 2020)

This puts parents in a difficult position. The case of Maria (see above) illustrates this: each system has its own expectations and regulations. These are not aligned with each other. In some cases, the combination is very difficult to make for parents.

2.4.3 Context factor 3: Many families are living in vulnerable situations

The type of vulnerability differs between project partners, but in PACE we are confronted with families who combine different risk factors that make access to childcare and employment additionally complicated. In Turnhout and in Kent, for instance, many of the parents who are part of PACE are newcomers who do not speak the language. If they have degrees or qualifications, these are often not recognized.

In Arques, a PACE professional mentions that there are "many single parent families with many children, living on benefits."

2.4.4 Context factor 4: parents want to work but don't know where to start

Interviews with parents performed in 2017 (see report in Piessens, Raes & Van den Bosch, 2017) showed that many parents are motivated to go back to work but are confronted with many external and internal barriers. On the one hand, there are newcomers who are unfamiliar with the childcare and employment system and do not speak the language (well) yet. There are also parents, mainly mothers, who have been absent from the labour market for a long period. Especially in France and the UK, mothers tend to stay at home with their children for several years in a row. After being absent for long, parents feel very insecure about restarting employment.

> *"Parents had their life on pause."* (PACE professional, Arques, 2020)

We see that many of them do not know where to start. From the Public Employment Services, they get the message that they need to start working but do not get tailored advice or time to consider what they really want or which steps they need to take.

> *"Parents want to go back to work but they don't know how."* (PACE professional, Gravesham, 2020)

2.4.5 Context factor 5: specific factors

Some project partners identify specific context factors. In Brighton & Hove, for instance, there is expensive housing and students are overcrowding the labour market. In the Netherlands, the current childcare policy is very strict and makes occasional and flexible childcare challenging to organise in a manner that is affordable for vulnerable families.

STEP 1: Update of the PACE programme theory

Based on the context analysis, we present a first update of the PACE programme theory. This update considers the main conclusions that were made as a result of desk research and interviews with the PACE project partners.

The changes made to the programme theory are highlighted in **blue**.

Context

- Formal and informal barriers to childcare; unequal access with families in poverty having lower access to (high quality) ECEC.

Inflexibility makes childcare less accessible especially for families who cannot plan and pay ahead.

Different families need different kinds of flexibility.

- Childcare system is oriented towards regular attendance which is an additional barriers for families with no or unstable employment

Childcare regulations and funding systems make it difficult for settings to provide flexibility. This effect is sometimes exacerbated by pedagogical requirements.

- There is room for upskilling early years practicioners in parental involvement and working with vulnerable families

- Lack of collaboration and communication between childcare-employment- welfare systems

Childcare and employment are each other's barriers. Families end up in a catch-22 situation.

- **There is a push towards employment, with benefits becoming more conditional and being in paid employment becoming a duty rather than a right.**

Parents are expected to work but are not appropriately supported into employment. Many parents want to work but don't know where to start.

- Vulnerable families have limited understanding of the childcare and employment systems *while making the combination between care and employment is mainly their puzzle to solve.*

Mechanisms

- Flexible and occasional childcare places will make childcare more accessible for families with a distance to childcare and employment

- Involving parents in childcare will make childcare more sustainable and can be a first step to volunteering

- Training early years practitioners will lead to increased parental involvement and sustainable childcare solutions for vulnerable families

- Volunteering in childcare can be a first step to employment

- Collaborative approach between welfare, employment and childcare will overcome barriers to employment

- Training and coaching parents on soft and labour market skills using a PDP within childcare will bring parents closer to employment

Outcomes

- increased access to childcare for 550 families; sustainable childcare solution and parental involvement for 550 families; 50 childcare workers able to work on parental involvement or voluntary engagement

- less distance to the labour market for 550 parents, with 110 being in sustainable employment

- increased collaboration between childcare, employment and welfare services, including 110 new collaborations with welfare services

- adapted childcare policy: more flexible and occasional places, integrated approach

- impact on child poverty in the 2seas region

"Terms and conditions"

- **Families are mapped and contacted:**
  Parents will need to be found and convinced to start childcare and employment support.
  The outreach work that is needed to map, contact and engage families depends on the local context and the characteristics of the families one wants to reach.
- **The integrated approach is supported by staff:**
  Early years practitioners get additional support from social workers or volunteers.
  Early years practitioners struggle with flexible and occasional childcare because they fear that it is not good for children's well-being and development. That is a concern that needs to be taken seriously in developing new practices and in coaching staff.
- **The integrated approach is supported by the infrastructure:**
  Childcare and employment are physically linked, transport and physical barriers to employment support are removed as much as possible
- **Parents are supported into sustainable work rather than into work as such:**
  Work is become more flexible. This is more often the case for low-income employment or employment for low-skilled workers. These workers also more often end up at the "wrong side of flexibility", in precarious work, underemployment or in-work poverty.

3 Quantitative outcomes: the naked PACE numbers

"*Not everything that can be counted counts. Not everything that counts can be counted*." (William Bruce Cameron)

Still, numbers must be counted and can be informative. In the course of the PACE project, the project partners collected data on the number of families and parents involved in the project, finding access to childcare, being involved in childcare, following training and coaching trajectories, doing volunteer work, entering education programmes, applying for jobs and working. Furthermore, each project partners registered the number of trainings organised for childcare professionals and the number of new collaborations that was set up because of PACE.

The practices, policies and possibilities of the project partners were diverse. The uniformity in the activities they could offer was limited. The same was true to the concrete way they could deliver training programmes, parental involvement and volunteer work. For instance, in the UK, it is not generally accepted for parents to be physically present in the rooms where the children are taken care of. This complicates the operationalisation of parents' involvement in childcare through being physically present and helping to take care of the children. Likewise, the definition of a 'sustainable childcare solution' would differ across partners. For a project partner offering only occasional childcare, sustainable childcare would mean that the family transfers to a more permanent childcare place in a regular early year setting. For a project partner working mainly with parents in flexible and temporary work, a sustainable childcare solution means that the parent can plan and take up childcare sessions at short notice and in a flexible manner.

This diversity is not fully reflected in the numbers that are reported below. We annotate the most important numbers to some extent, but the scope of this report does not allow us to do so in an exhaustive manner that takes into account the complex and diverse daily realities of the PACE project partners.

3.1 Mapping and contacting PACE parents

Earlier findings within the PACE project have shown that three elements are crucial when it comes to mapping and contacting PACE parents. The first element is establishing a strong network and assigning a PACE keyworker within this network. A keyworker who is accessible, who knows the families and the neighbourhood, makes a massive difference (Raes, 2019). Second, parents who already know PACE are often able to motivate other parents to start in the project. An example of this are the "cafés parents" organised by the French partners and the breakfast for mothers in De Mussen in The Hague. A third successful practice is the so-called 'reaching-in'. It means that project partners identify parents that are already acquainted with childcare or their organisation in some way. Some of these parents use childcare occasionally or visit the children's centres. In the reality of the PACE project, we have seen that it can be worthwhile to engage with parents who already use some form of childcare but are at distance from the labour market (Raes, 2019).

How many parents has PACE been able to map and contact? In total, 757 parents were mapped, contacted and engaged in at least a first contact with a PACE professional. The majority of parents were mothers (93.5%). As can be seen from Figure 5, the majority of participants were reached in England, but the numbers of participants are comparable across countries.
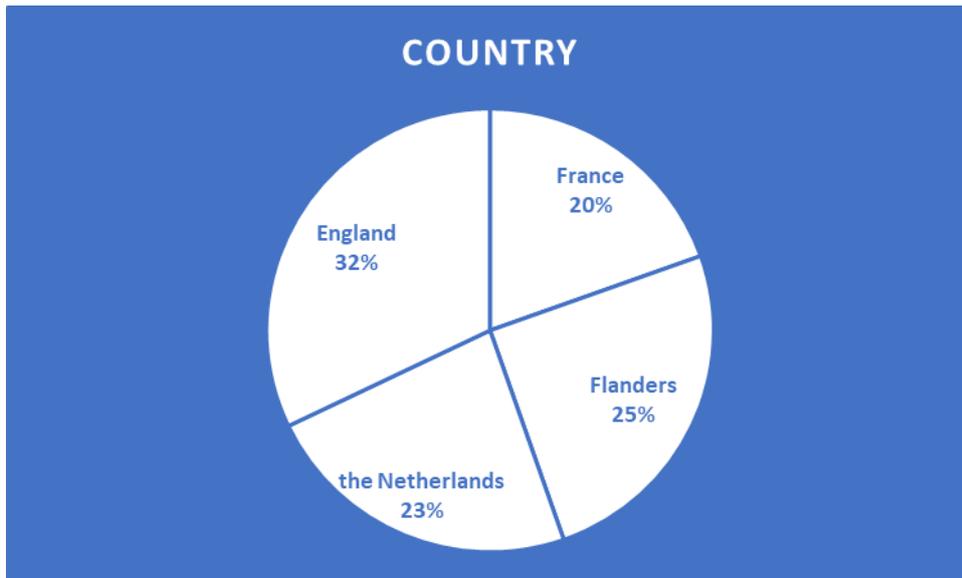
Figure 5. The distribution of participants in the PACE project per country or region.

All percentages reported in the sections below are valid percentages.

3.2 Parents employment situation prior to PACE

Parents entering the PACE project are unemployed. Some parents have been unemployed for a long time or have never worked. Other parents have employment experience from before they started a family or from their country of origin. The situations of PACE parents are very diverse, going from families with a very low work intensity to parents who have a partner who is employed, looking to go back to work after a period of absence from the labour market.

The project partners assessed parents' distance to employment when they entered PACE. This was a subjective estimation on a 0-10 scale.

The **UK partners** used the following operationalisation of this scale:

- 0-1: parent is estimated to need two years or more to get back to employment
- 2-3: parent is estimated to be approximately one year from employment
- 4-5: parent is estimated to be approximately six months from employment
- 6-7: parent is estimated to be approximately three months from employment
- 8-9: parent is ready for work (e.g. applying for jobs)
- 10: parent is in paid employment since starting PACE

In other countries, a slightly different operationalisation is used. In Mechelen (BE), for example, distance to work is operationalised as follows:

- 0-4: The parent receives f.e. health insurance benefit and tells the social worker that he/she cannot go to work (not yet) and needs more time.
- 5-7: the parent tells he/she will go for a job, but doesn't know what kind a job, doesn't know how to apply. The parent still needs training or education and support, there is no stability yet.
- 8-9: the parent knows which setting he/she wants to work in, is applying for the jobs.
- 10: the parent is in paid employment.

Another example, from one of the French partners (Arques, FR):

- 0 – 1: very far = work is not at all a priority; the parent has several barriers (psychological, cultural, mobility…). The parent might also have a life project that excludes work.
- 2-4: far = Work is not a high priority; the parent still has barriers. Work has been mentioned but not a short-term objective.
- 5: average = Work is considered. There are still barriers that need to be dealt with. Work is considered as a middle term objective.
- 6 - 7: Work is considered seriously. Might be dealing with the last psychological, mobility and/or cultural barriers. The parent is also working on his/her personal barriers to employment (training, qualifications).
- 8 – 9: Employment is the priority. The parent is applying for a job and going through interviews. The parent is in close contact with Public Employment Services.
- 10: The parent is in paid work.

The reason that the operationalisation is not completely uniform between partners, is that project partners were given the freedom to adapt the operationalisation to their own, internal systems and operationalisations. But as can be seen from the examples, the way in which distance to work is defined is similar, even though different criteria (time, priority, presence of barriers) are used.

Despite differences in the way in which distance to work was operationalised, the estimated mean distance to work was similar in all countries, with a mean of 4.39 on a 0-10 scale (SD = 1.52). The estimated distance to work was a bit more positive than the mean in Flanders and England, and lower in the Netherlands and France, with the distance to work in the Netherlands being significantly lower than that in Flanders and England (Boneferroni-corrected post-hoc tests are at the $p<.05$ level) (see Table 3). However, it is difficult to interpret these differences as being a real reflection of the situation of the parents. We cannot exclude the possibility that they are due to differences in interpretation of the 0-10 scale or to tendencies to rate the distance to work in a more optimistic or pessimistic manner.

Table 3. Distance to work of parents who enter PACE

country	Mean	SD	N
France	4,21	2,393	145
Flanders (BE)	4,59	2,392	135
The Netherlands	3,78	2,959	176
Engeland (UK)	4,86	2,156	224
Total	4,39	2,512	680

Estimated distance to work of parents entering PACE in the four countries.

3.3 Parents' access to a sustainable childcare solution

As mentioned above, 757 parents were reached through the PACE project. For 711 parents, we can provide further information on their access to (sustainable) childcare.

Of these 711 parents, 92% experienced increased access to childcare (N = 654). This means that one or more barriers to childcare were lowered or overcome through the offering of accessible, occasional or flexible childcare places.

For 686 families, we have information on whether or not a sustainable childcare solution could be provided. A sustainable childcare solution means that it is a childcare solution that a family can count on and that allows them to lead a 'good life', whatever this means to them at a given point in time (e.g. following a training, moving towards employment, coping with personal difficulties). For 66.9% of these 686 families (N = 459) the childcare solution was sustainable. This means that the child could move from occasional to regular childcare or had access to a childcare solution answering to the families' (employment) needs. For 227 parents, there was no sustainable childcare solution. This meant that a family either stopped using childcare, was unable to make the transfer to regular childcare because of availability or affordability issues. In some cases, parents moved out of the area or dropped out of the project.

3.4 Parental involvement in childcare

In the quantitative measurements, the construct of parental involvement was operationalised through three indicators. First, whether or not parents were invited into childcare for informal meetings. Two, whether or not parents were involved in childcare as volunteers. Three, whether or not parents were involved in training, internship or education linked to childcare.
In the original programme theory, the idea was that parents would first enter childcare, then be involved in childcare to start building up volunteering (in childcare), doing training and education and then moving towards employment.

The numbers show that the manifestation of parental involvement is very different for each of the four countries and regions.

In France, 97.3% of parents are invited in childcare for informal meetings. Less than one fourth of the parents (23.8%) is volunteering in childcare, and most parents (91.2%) are not involved in internships or education programmes linked to childcare. In England, the vast majority of parents is invited in childcare for informal meetings (96.1%) and a substantial part of the parents is volunteering in childcare, including the children's centres (33.8%). Also, the number of parents doing an internship or training linked to childcare is quite extensive, with the percentage of 23.3 being significantly higher than those reported in the other countries and regions. The Flemish partners report that 90.2% are invited in childcare for informal meetings. Only 6.6% are volunteering in childcare and only 1.6% is doing an internship or training linked to childcare. In the Netherlands, at last, all parents (100%) are invited in childcare informally. Very few parents volunteer in childcare (only 1.7%) but more parents do internships or trainings linked to childcare (4.5%):

- Almost all parents are invited in childcare for informal meetings;
- Volunteering in childcare is not common in the Netherlands and Flanders, and more common in France and England;
- In England, almost a quarter of parents involved in PACE do an internship or training linked to childcare. This is far more common than in the other countries and regions, where 1-9% does.

Interestingly, parent's involvement in childcare is related to the sustainability of the childcare solution. Parents who are indicated to have a sustainable childcare solution are almost always invited in childcare for informal meetings (97.13%). The level of involvement is also high for the other parents (92.85%), but significantly less than for parents having a sustainable childcare solution, $\chi^2(1) = 6.86$, $p = .01$. Important, it is not possible to make any strong statements on the direction of this relationship. It might be that parental involvement is a predictor for sustainability in childcare, but it might as well be vice versa, or both elements might be predicted by a third unknown factor. We see an even stronger connection between sustainability in childcare and volunteering in childcare and following an education in childcare, χ^2's > 16.06, p's < .001. Almost all parents who volunteer in childcare or follow an education or an internship related to childcare, can count on a sustainable childcare solution.

3.5 Parents' route to employment

We see that the vast majority of parents moved closer to employment in the course of PACE. For 602 parents, we have a pre- and a post-measurement of their distance to employment. As shown by the table below, they move closer to employment. The difference between the pre- and the post-measurement is significant, $t(601)$ = 22.36, $p < .001$ (see also Table 4).

Table 4. Parents' distance to work

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
distance to work pre	4,39	602	2,556	,104
distance to work post	6,65	602	3,097	,126

As can be seen from Figure 6 and Figure 7, the group of parents have moved closer to employment (value of 10) and only a small number of parents remains very distant from employment (values of 0-5).
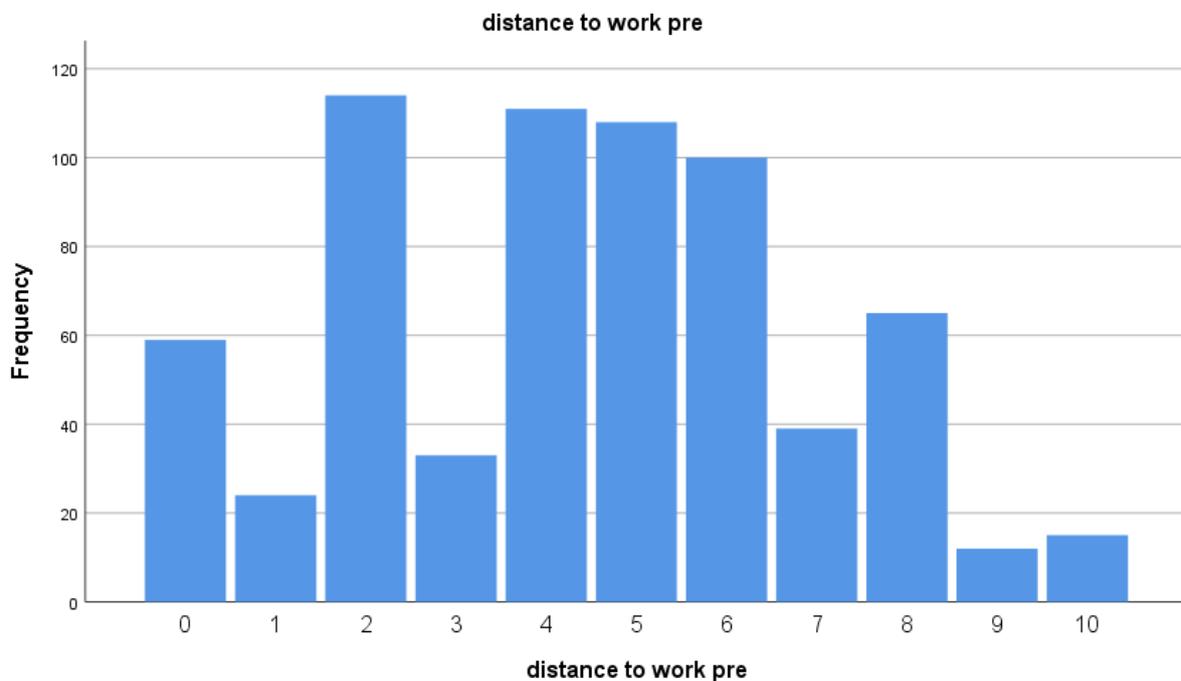
**Figure 6**. Distance to work of parents at the start of PACE.
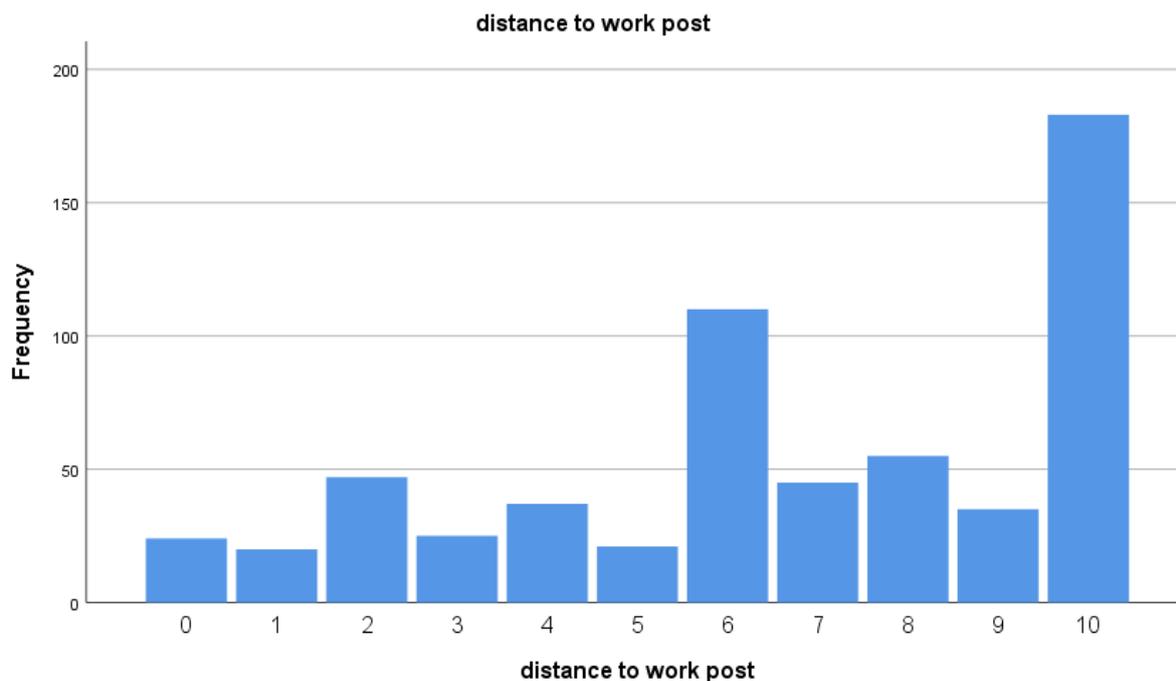
Figure 7. Distance to work of parents at PACE closedown.

Are there exceptions? Yes, although 459 parents moved closer to employment, there is a small number of parents (N = 16) who end up further from employment at the end of the project than at the start. Also, for 128 parents, no change in distance to employment was registered. This is a substantial group of parents. The lack of progress is often allocated to personal or family issues. Parents have difficult personal circumstances, are going through a divorce, get pregnant, move out of the area, are no longer in contact with the PACE professional or indicate they are not willing or able to work after all. We should also note that the group of 128 parents, making no progress, consists for a large part of parents who have not made any progress yet because they started in the PACE project recently.

For around 718 parents, we have been able to track their progress on their route to employment.

- 420 parents learned soft skills
- 398 parents learned labour market skills
- 436 parents worked with a PDP to get closer to employment
- 269 were in training or education because of PACE
- 169 parents were in volunteering, an internship or a work experience place because of PACE
- 342 parents applied for jobs
- 218 parents were in employment
- 162 parents were in sustainable employment

Sustainable employment meant that employment was, on the long term, manageable for the parent. The parent was able to combine this job with a family life and the job did contribute to the overall quality of life for the family. We can see that the number of parents in sustainable employment is high: **almost 75% of all working parents in PACE are in sustainable employment.**

Chi-square tests confirm that all indicators (learning soft skills, labour market skills, going through a PDP, volunteering, applying for jobs, being in training or educations) are very significant predictors for being in sustainable employment, all $\chi^2(1)$'s > 10.42, all p's < or =.001. The strongest predictors for sustainable employment are applying for jobs and going through a PDP.

3.6 Childcare and employment

Does the families' childcare situation influence their employment situation? Based on the data, we can conclude that it does.

Parents for whom the childcare solution is sustainable are significantly closer to employment at closedown (M = 7.22, SD = 2.80) compared to parents who do not have a sustainable childcare solution (M = 5,65, SD = 3.55), t(291.152) = 5.25, p < .0001. If we take into account pre-existing differences in distance to employment and use the *change in distance to employment* as the dependent variable, the difference between families with and without a sustainable childcare solution is less spectacular, but still significant, t(311.449) = 1.98, p < .05.

We see similarly significant results if we look at the coherence between who has a sustainable childcare solution on the one hand and who is volunteering, applying for jobs or working on the other hand. In all cases, having a sustainable childcare solution is a positive predictor: if families can count on childcare, parents are more prone to volunteer, be in an internship or a work experience place, χ^2(1) = 38.81, p < .0001. There is also a bigger chance that they are applying for jobs, χ^2(1) = 38.48, p < .0001, and that they are in paid work, χ^2(1) = 8.58, p < .005. Most important of all, when childcare is sustainable, employment is also more likely to be sustainable, χ^2(1) = 22.84, p < .0001. To make this concrete:

> When a family does not have a sustainable childcare solution, the parent has a **27.92%** of being in sustainable employment at PACE closedown. When a family does have sustainable childcare, this chance rises to **52.70%.**

These analyses do not allow us to draw any conclusions on causality. We cannot state that sustainable childcare leads to sustainable employment. We can only see that both factors are related. Even within the group of PACE families, who all receive support in relation to childcare and employment, we see that **sustainability in the childcare solution is strongly related to sustainability in the employment situation**.

3.7 Early years staff trained on parental involvement or voluntary engagement

The PACE project aims to tackle barriers to childcare. This also includes informal barriers and barriers in communication. In addition, involvement of parents in childcare is seen as a key element to make childcare more sustainable and as a first step to volunteering and later to employment. Although many early years professionals are experienced in working with a diversity of families and in working on parental involvement, the PACE approach in childcare is new and, in a sense, even disruptive. It starts from a whole family approach in childcare, that is based on actively welcoming all children and parents and seeing parents as more than parents.

Early years staff from the settings involved in PACE received training and coaching in a variety of topics. In total, 173 early years staff members received training during PACE. The topics of these trainings were broader than but included parental involvement and voluntary engagement by parents.

Project partners working with providers that were not under their own management also provided training and coaching for settings. The offer for childcare workers included training, coaching or mentoring on:

- poverty
- intercultural issues, diversity and inclusion
- working with vulnerable groups
- coaching parents as volunteers

There was no uniformity in the methods used to train staff. The project partners used a range of different methods, based on their own expertise and network and on local needs and possibilities. Some preferred work floor training, others used specific programmes. For example, to train staff on working on parental involvement and volunteering, Brighton & Hove developed a course called "Making it Real". This course was offered to Children's Centres and Children's Centres Nursery Staff. The course is designed to train staff to work on parental involvement/engagement, communicating with parents and working with volunteers. In Mechelen and Turnhout, a pedagogical coach provided by Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts supported the team on the work floor on topics that were relevant to them, including parental involvement and volunteering.

Kent County Council and the Education People used a survey to investigate what the common elements of success were in the trainings used by partners, even though the methods they used were diverse. They concluded that **coaching** is seen as important and implemented by all partners in one form or another. Providing tailored support through coaching is evaluated in a very positive manner by staff and leads to **increased confidence and skills of early years staff** in working with parents. Not all project partners provided trainings for childcare staff on the topic of parents' volunteering but were able to achieve volunteering by parents, whether or not in childcare. If not trained in volunteering parents in childcare, early years staff was made aware of volunteering opportunities for parents and signposting them to other offers.

3.8 New collaborations with welfare organisations

Families sometimes deal with complex issues. Families living in vulnerable situations might encounter problems in the domains of childcare and employment but also in education, health, finances or housing, … Some of these problems might create additional barriers to childcare and employment. It is not possible for a childcare organisation or even for a strong team of keyworkers to cope with this diversity of problems, that are often interactive in nature, by themselves. Although a keyworker is well placed to coordinate support, he or she will need other services to overcome housing issues, relationship and health problems. Therefore, a key assumption in the PACE project is that there should be collaborations with other services to provide tailor-made support towards families. It should be possible to work on barriers together with different service providers. For instance, a PACE keyworker can help a parent with an addiction or a housing problem to get in touch with a specialised service.

During PACE, the project partners set up **103 new or renewed collaborations with welfare services**. New collaborations were collaborations that did not exist before PACE. Renewed means that the collaboration was intensified, formalised or reviewed because of PACE. The focus was on organisations that supported PACE parents with ongoing issues such as debt, welfare benefits, housing, health, substance misuse and addiction.

These collaborations included the following services:

- Health services
- Social work teams
- Organisations supporting families with disabled children
- Public Welfare Services
- Services related to asylum and migration
- Services offering support in relation to domestic violence
- Organisations offering (residential) family support and assistance
- Agencies working on Public Health, Welfare and Family (such as Kind en Gezin in Vlaanderen, le PMI in France)
- Youth work and youth welfare work
- Sports and community sport organisations
- Centres for adult education
- Organisations specifically working with young people with a distance to employment and education

- (Primary) schools
- Community Centres
- Services offering support for mental health problems and addiction

Next to new collaborations with welfare services, PACE project partners also installed new links with employment services. For several project partners, the collaboration with Public Employment Services, temporary employment agencies, job fairs, organisations offering career advice etc. was innovative in the sense that they had not developed these relationships before. The total of newly developed collaborations in the field of employment was 91.

STEP 2: Update of the PACE programme theory

Based on the overall quantitative analyses, we present a second update of the PACE programme theory. This update takes into account the main conclusions that can be drawn from the quantitative analyses.

The changes made to the programme theory are highlighted in **purple**.

Context

- Formal and informal barriers to childcare; unequal access with families in poverty having lower access to (high quality) ECEC.

Inflexibility makes childcare less accessible especially for families who cannot plan and pay ahead.

Different families need different kinds of flexibility.

- Childcare system is oriented towards regular attendance which is an additional barriers for families with no or unstable employment

Childcare regulations and funding systems make it difficult for settings to provide flexibility. This effect is sometimes exacerbated by pedagogical requirements.

- There is room for upskilling early years practicioners in parental involvement and working with vulnerable families

- Lack of collaboration and communication between childcare-employment- welfare systems

Childcare and employment are each other's barriers. Families end up in a catch-22 situation.

- **There is a push towards employment, with benefits becoming more conditional and being in paid employment becoming a duty rather than a right.**

Parents are expected to work but are not approriately supported into employment. Many parents want to work but don't know where to start.

- Vulnerable families have limited understanding of the childcare and employment systems *while making the combination between care and employment is mainly their puzzle to solve.*

Mechanisms

- Flexible and occasional childcare places will make childcare more accessible for families with a distance to childcare and employment

- Involving parents in childcare will make childcare more sustainable and can be a first step to volunteering (the data confirm a relationship between involvement in childcare and sustainability of the childcare solution)

- Training and coaching early years practitioners will lead to increased parental involvement and sustainable childcare solutions for vulnerable families

- Volunteering in childcare can be a first step to employment (the data confirm a relationship between volunteering, in or outside of childcare, and being in sustainable employment)

- Collaborative approach between welfare, employment and childcare will overcome barriers to employment

- Training and coaching parents on soft and labour market skills using a PDP within childcare will bring parents closer to employment (the data confirm this, using a PDP is the strongest predictor of employment)

Outcomes

- increased access to childcare for 654 families; sustainable childcare solution ~~and parental involvement~~ for 459 families, most (97%) of whom are involved in childcare; 173 childcare workers ~~able to work on parental involvement or voluntary engagement~~ more skilled and confident in working with parents

- less distance to the labour market for 459 parents, with 162 being in sustainable employment

- increased collaboration between childcare, employment and welfare services; including 103 new collaborations with welfare services and 91 with employment services

- adapted childcare policy: more flexible and occasional places, integrated approach

- impact on child poverty in the 2seas region

"Terms and conditions"

- **Families are mapped and contacted:**
  Parents will need to be found and convinced to start childcare and employment support.
  The outreach work that is needed to map, contact and engage families depends on the local context and the characteristics of the families one wants to reach.
- **The integrated approach is supported by staff:**
  Early years practitioners get additional support from social workers or volunteers.
  Early years practitioners struggle with flexible and occasional childcare because they fear that it is not good for children's well-being and development. That is a concern that needs to be taken seriously in developing new practices and in coaching staff.
- **The integrated approach is supported by the infrastructure:**
  Childcare and employment are physically linked, transport and physical barriers to employment support are removed as much as possible
- **Parents are supported in sustainable work rather than into work as such:**
  Work is become more flexible. This is more often the case for low-income employment or employment for low-skilled workers. These workers also more often end up at the "wrong side of flexibility", in precarious work, underemployment or in-work poverty.
- **Having a sustainable childcare solution is related to being in sustainable employment:**
  If parents can count on a sustainable childcare solution, looking for sustainable employment is facilitated. Vice versa, if parents have a sustainable job and income, it becomes easier to access and afford sustainable childcare.

4 PACE through the parents' eyes

4.1 Introduction

In this part, the perspective of the parents is presented. First, the methodology used to interview parents is described. Second, the experiences and opinions of the parents are displayed. In this descriptive part, we stay close to the words of the parent. Quotes illustrate the descriptions. At last, we present the main conclusions and incorporate these in a third update of the PACE programme theory.

As the number of parents who gave their input is limited, 77 in total, there must be caution in drawing firm conclusions.

4.2 Methodology

4.2.1 Data collection

The main data were collected from late 2019 to early 2020 via focus groups with parents who had been part of the PACE project for at least three months, or who had closed down PACE. After analysing the data from these focus groups, additional analyses were performed on the reports of interviews and focus groups with parents that had been performed in 2018 and on parents' available close down stories. These additional analyses were done to ensure that we captured the perspective of parents as completely as possible.

Focus groups

The data were collected from the end of 2019 till the beginning of 2020 via focus groups. These focus groups were performed by three researchers from Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, who worked in pairs. For each focus group, one researcher was the moderator and another researcher were responsible for the report.

The researchers drew up a discussion guide in advance[22]. This guide contained the following parts:

- Childcare accessibility (D 1.1.3)
- Parental involvement (D 1.2.5)
- Employment support (D 2.2.6)
- PACE impact on various life domains

Focus groups were conducted in:

- Gravesham Kent: 8 mothers and 1 father (partner of one of the mothers)
- City Council, Brighton & Hove: 7 mothers and 2 fathers (partner of 2 of the mothers)
- 38 Volt, Mechelen: 4 mothers
- De Mussen, The Hague: 12 mothers
- CS Jean Ferrat, Arques: 5 mothers
- City of Turnhout : 2 mothers
- ACSW, Wattrelos: 10 mothers

The local staff working on the PACE project invited the parents and organised the practical arrangements. Parents were informed about the focus groups well on beforehand. In most cases, they were offered

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[22] The guide can be obtained from the authors on request.

occasional childcare during the focus groups. In some cases, they were also offered a refund for public transport. At the start of the focus group, parents were informed orally and through a written information letter about the goals and nature of the focus group. All parents read and signed an informed consent form.

Keyworkers were present during the focus group at Kent, Brighton & Hove, CS Jean Ferrat and in Wattrelos (ACSW). This was on the one hand for the comfort and safety of the mothers. On the other hand, the keyworker could also assist in translating if necessary. In Brighton & Hove, only one researcher was presented for the focus group and a member of the local PACE staff made the report of the focus group.

Parents' stories

- From three projects, stories from parents were submitted during 2020.
- 22 parents from Brighton & Hove wrote a closedown story at the end of their PACE trajectory.
- Six parents from Ghent told their 'impact story' and forwarded this to the project partner via email.

Pilot

In Kent, a pilot on occasional and flexible childcare was performed in 2019 and 2020. Through a paper and pencil questionnaire, ten parents reported their vision on occasional and flexible childcare before the start of this pilot. Five of these parents again reported their vision and experiences at closedown. The qualitative accounts of these parents are also taken into account in this part of the impact report.

Parent interviews and focus groups from 2018

In 2018 interviews of parents were conducted in:

- CSE Boulogne: 8 parents
- 38 Volt, Mechelen: 8 parents
- ACSW, Wattrelos: 6 parents
- City of Turnhout: 4 parents (2019)

In Kent and Brighton & Hove, a focus group was performed

The interviews and focus groups from 2018 followed this structure:

- How did PACE start?
- What has changed for you because of PACE?
- What have been main obstacles on the road?
- What would be a good PACE result for you?
- What should we keep/continue doing (what makes PACE worthwhile)?

4.2.2 Data analysis

The reports, notes and stories were read by the researchers. An initial coding has been worked out. The data were ordered under the codes. In a next step, the data were further clustered and written out.

4.3 Parents' voices

This part describes the experiences and opinions of the parents. The descriptions are illustrated with quotes from the parents. The input of parents has been structured as follows. First, we discuss parents' experiences with childcare. Second, parents' experiences on employment and activation are outlined. Third, we discuss parents' stories on the integration, or the lack thereof, between childcare and employment. For each of these three parts, we start with describing the general context for parents: what are the main barriers they experience? What makes it difficult for them to access and combine childcare and employment? Next, we discuss the 'PACE answers' to access to childcare and employment. At last, we list the difficulties that remain and that often point to structural problems that are out of control for parents but also for PACE professionals and organisations.

4.3.1 Parents childcare experiences

Some general information on childcare and the PACE project

In this part, we discuss parents' experiences with childcare. We start with discussing the barriers that parents experience in relation to childcare and employment, after which we present parents' accounts of the PACE answers and the barriers that remain. Next, we outline parents' perspectives on the (mis)match between childcare and employment and how they experienced the accessibility of the project itself.

There is a large variety in the stories and experiences of parents. The reason for this is that the PACE project partners experimented with different types of childcare solutions (as described in the handbook by Raes, Piessens & Willockx, 2020) and that the context in which they operated was very diverse. While some project partners had childcare under own management (e.g. Mechelen with the occasional childcare centre 38 Volt, Brighton & Hove with their own at-home childcare service), other project partners had to collaborate with external childcare providers (e.g. Arques offers out-of-school and holiday care for children older than three, but had to rely on private providers for a childcare offer for zero to three year old children).

Childcare: A hurdles competition?

Parents testify on the barriers they have experienced in finding a place in childcare.
For some parents, finding a childcare solution feels like solving a complicated puzzle.

> *"Our biggest battle was finding childcare" (a mother, Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

In France and Belgium, parents are confronted with waiting lists. Parents from Gravesham (UK) testify how hard it was for them to find a nursery that suited their needs. For some parents, a childminder is more appropriate because of the tailor-made offer. Although they then depend on the specific offer. For example, a mom signals that it is difficult to find a childminder for more than one child.

Sometimes they need to combine different systems to create enough hours of childcare for a family.

> *"In September I started with a nursery (I got 15 hours). My keyworker got me in touch with a childminder. Two 2- hour sessions. So, one child in nursery and one with a childminder." (a mother from Kent, 2020)*

Transport and mobility are issues for many parents. In Mechelen and in Brighton & Hove, the parents indicate that childcare at the other side of the city is hard to reach. It takes too much time to get there by public transport. Furthermore, it is not easy to commute with two or three young children.

"I do not have a driver's licence. It is currently not possible for me to work with children that I have to take care of. There is no childcare in the direct environment." (a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)

Moreover, parents indicated that childcare nearby a school is recommended. This makes childcare feasible for a family with children in a nursery in combination with children that already go to school.

Another major barrier, especially in the Netherland and the UK, is affordability. Parents indicate that childcare can be so expensive that they prefer to stay at home to take care of the children.

"For my oldest child, I needed childcare. I found a nursery. Then I got pregnant again, they were twins, that on top of my salary was too much, I gave up work to stay at home. I would have been working to pay for childcare. You're not winning. It was pointless to work, I would have been working for 20 pounds." (a mother, Gravesham, 2020)

In the Netherlands, childcare is difficult to afford if the parent does not work full time. This implicates that childcare is not available to these parents during the trajectory towards work or with part time employment. Also, the invoice must be paid in advance, which is extremely hard for parents who are not yet employed or have started working recently.

"Then if you have work, you pay the childcare in advance, but you have no income yet. I received an invoice of 1600 euros for two children for after-school care. I could not afford this." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)

Childcare has to respond to a lot of rules and regulations. In daily practice, this means that most early years settings are not flexible. There are fixed sessions and opening hours and parents are preferred to plan childcare ahead. This poses a challenge for many parents who are part of the PACE project. These are often parents who need flexibility. They are not yet working but have to be available to enrol in a training or start working. Furthermore, they often live in a complex family situation that requires flexibility from childcare. Sometimes there are also very practical circumstances that require flexibility, for example, a workshop that ends after the closing time of the childcare or a training that starts early in the morning. Parents who have experience in regular childcare often run into a lack of flexibility.

The statutory rules complicate flexibility. There are often "fines" if a parent cannot adhere to them. For example, parents must hand in their schedule long in advance, which is not always possible.

"I find the specific days hard. My nursery is not flexible either as they are full for spaces. It is hard for the nursery to organise. There is one-month notice to change days. Buying extra hours is not always possible. Also, if I need to start a bit earlier, I have to buy the whole morning rather than just an hour. I had to pay £1000 for the month as I was not yet eligible for 3-year-old funding until next term." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)

Childcare is often not adapted to parents who want to change days or hours. Therefore, some nurseries prefer children who attend full time or at least regularly. And if parents still must deviate from the schedule, they get the message (often in a friendly way) that it is "the last time" and that in the future they should come in time. A mother testifies that she has stopped a course because she could not be in time to pick up her child from nursery.

Starting childcare is more than a practical issue. For many parents, bringing their child to childcare for the first time is an emotional step as well. Some parents report that they are used to being with their child permanently. Separating from their child is not easy. This can be additionally hard for parents who do not speak the language or for parents with children with special needs.

> *"I was really worried the first time. My child will cry, he's always with me. Because of the language, he will not be able to explain what he needs. When I came over [after the first day in nursery], he was very happy." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

> *"Mums are human too; we need to be seen and considered. Do not ignore us, it hurts." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

Several parents refer to negative experiences in childcare. These are experiences of feeling judged. For instance, parents declare that they receive non-verbal signals, see how the staff exchange glances with each other "it is that mother again". A mom noticed that after a few months one of the staff members still didn't know her child's name. Parents wonder whether this is due to prejudices, for instance because they are wearing a headscarf or don't speak the language well. Parents talk about staff not looking or talking to them. A mom wearing a headscarf feels very humiliated by this attitude. Yet she testifies on how she persisted and continued to seek contact with staff. After a while, they finally began to conversate with her.

If the staff does not present themselves as a team that works together, this has an impact on how the parent experiences childcare. It starts for them with a shared vision that shapes the practice.

> *"For me, the service must have a vision of an "open book", that is my starting point. [...] In the nursery, for example, with my child who was still bedwetting, they did not communicate about it. My child suddenly didn't want to go anymore. If we then talked about this with them as a parent, it was difficult. "We assume that if they are toilet trained during the day, then also during sleep." Then they used a kind of camping bed. They had not talked about that. My child had developed a fear for going to the nursery. Then I sent an email to the setting manager of the nursery. He defended the staff, but I did not feel that he really listened, that I was not taken seriously." (a mother from Turnhout, 2020)*

If parents feel that the relationship with the childcare is not positive, they lack the confidence to leave their child behind. And they are anxious to express their opinion or show their vulnerability.

Also, the moment and place of dropping off and collecting their child should facilitate to talk to the staff. A line of queuing parents at the door to drop off their child creates little opportunity for conversation.

To conclude, parents experience structural and practical barriers to childcare: there are too few places, often these places are not available on short notice or not flexible, childcare comes with a high cost and for families with limited mobility the physical accessibility can be an obstacle as well. Aside from these formal barriers, parents also experience informal barriers. They report that it is hard to separate from their child and that they sometimes feel judged by staff.

Childcare in PACE: Parents' accounts on the importance of accessible and flexible childcare

The approach to offering accessible and flexible childcare to parents was not uniform across all project partners. The table below depicts some of the many actions and activities that project partners undertook in providing accessible and flexible childcare solutions for parents.

Table 5. Overview of concrete PACE practices in childcare

Project partner	Examples of concrete actions and activities in creating accessible and flexible childcare solutions
ACSW Wattrelos	Extending the opening hours of the *haltes-garderies* (early years settings offering occasional childcare), offering full-day care and providing parents in the PACE project with the opportunity to plan and use childcare occasionally.

Community Centre Arques	Creating an informal volunteer network to provide occasional and flexible childcare during courses and activities for parents. Working together with parents to organise activities from within childcare.
CSE Boulogne-sur-Mer	Proactively informing all parents with young children in the community centre on childcare possibilities; offering a combination of regular and occasional childcare in the *multi-accueil* (an early years setting combining regular and occasional childcare).
Brighton & Hove	Offering tailored childcare brokerage for parents in PACE, guiding parents to nurseries, childminders or the at-home childcare service; advocating for more flexibility in childcare with childcare providers across the city; guiding parents towards childcare through keyworkers across the city.
Gravesham (Kent)	Organising a pilot of occasional and flexible childcare in nurseries and childminders that used to offer planned and regular sessions only; advocating for occasional childcare in the region; offering a 'taste of childcare' for parents in PACE through the Learning Links programme.
The Mussen (The Hague)	Offering informal occasional childcare; advocating for more flexibility in the childcare system.
Ghent	Designing a pop-up nursery; offering occasional childcare at short notice
38 Volt (Mechelen)	A purely occasional early years setting that is free of charge and combines childcare with employment support in one physical place.
Turnhout	A flexible early years setting in the same building where regular early years and out-of-school care is offered, along with employment support for parents.

4.3.2 What makes childcare accessible for parents?

Support in navigating the system

Parents highly appreciate that PACE supports them in finding a place in childcare. When parents are referred to PACE, they are often brought in contact with a keyworker who helps them to find childcare. These keyworkers go to great lengths to help parents find a spot in childcare. Also, some PACE projects have an agreement with one or more early years settings to give their parents priority or enable flexibility for these parents. Parents appreciate that this allows them to do other activities while their child is in childcare. However, some parents have difficulties with this system. They get priority while other parents with similar needs, but accidentally not in PACE, do not have this advantage. There is also fear that the nursery itself will treat them differently, less friendly. Practice shows that these nurseries treat parents who are part of the PACE project no different than other parents.

> *"It is a great project for people who have children and want to work or follow an education. These parents cannot find childcare because everything is full. My keyworker has guided me very well in this. I was able to bring my child to the nursery, do an internship and attend a course without any problems and I am happy about that." (a mother from Turnhout, 2020)*

On different gears and paces

Childcare has its own pace, determined by the local context and regulations. In the UK, parents are preferred to arrange their childcare and funding before the start of the next term. In Belgium, many parents are confronted with waiting lists. Finding childcare at short notice is a hassle. Still, parents are sometimes expected to have a solution after a few days or weeks. For instance, they are called upon by employment or integration services to start a course, they have an urgent appointment or can start working in two weeks.

Parents testify that being able to count on a readily available childcare solution is crucial.

> *"An important change for me was having childcare for my youngest son. Through a childminder which allowed me to take language courses. Also, I have got a job, cleaning work. I do not like this work, but I need the money. In the holidays, I have childcare for all the children". (a mother from Turnhout, 2018)*

> *"Having childcare has allowed me to look for a job and to work." (a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)*

> *"My son started to go to nursery and now I can go to [the] English course which is very helping me and I have time to cleaning [and] doing my housework properly. My son he is happy to go to [the] nursery." (a mother using occasional childcare in Gravesham, 2020)*

> *"I have many health problems, thanks to 38VOLT I can go to the hospital without the child, is much better." (a father from Mechelen, 2018)*

For some parents, starting childcare is a huge step. They might not be familiar with the childcare system or have bad experiences. Some parents have been home with their children fulltime and are not used to being separated from them, and vice versa. Other families have fled another country. For them, leaving their children behind is a massive emotional experience. In these cases, early years professionals and settings need to be able to switch to another gear and give families the opportunity to get used to childcare in a slow pace. In Gravesham, many parents testify how the "Learning Links" programme has helped them to take the step to childcare. In Learning Links, parents come together in small groups. They learn about parenthood and children's development in a very low threshold manner, while their children are taken care of by early years practitioners. This all happens in the same building.

> *"I used childcare only for Learning Links. For my youngest. [it was] Alright because it was in the same building. My little boy was very clingy at that stage. So, it was important. Was fine as a first start, he got used to being away from me." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

In 38 Volt in Mechelen, parents can stay and play with their child as long as they need to get used to childcare. For some parents, this is what they need to build trust in childcare and be separated from their child.

> *"My keyworker called, and I was welcome. I was able to see how they work here. We can say goodbye to our child gently. Another mom got all day to say goodbye. This is different in other nurseries." (a mother from Mechelen, 2020)*

> *"When my daughter started here in childcare, I stayed here every day during 3 weeks. After three weeks they told me "now you should go". They talk with me not about me. Also, it gives me confidence and trust that I can be here whenever I want so I can hear how they talk about parents I know they do not gossip. Once I heard a student say something about a parent and she got corrected immediately." (a mother from Mechelen, 2020)*

Being able to go slow is important for parents but for the children as well.

> *"My children opened up as well in Learning Links." (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)*

Different shades of flexibility

Many parents refer to flexibility as being crucial. They do not ask for flexibility as such. Parents need flexibility to make their life work. Parents living in vulnerable circumstances often experience a high demand of flexibility, from welfare or public employment services, from the schools of their children, etc. They often have

diminished ability to fully organise themselves and to plan, because of health, housing or family issues or a combination of these. They need flexibility in at least one domain to solve the lack of flexibility in other domains. In many cases, flexibility in childcare can help families to solve the puzzle of daily life at least partly.

Being able to start childcare at short notice, or at your own pace, is part of this flexibility. Knowing that there is a childcare solution you can count on in emergencies is part of it as well.

> "I was offered it [occasional childcare] when I had a job centre interview and it's really good. Knowing that whenever I need emergency childcare there is something available. It gives peace of mind." (a mother using occasional childcare in Gravesham, 2020)

For many parents, flexibility in childcare is linked to their training or employment situation: when they work flexible hours, they will need flexible childcare. When their financial resources are limited, they want childcare only when they need it and not full time.

> *"They helped me with childcare: I have a place in childcare that is flexible. They also help me to get my driver's license. With regard to childcare, I cannot say whether they do better than other childcare providers, I do not have any experience, but they are very flexible. I am now working on a temporary contract, and I am able to do volunteer work in the community centre to help me get my driver's license in a less costly manner." (a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)*

> *"I plea for flexible childcare. When I started here it was not there yet, I missed that very much. Now that it is available, when I come to do something here [in the community centre], my child can go to childcare." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

Flexibility serves different opportunities for parents: applying for a job, taking an exam, a doctor's appointment during pregnancy, the occasional visit to the hospital with another child that has an illness, or also to have some time for themself and going shopping or to the hairdresser.

Parents need the flexibility to be able to bring their child to childcare when needed. In addition, it is also important that the childcare centre has extended opening hours so that this matches the courses and working hours of the parent better.

Less worries about finances

In 38 Volt in Mechelen, childcare is free. Parents indicate that this is a key element of accessibility for them. The pilot of occasional and flexible childcare in Gravesham (Kent) also consisted of sessions that were free of charge for parents. A mother explains how important this is to her.

> *"The benefit of occasional childcare for me is on finances and employment. For both: not worrying about paying for childcare when you want to do training course that will help you get a job offer." (a mother using occasional childcare in Gravesham, 2020)*

Other project partners were not able to offer childcare for free but supported parents in finding an affordable childcare solution. For instance, in Brighton & Hove, a childcare broker and PACE keyworkers offered parents support in accessing the different kinds of funding and tax repays available to parents.

> *"We learn to use the system in a smart way: the PACE officer helps us with this. There are ways to make sure that you get more money in but do not lose too much money, you have to make sure you work the right amount of hours and ask for the right things in terms of benefits." (mothers from Brighton & Hove, 2018)*

> *"My keyworker was extremely supportive and helped me to understand how finding work would impact on my eligibility for tax credits and financial help with childcare." (a parent's closedown story from Brighton & Hove)*

Being welcome and building confidence and trust

Parents want to see that their child is happy in childcare. For them, trust means getting to know each other. The first impression is important. For some parents, it is very important that the setting is clean. But most parents emphasise the importance of a homely atmosphere and being welcome.

> *"You want to leave your child where it feels familiar. It is like that here. It is a familiar and a safe environment. Without that childcare I would not dare to take the step to work. It's just a big concern". (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

The parents share their experience about what helps to feel at ease to leave their child at the nursery. If they can see that their child is welcomed and treated well, they feel reassured. They also greatly appreciate if they are asked information about their child: how the child can be comforted, how it is at home, what it likes to play with, etc.

> *"I am very happy with the childcare. I visited other settings and was not happy there. "J'étais découragée" (I was discouraged). They did not pay attention to the children. Here it is well organised, and they pay attention to the children. "Ils font bien leur travail"(they do their job well)" (a mother from Mechelen, 2018)*

A mother explains what the staff does to make her and her child feel welcome:

> *"You feel welcome. Also, to the children, they have seen my child, they take care of it. It is different here. Here they help you to enter with the baby and your stuff, to bring everything inside. Others [other settings] only say hello, they don't help. Here they take care of this. They ask more, are interested." (a mother from Mechelen, 2020)*
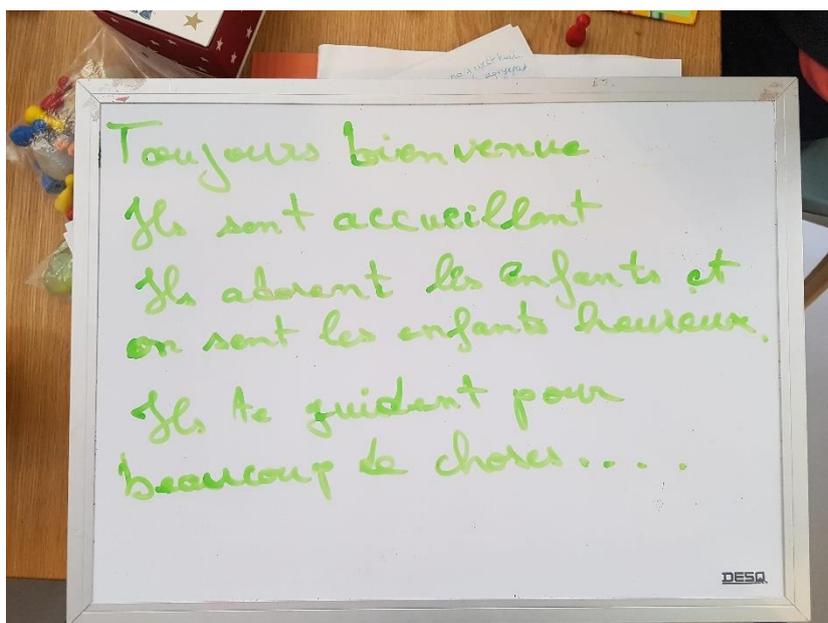

Figure 8. A mother's message for 38 Volt in Mechelen.

The message from a mother from Mechelen in 2020, depicted above, reads: "*You are always welcome here. They give you a warm welcome, they adore the children and you can feel that the children are happy. They support you with many things …*"

Parents emphasise the importance of the staff's positive and welcoming attitude. This means being friendly, making you feel welcome. This attitude is made concrete to both the child and the parent. The parents are sensitive to how the child is treated: hugging the child, comforting when it is crying. A father explains how important it is for his wife that the early years staff take into account her worries about behaviour and food:

> "*We send our son here because he can learn a lot here, at home he cannot learn these things. He comes here twice, three times a week. Very important is having confidence and trust in childcare. In other places this did not work. My wife is very strict on food and behaviour, here in 38 Volt this is not a problem. We do have trust in this system, and thanks to the trust no problem to come even more than is necessary.*" (a father from Mechelen, 2018)

Parents also talk about the possibility to spend time with their child in the early years setting. This is something that is more generally accepted in Belgium and France than in the UK where safety regulations make it difficult for parents to enter the setting. In 38 Volt (Mechelen), the parents find it very helpful to leave their child over time. It ensures a gradual transition for both parent and child. It also reassures them: they can see how the staff works and how everything is organised.

In some childcare places, the parent must hand over the child at the entrance or reception or there is limited access.

> "*I could pick up my child at the table, so up to where the child was busy. That possibility was there but not every day. You have the feeling that you are blocked here (at the door). If they sit at the table in the afternoon while eating fruit, you can enter…that is fine. It is parental participation, you get a voice, you feel familiar in the space, you are allowed to be there.*" (a mother from Turnhout, 2020)

> "*There are stay and play sessions, but then they ask you to leave. Except if there are activities planned together with the parents.*" (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)

Not all parents find it equally important to be allowed access to an early years setting. In the UK, parents generally find it normal that this is not allowed because of safety reasons. Another parent indicated that having parents in childcare might makes the separation process more difficult.

Parents also express clearly how they want to be involved as a parent. They do not want to receive unsolicited advice on how to raise their child. On the contrary, they want to receive questions about which approach could work for their child. And they want to be listened to if they have concerns about their child.

> "*My son is more difficult. They discuss with me what works at home. For instance, is it alright to make the child stand in the corner? They look together with me for a way to handle him. If an approach does not work, they will still reassure me. If it does work, they take a picture and send it to me.*" (a mother from Mechelen, 2020)

The parents find it hard to leave their child behind, especially when the child is crying. They appreciate if they get time to say goodbye, that they can stay with their child a bit longer.

They also wish to be kept informed of how their child is if they are not present. When the child is finally calm, the parents would like to hear this by receiving a call or a message. A mom gives as an example that in the beginning she sometimes got a picture or a video to see how her child was doing. If anything occurs, they want to be informed quickly, e.g. a call if the child has a fever. They also like to hear about positive events.

In 38Volt, parents bring their homemade food for the child's lunch. The parents appreciate this very much: they are assured that their child eats what it is used to and what they prefer as a parent.

Being more than a parent

In addition to the expectations concerning their child, parents also want to be seen as and be more than a parent. Parents value a personal and tailored approach and feel that staff is really interested in who they are.

For non-native speakers who do not know the national language sufficiently, the threshold is lowered, and communication goes more smoothly if the staff is willing to speak English or French (e.g. in Belgium).

Finally, parents also want to be able to bring in their personal concerns. They want to be asked how they are doing. A mom who is a victim of social violence gives the example that it was supportive for her to being asked about it. Other parents testify as well:

> *"It is nice if they ask how I'm doing." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

> *"38 Volt is a place to find peace for me. The childcare professionals notice when I have a difficult moment. They say "Come, stay a little longer and have a coffee".” (a mother from Mechelen, 2018)*

Several parents mention that early years professionals motivated them to take time off for themselves, something they had not done for years. On the statement whether the childcare in PACE allowed them to do things that are important to them, parents answered:

> *"Yes, I was pregnant and could go for an appointment."*

> *"I could use childcare to study for an exam."*

> *"The staff here says: bring your child if you want to do something for yourself, such as go to the hairdresser or do some shopping."*

> *(mothers from Mechelen, 2020)*

The accounts of parents from Gravesham who participated in the occasional childcare pilot are comparable.

> *"Having kids in temporary childcare would help me with social contact because I can have a meal at a friend's or go to the mall with friends. Self-care with kids away, I can have a nice 2-hour soak (which I haven't done in over 4 years) and also do my hair, nails etc. Also, for my mental health: the kids being away creates lone time to reflect or just to read a book with no noise." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

Mothers testify that taking time off for themselves is not something they would do usually or spontaneously. They would not tend to ask for it either out of fear of being judged by staff. The fact that staff proposes this really makes a difference for parents.

4.3.3 Obstacles that remain according to parents

For many of the parents who were part of PACE, the project has made a huge difference in gaining access to childcare. Keyworkers supported parents in finding a place in childcare. However, also the keyworkers were confronted with structural barriers in affordability and availability and with a lack of flexibility.

Especially in the Netherlands and the UK, childcare remains an expensive venture for many parents.

> *"Childcare is a huge obstacle [to employment]. Its costs and the lack of flexibility around being a mum. You don't want to work just to pay for childcare, so that someone else looks after your children." (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)*

As discussed before, flexibility means different things for different families. While one family is content with the fact that they can plan and use childcare at short notice, another family might need non-standard opening hours. We see that this is very difficult to accommodate, except when there is an affordable at-home childcare system (Brighton & Hove) or when there are childminders or nurseries offering care during non-standard hours.

> *"Childcare is not adapted to working hours of parents. A lot of parents here work non-standard hours. When I would start working full time, I would be forced to pay a nanny at home, which is very expensive. This is the reality for many parents." (a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)*

In addition, the childcare places created thanks to the PACE project are not sufficient to cover the needs of all families. Also, within the PACE project, parents testify that there is not enough flexibility in childcare. Several parents state that the places created by PACE are valuable, but they are not enough for a system change.

> *"You meet weekly with your mentor, you have meetings. There is childcare available now, but it is still not flexible. For specific in-house trainings, yes, but not for other things. There is an attempt here, but no systematic offer." (mother from The Hague, 2020)*

> *"PACE [should] promote better childcare. I need to get more involved into the project to get the most from it. Limitations of scope of PACE is how it can influence change in cost/flexibility of childcare." (mother from Gravesham, 2018)*

During the focus group in Brighton & Hove in 2020, seven out of eight parents (some were couples) indicated that having childcare adapted to your needs in terms of planning and working hours is the most important lever to accessible childcare for them (see Figure 9 below).
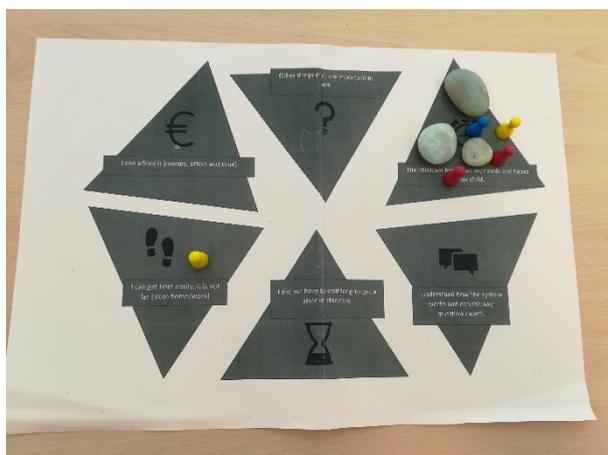

Figure 9. Main levers to accessible childcare for parents.

Parents in Brighton & Hove seem to have accepted that there is little they can do to make childcare more flexible.

> *"It is clear that they require fixed booking so no judgement, it is clear expectations both ways "no expectations or hopes of flexibility", it is clear what they offer. It is very clear that they only start at 8." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

> *"If I ask for flexibly, they are always lovely – but they explain they are full and can't do it. No judgment." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

Parents want to be more involved and more together

In terms of parental involvement and inviting parents into the nurseries, we see that there is a lot of variety. PACE project partners who have childcare under own management had more opportunities to work on this than project partners who depended on external, private providers. Parents' accounts on parental involvement vary, but when asked if they would like to have the opportunity to be part of their child's childcare experience, almost all parents say they would love to.

> *"[It is an] Outstanding nursery but they were distant and then I changed with my third child to one that is friendlier. Some don't care about parents lives and don't understand at all even if they are of outstanding quality for the children." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

> *"Especially at the start [i.e. when child just started childcare], I would like to be there in the mornings for an hour, just to see how he is doing". (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

Childcare can also be a place of social contacts. It is a place where parents can meet each other.

> *"I would like to get to know the other parents at the nursery and socialise and invite them for parties." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

Parents from the PACE target group sometimes live in isolation, are new in the country, unfamiliar with the culture and have few contacts. They express the need to get to meet others and indicate that childcare can help to answer this need. Parents have more examples of schools that facilitate encounters between parents than of initiatives in childcare. In childcare, it is often just dropping off the child and leaving straight away.

During interviews and focus groups, we hear few experiences from childcare where attention is paid to interaction between the parents and where parents are actively involved. There is a nursery with a play area where parents can chat. There is a childcare that organises "stay and play" sessions. Another example is the nursery where children learn songs in different languages. Still, a mom confesses that it is hard that it just does not happen in her language and that she is not invited in to teach the children a song from her home country.

It needs a context where it is possible to work out a more parent involved childcare. For example, in the UK the strict safety regulations make it difficult to allow parents into childcare.

The limits of purely occasional childcare

Once parent and children feel settled and confident, parents prefer their child to remain in the same setting. They are reluctant to changing childcare. Some PACE projects only offer flexible and occasional childcare. The intention is to move on to a steady childcare solution afterwards, which is very difficult for parents. Parents

prefer to keep their children in the same setting even if that makes it difficult for them to move towards employment.

> *"The setting is not flexible; I can't swap hours or add additional hours as there are waiting lists. I don't want to move daughter as she is settled. Good quality but not flexible for appointments or job interviews. If I get work the chances are, I would need to look at temporary childcare while I wait for a space [in the setting where she is settled]. She is happy and settled and she struggled to settle so I don't want to move her." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

4.3.4 Employment and activation

Some general information on employment and activation in PACE

Here, we discuss parents' experiences with employment and with employment support. Similar to the part on childcare above, we first discuss parents' past experiences and barriers. Then we present their experiences on employment support in PACE. At last, we take time to outline the barriers and obstacles that remain or that PACE cannot change.

Again, there is variety in the accounts of parents. As discussed before, the target group and the local contexts in PACE are diverse. Also, the PACE project partners used different approaches to employment support, as described in the prototypes on employment support and activation.[23]

The labour market: An actual market for parents?

The parents testify about their experience with the labour market: the jobs, flexibility from the employer and to write their resume. In the UK, the Netherlands and France, there is also a group of mothers that have stayed home to take care of their young children. When the children are older, they want to work. However, they have a gap in their resume. The employer does not appreciate the staying at home for the children, "being a mother".

> *"Employers don't want young parents or people that are planning to have children." (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)*

> *"Often you get the question "Madam, what have you done in the past eleven years?" – "Yes, but I have been a mother."" (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

Many of these parents feel as if they are no longer competent and that they are worth less than someone who has always been working.

> *"I am always applying for work and I do a lot of interviews. I never get answers. When they respond they say that others are better or that I am not the right candidate." (a mother from Ghent, 2020)*

Some parents are searching for permanent work. However, they often end up in temporary jobs. And the transition from temporary to permanent work is not going smoothly. In this way they are stuck in an unstable employment situation. With temporary jobs, there is often uncertainty about the number of hours and whether they will have a job the following week.

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[23] Will be published as part of Output 3

Some have negative experiences when applying for a job. A practical test can go well while they fail the interview and are therefore not accepted. Other parents who have degrees and qualifications from abroad face difficulties because their degree is not recognised or valued. Having their diploma admitted is too expensive.

> *"I have a master's degree in English literature and linguistics in Hungary, but I am facing difficulties. I have to start everything from the bottom." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

> *"I used to work in a hospital in Nigeria. I really liked that, but my diploma does not count here." (a mother from Ghent, 2020)*

While the labour market might sounds as a market where you can stroll around and pick and choose a job you like, many parents rather feel like they are the goods in the market stalls where employers can pick and choose from.

Trajectory to work: activation and employment support

Many parents still have a way to go before they are ready for the local labour market. For some parents, PACE is their first experience with employment support. Many parents, however, are already familiar with the Public Employment Services (Pôle Emploi in France, Jobcentre Plus in England, VDAB in Flanders and UWV in the Netherlands). Their experiences with these services are shockingly united: parents feel unsupported and unheard by these services. In addition, parents experience these services as inaccessible in various ways. The procedures are complicated and are not well explained. There is too little time for an interview, limited opening hours. For some, the service is in a different city and therefore hard to reach.

> *"Jobcentre is a scary place to go." (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)*

> *"The system is very complicated. I wanted to work and did find information on internet of the possibilities, but it is complicated. There is no step-by-step plan on what you must do first and next. They should try harder to use words that everyone can understand. The employment service is very strict, I had to work immediately, did not matter what job. They do not take into account your situation. I asked about childcare and they just said "no I cannot help you with that." It is demotivating. They push you." (a mother from Turnhout, 2019)*

> *"Job Centre, they pull your hood down when you walk, in its really intimidating." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

Parents indicate that their activation trajectories do not always correspond with their wishes and needs. There is pressure from the employment services to follow a specific course or to start working immediately. For example, a trajectory that leads to a bottleneck profession or they must follow language lessons. There is little possibility to try out a certain direction.

> *"The employment services are an obstacle. They are very rude and strict. "Sorry, you just have to go cleaning", they say. I would also lose my benefits if I would do the training I wanted to do." (a mother from Turnhout, 2019)*

As mentioned earlier, some parents have a degree from their country of origin, but they still must follow a trajectory again to be eligible. These parents feel frustrated as they feel ready to start working and are obliged to start all over again.

> *"It would be good to select a nurse, receptionist or schoolteacher with the same qualifications I have in my country. But here (UK) again you need to complete some courses which is a waste of time and money. Because here, I need to go to college and complete the course and will pass the exam." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

Many parents want to work, but do not want to take any job. There are exceptions, some parents just want to work to get money in.

> *"What I want? Being in employment, it does not really matter what type of employment. I just want to work. Important for me to be independent, financially, and for myself: learning things, evolving, … Also, I need to have childcare that I can depend on, that I can trust." (a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)*

Still, most parents indicate they want a job in a sector that interests them or do an additional training to achieve this.

> *"A good result for me would be having a driver's license, being in employment - part-time, in an area that I am interested in, like working in a shop." (a mother from Wattrelos, 2018)*

> *"Being able to work is also important. It means independence, a reliable income but definitely also getting satisfaction, a sense of purpose from your job. For me, I need social contact, being occupied and help people. If I come home and ask myself "what have you done today?" I want to be able to give a good answer to that. I want to mean something for other people. Before I did cleaning work and I worked as a dental assistant, but I did not get satisfaction from that." (a mother from Turnhout, 2019)*

Parents realise that this requires time and resources and do not feel supported by Public Employment Services in this matter. Because of the strict rules and timing of these services, the parents have a strong feeling of detachment and no flexibility. This seems to reflect the way the service is provided. Parents confess about anonymity, being a number, they don't know you, the atmosphere is negative. According to the parents, it makes a lot of difference who the keyworker is. You are highly depending on his willingness.

> *"With Pôle Emploi it is as if we are boring them. You are a number to them. They prefer email and that doesn't work. They don't really know you as a person. It is only open in the morning, in the afternoon by appointment. But it also depends on the person who works with you." (a mother from Arques, 2020)*

The services are also strongly focused on the needs of the labour market. They do not stimulate what the person wants. For example, a mother says that she wanted to go to university but that she would then lose her benefits.

> *"The work coaches at the Job Centre don't know much about universal credit. I told them that I want to go and get qualified and go to university. They just told me my benefits would be stripped and I would really struggle. The building is vile. They said: "We don't have people telling us they want to go to university when they have children."" (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

Employment support in PACE: experience from the ground

The table below gives an overview of how the different PACE project partners approached employment support. The overview depicted below is not exhaustive but gives an idea of how the project worked with parents towards employment.

Table 6. Overview of concrete PACE practices in employment support.

Project partner	Examples of concrete actions and activities in facilitating access to the labour market
ACSW Wattrelos	Offering low threshold "*café-parents*" where parents can meet and discuss their trajectory together. A variety of trainings and workshops for parents offered within the community centre, combined with individual appointments with a keyworker. Parents can participate but also organise activities and there are many opportunities to volunteer within the community centre.
Community Centre Arques	Comparable to the approach of Wattrelos. A combination of group activities and tailored individual support. An employee from the local Public Employment Service comes into the community centre several times a month to lower the threshold to parents.
CSE Boulogne-sur-Mer	Comparable to the approach of Wattrelos and Arques. The parents are supported by a team of professionals and there is always someone available for parents to talk to.
Brighton & Hove	Parents are supported by a keyworker that is easy to reach and accessible. The keyworker also helps parents to access other services and is linked to services within the city council. This allows to work on access to childcare, benefits, employment support etc. Parents are offered a range of trainings and workshops in-house and in collaboration with external partners. There is a broad offer of volunteering.
Gravesham (Kent)	Parents are supported by a designated keyworker. They are offered trainings in house but can also access education and trainings in other organisations. One of the keyworkers is physically present in the local Job Centre once every two weeks. This lowers the threshold for parents visiting the Job Centre to get information on PACE and vice versa, the Job Centre staff's awareness about parents' personal situation and childcare needs increases.
The Mussen (The Hague)	Parents follow a six-month coaching programme. They are paired up with a mentor, a volunteer with a large business and employment network. This person coaches them and helps them to access employment. This is combined with a low threshold offer of activities and trainings within the community centre. Many parents can enter volunteer or work experience trajectories.
Ghent	A designated keyworker (single point of contact) supports parents in gaining access to employment step by step. The keyworker knows the city very well and has a large network on the level of employment and training. There is no group offer of trainings for parents, but parents are referred to external educations and trainings. The keyworker also has a network within the city, collaborates closely with public welfare and employment services and can easily access information on parents' benefits and employment situation.
38 Volt (Mechelen)	Parents are personally supported by a designated, accessible keyworker who works in childcare, which makes it easy to have formal but also informal meetings. The offer for parents is mostly individual but parents are also signposted to other organisations for trainings. The keyworker is linked to the local public welfare service and collaborates with the Public Employment Service.
Turnhout	A keyworker guides parents to work mostly on an individual basis. Once every week, the keyworker is physically present in the building where childcare is organised. There is close collaboration with other services who can offer trainings and education. The parents are supported in a tailored manner and the keyworker advocates for parents' rights and supports them in contact with public welfare and employment services.

4.3.5 What makes employment more accessible for parents?

Even though the practices and approach of PACE project partners is fairly diverse, shared 'elements of success' clearly emerge from the stories of parents. This section describes the impact of the PACE projects as experienced by the parents. The very positive perception was striking. Across the projects, parents indicate similarly what they experience as positive and the dominant aspects were largely the same no matter how the local project was designed.

A designated keyworker

It is not easy for parents that are further away from employment to find their way to a suitable job. For them, the PACE worker is a guide and a navigator in the world of employment. The parents give examples of what their caseworker does: looking for a suitable vacancy; showing the way to a temporary employment service; broadening the parent's view by suggesting to applying for a job in another municipality; attending job fairs. Parents also receive assistance in drafting or finetuning their resume and preparing to apply for jobs.

> *"It gives me confidence helping me to do a CV and gives me confidence that I have skills. They make me sound better in job applications. And there are always biscuits." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

For some parents, the worker provides a realistic picture of what is possible, which jobs are feasible and which are not.

> *"Every time I went on a job interview, I had an appointment with my keyworker to talk about what it was like. Sometimes she called the employer to find out how it had gone. She then told me what I can and cannot say during such an initial conversation. She taught me that I listen too little to the questions that the boss asks and that I immediately say too much what I want." (a mother from Ghent, 2020)*

The parents also perceive their caseworker as a mediator, sometimes an advocate to potential employers. Some parents don't know how an application procedure functions, how you present yourself. Or they do not fully understand what has been said in an interview, why they are not accepted. When necessary, the PACE worker will contact the employer himself to pave the path, to ask for clarification or afterwards to inform the parent why they are not accepted. If needed, keyworkers will also mediate between parents and public welfare or employment services.

> *"I get the chance to start a training, with approval from the Public Employment Service, on my own pace. Since I am in contact with my keyworker, the relationship with the employment service is better. She is like a moderator/broker, she really helps in a meaningful manner. Like now I have to look for an internship spot and she helps me to find one while all places seemed to be taken already." (a mother from Turnhout, 2019)*

Parents emphasise that how they are treated makes all the difference to them. It is striking how parents from the four different countries use more or less the same words to describe the way they feel about the keyworker. They describe this person as someone who is easy to reach and accessible, a person who cares, gives answers and correct information and will stand up for them. In addition, it is someone who values parents for who they are and at the same time will push them to go further. Sometimes, they even make the impossible possible.

The PACE staff will push you a little bit. You have to work hard, because they also work hard. Put in the same effort. You need to put in as much as they do. But you have to be prepared and capable to do this, and sometimes it still not right for you." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2018)

"After my divorce, I was trying to start my own business. My keyworker helped me to make my business plan. I finished my qualifications (level 3). To combine this with three children, that was impossible. Because of PACE, this became possible. My keyworker feels like part of the family." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2018)

The professional attitude of the staff is very important to the parents. They sum up different person-oriented attitudes: being friendly, always standing by, listening. The parents indicate that the approach is positive: giving courage, not being judged, supporting, positive feedback. It is not easy for some parents to build up trust. Working at their pace is important. It is about treating them as a person, not only concerning work and childcare, but also about more personal themes. The parents see them as staff but also call them a "friend". The parents compare PACE with other services. In PACE projects there is support towards employment, but there is no pressure. It is tailor-made and on pace of the parents.

My PACE Journey

"It was through my partner that I come to know about the PACE programme. When I finally received the decision on my status here in the U.K. my hunt for employment started. When I met my caseworker my chances of getting into a job went up. She had provided me with every support that I needed in order to get me ready for employment. She regularly updated me with job posting and websites, local job fair dates and trainings that could possibly help me with employment.

Her encouragement has kept me motivated and focused and her support highly contributed in achieving my goals in my Personal Development Plan. I hope that this programme will continue in supporting and helping others as the support that has been provided for me has greatly helped me in getting me ready to get back to employment. Thank you so much for the opportunity this programme has given me, and I commend my keyworker for her untiring effort in providing me with the support that I needed."

(the closedown story from a father from Brighton & Hove)

In their stories, the parents often refer to one person, their keyworker who makes the difference. In the Netherlands, the parent has a mentor (a volunteer) who guides them to employment. The parents experience this as supportive. But they do emphasise the essential that there is a good connection between the two. Changing of mentor is important if they don't feel comfortable, but then the parent must dare to communicate this.

"I was then linked to a mentor. Together with him I had weekly sessions for about six months. When I started, my self-confidence was low, and I couldn't name my qualities and talents very well. My mentor helped to rediscover them, which helped my self-confidence grow. I have also had support in writing motivation letters and writing my CV." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)

As mentioned above, this is done in a personal, tailored manner and without putting parents under pressure like other services. There is no financial punishment and no judgement when a parent is going through a difficult period. The keyworker trusts the parents' skills and will help parents to regain confidence in themselves.

"They are available, there is always the possibility for an appointment. Also: they give good advice and make sure the information they give is correct. At the Public Employment Service, they did not tell me all these things." (a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)

"Having a designated mentor, one-to-one contact, is really nice" (a mother from The Hague, 2020)

"My PACE keyworker is the nicest person in the Job Centre, even if she doesn't work there." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)

"I got personal support; the staff is available. This is different from the Job Centre, where there is only contact through email and it is more administrative. We are looking together at the possibilities." (a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)

"The family support worker is always looking for a solution. She is just super. I already got a lot of help [before I came here], but she is just great. You can count on her. She calls for you, she is empathic. She understands you." (a mother from Mechelen, 2018)

"There was positive help and I felt supported and not under pressure." (a mother's closedown story, Brighton & Hove, 2020)

"Emotions are also important; the keyworkers should ask about them. What is important here? A good keyworker. That is someone who takes the initiative, but without a barrier between us, who is honest, who invests in the parents by accompanying them and listening to them." (a mother from Arques, 2020)

"I have a learning disability and my keyworker made me see it as something positive and taught to say it to others. I've never been this open. I was surprised that they made an appointment for a job interview. My keyworker gave me confidence, insight on my talents. I can be honest now. In PACE, they were fine with learning a little bit slower." (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)

In case of emergency, parents can count on the keyworker. One parent refers to her keyworker as "a lifeline".

"Our keyworker is a lifeline and an extension of our community. There is a professional boundary, but she has been such a 'friend' to us. Way outside to what we could have wanted. Christmas 2018 they stripped us of all our money. PACE were the only people who helped us. My husband was at that time volunteering at the Children's Centre. PACE saved us!" (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)

"Our keyworker does believe in us. She is supportive through it all. It's not just a job for her, it's personal. Our growth is her growth." (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)

Parents sometimes feel that Public Employment Services treat them suspiciously, as if they do not want to work and need to be pushed. In PACE, the keyworkers do not start from suspicion but from trust and interest in who the parent is and what (s/)he wants to achieve. Another aspect that parents value is that they get supported into work, with mock interviews and phone calls before or after a job interview. This is different from services who offer training but then leave you to it.

"Give everybody a chance, people out there want to work! They sometimes think maybe you want to stay at home, they think maybe foreigners want this. It is not true. Not everyone wants to stay at home. They need to accompany people INTO work, not just train them or see them and then leave them to it. For some people it is really difficult to get anything: a

house, a place in childcare, work, ... Also, we need more childcare, more places, for parents who want to work and go to school. There are too many restrictions in language, you will learn it on the job, you learn every day. They think you can learn everything in school but that is not true. You can learn the basics there, but you will learn every day while you work. My keyworker, she gives answers, she keeps helping and takes you step by step. She also went with me to the Public Employment Service." (a mother from Turnhout, 2019)
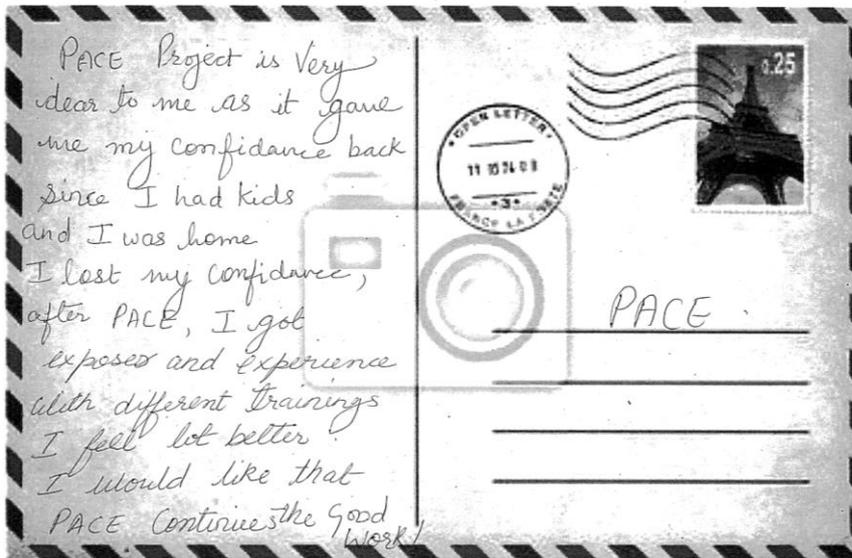

Figure 10. A message from a mother to PACE, Gravesham, 2020

Working towards shared targets with ownership for parents

Common to all PACE projects is working with a Personal Development Plan (PDP). It is a tool to make explicit and specify what the parent wants, what interests, strengths he or she has. From there, the goal is determined together, and a plan is designed. Each project has worked out a format for the PDP according to their own context. In some projects, the parent takes the PDP or a copy of it home with them after each appointment. For others, it remains with the keyworker and it is included during the conversations.

Not all parents have knowledge of the PDP. For those who do know this, its importance is also different. The tool is not essential for all parents. For some parents the content of the PDP might as well be discussed orally, and they do not need to see it or bring it home. Other parents indicate that it provides direction. It helps to set goals, to motivate and to give perspective. Each PDP is tailored to the parent. For some parents, working on their PDP is difficult, they see it as an obstacle initially. They begin with a general "wanting work". The PDP supports them to make this specific and to take small steps.

> *"By getting to know you, I got to know things that I never knew they existed: cleaning lady through service vouchers, work at times that are appropriate in combination with training."*
> *(a mother from Ghent, 2020, addressing her keyworker)*

> *"Once when you explain or find out what your end goal is, they will give you courses that fit. And you have choice in decisions." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

> *"What has been important for me in PACE? The PDP and completing this together. It was my springboard towards employment. Also, it lifts out your strong and weak points and helps to talk about yourself, what your expectations are, it targets what you should work on. I*

already had a concrete idea, but PACE helped me to make it a reality." (a mother from Wattrelos, 2018)

A package of training, education and volunteering opportunities

In PACE, the face-to-face coaching by keyworkers is complemented by training opportunities, volunteer work and internships. The variety of this training and education pack is large. Parent value the fact that there is a broad offer they can access and that the offer is tailored. When a parent is looking for a long-term education, the keyworker will look together with the parent what the possibilities are. Again, for parents it is important that it is what they want to do, at the right moment in their life and combinable with their family life.

Parents feel that trainings and courses increase their chances on the labour market. They feel more confident to start working afterwards.

> *"Courses give you a better view on yourself and what you want to do. Before I didn't know what I wanted to do." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

All PACE projects will refer parents who need it, to (group) activities or trainings. These can be about employment, for example applying for a course, but also about raising children or rather focused on leisure like sports. The community centres in France, for instance, offer a wide variety of activities for parents and parents and children. Some of these activities seem to be far from employment at first sight, such as a theatre course, sports, going to the city together or music. Parents, however, indicate that these courses are important to them: it helps them to regain confidence, to learn to speak out, to feel connected and to learn more about what their interests are. A mother from Arques testifies in 2020 that she has learned how to take the metro in Lille thanks to PACE activities. Before, she was afraid to do this and did not know how to use it. This might seem like a small thing, but it has increased this mother's mobility and self-confidence.

The parents appreciate the subjects offered at the group sessions. They see the added value for employment. They learn to apply, present themselves. Language lessons and driving lessons are also a step closer to job vacancies. Sometimes parents can do proposals for a course themselves.
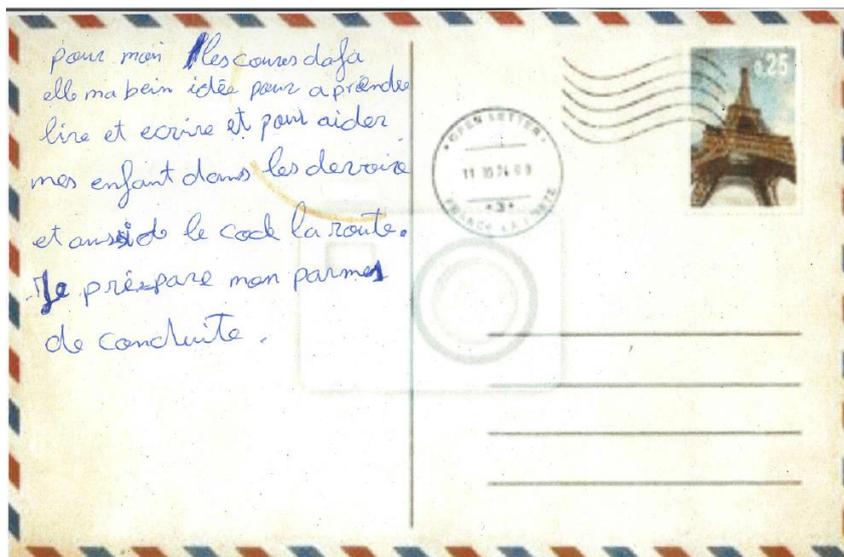

Figure 11. A mother's message for PACE, Wattrelos, 2020

English translation: "*For me, the courses have really helped to learn how to read and write and they helped my children with their homework. And also the Traffic Code, I am preparing to get my driver's license.*"

They also perceive the group activities as important for strengthening their self-confidence. They learn to come out of their isolation, to interact with others.

Not all parents are eager to follow a course. Some want to work immediately even if this is interim and not the most suited work.

> "What is important, is the help of someone who is there for you. My keyworker helps me to get a plan: first working, save money and later do the training. She helps me with paperwork. She works together with the Public Employment Service; this makes it easier for me." (a mother from Turnhout, 2019)

Some parents are already working through subsidised jobs or are volunteering. Certainly, in France and the UK, volunteering is mentioned by many parents as being a valuable step on their pathway towards employment. Parents experience voluntary work in different ways. For job counselling, it is used as a steppingstone to possible employment. This is also the case for some parents. It is an added value on their resume. Others appreciate voluntary work as meaningful to themselves, to be of value for society and to strengthen their sense of self-worth.
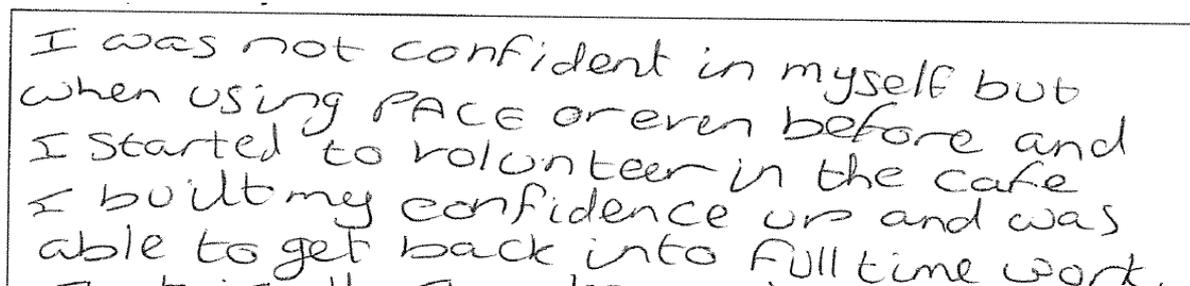

Figure 12. From a mother's closedown story, Brighton & Hove, 2020

Although most parents are generally positive about volunteer work, the fact that it does not come with additional income can be difficult for parents in a precarious situation.

> "Volunteering is good, but I can't pay my rent with it". (a mother from The Hague, 2020)

Almost all the mothers from De Mussen (Netherlands) are (or were) in subsidised employment (STIP employment). However, this is temporary employment and it provides no financial added value for the family. For some, it has been a steppingstone to a permanent job.

Meeting other parents

In the French community centres, the group aspect is a central part of the PACE project. There are many group activities that parents can choose from and the group of parents who participate in PACE meet each other twice a week while occasional childcare is provided for their young children. Other PACE projects organise group activities specifically for parents in PACE as well, these can be trainings such as soft skills or digital skills trainings, courses like Learning Links in Gravesham, or occasional activities for parents or parents and their children. Parents who have experience with these activities are very positive about it.

> "We can choose the workshops, that is also important. If we don't like one, we are not forced to participate in that workshop." (a mother from Arques, 2020)

The activities are matching with the family life, which lowers the barrier to participate. They are organised during nursery and school hours. Often, occasional childcare is provided during these activities. Nevertheless, initially it is not easy for many parents to engage themselves in a group activity. It takes time to get used to it.
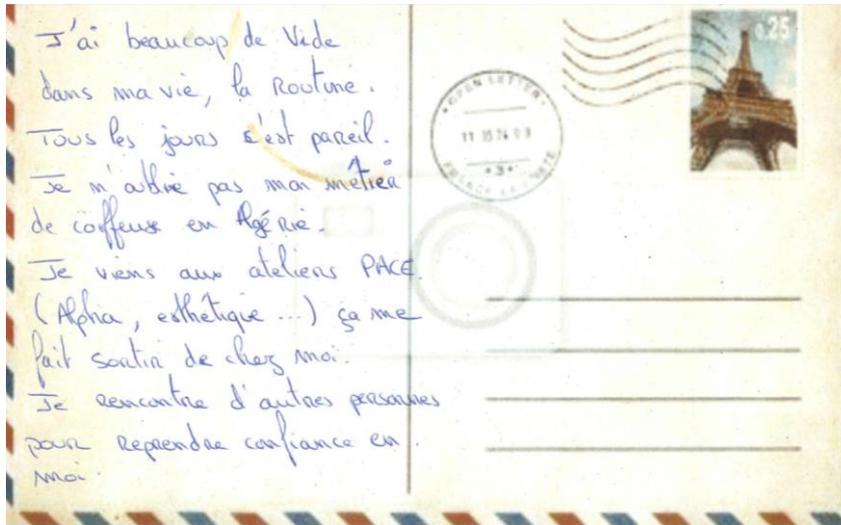
Figure 13. Message for PACE, a mother from Wattrelos, 2020

Translation in English: "*I have a lot of emptiness in my life and a lot of routine. Every day is the same. I haven't forgotten my profession of being a hairdresser back in Algeria. I go to the 'ateliers PACE', that makes me go out of the house. I meet other people and that gives me back some self-confidence.*"

The social aspect of attending a group activity emerged as a key element for almost all parents. They get to know other parents through the group offer. They experience recognition. They see that they are not alone in their situation. It is a new social network. Some call it their 'second family'. The atmosphere in which these proceeds facilitates it. There is no pressure to participate. Discretion is emphasised. It is the place to share their worries and emotions and be assured that this can be done in confidence.

> "*The feeling that there are others like yourself. We're in the same boat, we're not alone.*" (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2018)

During the focus groups, several groups of parents mention that the connection with other parents has been crucial and that this is something sustainable to them.

> "*After the PACE project is gone, we still have each other.*" (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)

The importance of a broad and integrated approach

Parents experience PACE as a project that focuses on childcare and employment and on all inquiries they have. The projects illustrate an integrated approach, a one-stop service. Their designated keyworker oversees all life domains, sees the cohesion in the life of the parent. Ironically, not focusing on employment seems to help to get parents closer to employment.

> "*My keyworker is important to respond to and support different questions.*" (a mother from Turnhout, 2020)

> *"They monitor a lot more than work; they look much broader. They also understand, and see that life gets in the way." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2018)*

The parents experience assistance with the children. In addition to searching for a place in childcare, it is also about giving advice on parenting or attention to the challenges of being a single parent. Parents sometimes visit other services with their keyworker to get further support. The acknowledgment of parents and the issues they face is crucial for many mothers.

> *"When I saw the flyer for PACE I thought 'oh my god mothers do exist'."*

> *"They acknowledge single parents and the issues they face."*

> *(mothers from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

In addition to the themes of children and work, all other life domains receive attention. Often there are concerns in other life domains that are dominant and that needs to be tackled first. These worries need to be solved first, to give the parent practical and mental space to focus on employment. The keyworker helps with practical and material aspects: housing, arranging once administration, residence status, referring for allowances.

Parents are sometimes reluctant to work because it does not benefit them financially, sometimes on the contrary. The keyworker can give the parent a realistic calculation of the difference between working or not. Finally, the keyworker also works on the parents' self-care by, for example, encouraging to do some physical activities or referring to a psychologist. And where many parents have stayed home to take care of the children, they are taken out of their isolation. They get the opportunity to meet other parents.

There is no 'golden combination' or winning package of support measures for parents. The success of PACE seems to lie in the fact that many different things are possible, that the support of the keyworker and the team is tailored to a person's needs and circumstances. During the focus groups we asked parents to indicate which elements were most important to them. Even within the same location and PACE projects, parents' answers were quite different, although the same key elements often surfaced (see table below).

Figure 13. A picture taken during the focus group with parents in Gravesham, 2020.

Some examples based on an exercise during the focus groups with parents.[24]

Table 7. Examples of main levers to employment.

Location	Most important?	Why?
Mechelen	Childcare	*"If there is no childcare, you cannot start working."*
	Confidence/trust	*"First you need confidence in the relationship with your keyworker. Then all other things will come step by step."*
	Structure	*"They offer structure here, that is good. You will also need structure when you start working."*
	Coaching	*"They offer you a range of options, they ask you what you want to do and then design a programme for you."*
Brighton & Hove	Confidence/trust	*"It is informal and a team together, they see us as human"*
	Administrative support	*"They know everything, travel grants going back to work funding other stuff"*

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[24] This exercise was not included in the focus groups in The Hague and Wattrelos because of lack of time.

	Broad outlook	"They access everything in one place you can look at all your support needs. Your benefits but also more support for your whole family. They have an overview, if they don't have the knowledge, they will find it for you."
Gravesham	Childcare	"You need childcare in order to work."
	Coaching	"Once when you explain or find out what you're end goal is, they will give you courses that fit. And you have choice in decisions."
	Confidence/trust	"The support is different from other services. Especially there is a difference in the way they treat you. There is no judgement."
Arques	Broad support	"You are supported on all domains."
	Other parents	"The exchange with other parents is most important. We meet each other, give each other advice, as women and for employment. You can also see you are not alone."
	Brief trainings and coaching (with PDP)	"You get closer to work. You get a lot of information on employment. The PDP helps to set goals."
Turnhout	Emotional support	"She showed me the possibilities, such as what my education trajectory could look like. Thanks to her I received exemptions at school.
	Confidence/Trust	"There is also just trust. She is a very open person, she sees people. She gives you the space to discuss your capabilities. So also mapped out what I can do and where I want to go. That is important, that is what
	Coaching	every person needs, you feel involved."

It is not possible to draw definite conclusions on what are the crucial ingredients of PACE solely based on this exercise, but it is clear that parents across settings value the confidence and trust in the relationship with the keyworker (and with other parents), the tailored coaching and the broad outlook and support.

4.3.6 Obstacles that remain according to parents

Obviously, the PACE project cannot change the macroeconomic context, the lack of jobs in some areas or the benefit systems. Still, the project can contribute to general awareness on the mismatch between childcare and employment and the challenges that are the result of trying to combine care and work.

> "The thought of going back to work is terrifying. You are looked at it differently when you have young children. I am a mom first and foremost. I don't want a job for 40 hours every week and miss out on everything." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)

> "Employers don't want young parents or people that are planning to have children." (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)

During interviews and focus groups, parents do ask employers for more consideration for their situation. This can be done through creating more part-time or shared jobs, adapting working hours to school and childcare hours and showing more consideration for parents who need to be at home when their children are ill.

They also call on employment services to take their situation into account and treat them in a more personalised manner. Despite predominantly negative experiences, the Public Employment Services remain an important partner for PACE projects and parents. Not all services recognise and support PACE projects. This may implicate that a parent who follows a course via PACE will not receive an exemption for this. The person must then remain available for the labour market, can be called up or be obliged to follow another training. We see that in these cases the PACE keyworker often mediates between the parent and the service.

Several parents have attested that they are glad to have a job thanks to PACE but that they actually long for a 'real' degree. Many of the courses offered in PACE are strongly focused on the needs of the labour market. They may lead to work, but the parent does not receive a diploma. Parents say they lack the added value of a real diploma, such as a bachelor or master's degree. Some parents have been supported in entering a long-term education in the context of PACE. This implies that parents go back to school for several months or even years. Not all parents are able to afford this.

In the course of PACE, we saw several examples of parents who invested a lot of effort into going back to work, but then were fired because of family issues. The story here below illustrates how painful these situations can be.

A PACE story written by a keyworker from Brighton & Hove, 2019

The parent was referred on to PACE by another parent who was receiving support from the project and has since secured employment. Her journey began in September 2019.

The parent, a lone parent living with her son, had been the victim of domestic abuse and a restraining order had been placed on her ex-partner. The parent suffered from anxiety relating to her ordeal. A court case was pending, and it had been recommended that they move to another part of the city for their safety. So, she had an awful lot going on. Her son would soon be eligible for a two-year funded nursery place, but she wasn't able to look for suitable childcare until she had moved; she had no idea where she would be living.

Despite their personal circumstances the parent was very motivated and determined to go back to work, hopefully within three months. Previous to having her son, she had worked in marketing and as a PA and was confident she would be able to find employment using the many transferable skills she had already acquired.

The parent was claiming Universal Credit and her claim was running smoothly, but her accommodation was privately rented, and she had a £100 a month shortfall. To help towards this, she did odd bits of work cleaning AirBnB accommodation. As she had no childcare in place, she took her son along with her while she worked.

The parent actively engaged in training. She participated in the 'Bright Futures' confidence building training facilitated by PACE in November 2019 and was also attending a 'Living Proof' course for survivors of domestic abuse at a local Children's Centre.

In December, the outcome of the court case went in her favour and she was no longer required to move. She decided to look for childcare and a two-year funded place was secured for her son at a local nursery.

Her job searching paid off and in January 2020 the parent was offered a full-time job as an administrator at a local pharmacy. Benefit calculations showed that the parent would be around £700 better off per month by being in employment. The nursery could offer her son full-time hours. However, they required an upfront payment of £821.43 which the parent was unable to pay.

At this point we were able to help the parent by:

-Supporting her to secure a one-off payment towards the upfront nursery costs through the Flexible Support Fund. She was given £700 towards this which is the maximum the Job Centre can give, this still left her with a £121 shortfall.

-Referring her to Brighton and Hove buses and helping her obtain one month's free bus travel.

-Referring her to Clarion Housing for a £50 starting work grant.

Luckily, the parent was able to come to some arrangement with the nursery to pay the additional fees. Without this combined financial support, starting work would not have been a possibility for this parent.

The parent started work in early February and the first week was challenging with the new routine but went well.

In the second week her son unfortunately became poorly. Being a lone parent with no family close by, she had no help and was forced to take time off work to care for him, which included a trip to hospital. Unfortunately, her new employer was completely unsupportive of her predicament and she was abruptly dismissed from her role. She felt particularly aggrieved as the company were aware of her circumstances as a lone parent without support when they offered her the job.

Reflecting on the experience the parent recognises that she needs to work at a company who are more accepting of her role as a parent. She also feels that taking on a full-time job was a little ambitious and has made the decision to look for part-time work in future.

4.3.7 (Mis)match childcare and employment

Childcare and employment: a difficult marriage to start with

From the previous chapters, it can already be deduced that childcare and work are not always well aligned. And this goes both ways. Parents attest that employers do not take their situations into account or do not realise that an employee is also a parent. Vice versa, the childcare system has very specific expectations of parents, in terms of regularity of attendance, the time to ask for funding or reserve a spot, the hours to bring or pick up children.

Also, parents themselves do not always find it easy to combine parenthood and at the same time go out to work. Specially, when the children are still babies or toddlers, some parents feel that their place is at home. If there are several young children, it is also extra stressful if they must combine this with working outside the home. Therefore, a job should outweigh the fact that they must leave their child in childcare. They want a job that gives satisfaction. So, it is not just a matter of practical arguments.

It is important for the parents that they can trust childcare and that the hours match so that they have no worries while being at work.

> *"Dear PACE, it would be nice if there were flexible childcare, so that you can make use of childcare from the moment you join the training course. If you need an hour, you should be able to do so not just for a whole day, but as needed!" (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

Parents indicate that childcare comes first. If childcare is not arranged, they cannot accept a job offer. That is a problem when there are waiting lists. Moreover, the childcare must match the working hours. Some parents also have evening or weekend work. The location of the childcare can also be a barrier. It should remain feasible to take a child to childcare, one or more to school and then travel to work.

Parents already experience a mismatch during the counselling phase. Little childcare is available for parents who apply for a job or take a course.

Finally, there is the financial aspect. Parents note that it is not always financially profitable to work if you also have to pay childcare. Especially when parents volunteer or take a course, the cost of childcare is a burden and the balance is often negative. The system is thus discouraging.

The PACE marriage of childcare and employment

In PACE, all project partners worked on access to childcare and employment. This was done in various ways. A first manner, like in what was called "PACE+" in the city of Ghent, is to support parents who already have a (partial) childcare solution into employment and adapt their childcare situation or make it more sustainable. A second approach is to primarily work through the activation or employment sector and find a childcare solution once parents start to do trainings, volunteering or job interviews. This was part of the approach from Gravesham, where parents could enter PACE via the Job Centre where one of the keyworkers was physically stationed once every two weeks.

A third approach was to work on childcare and employment at the same time. This was the approach from 38 Volt in Mechelen, who only worked with parents who were looking for childcare and employment. Many of the PACE project partners combined different approaches.

Whatever the approach or the entry into the combination of childcare and employment, the majority of parents affirms that the combination of childcare and employment is crucial to them.

> *"PACE provided childcare when I needed it to be able to attend courses." (a parent's closedown story from Brighton & Hove)*

"My keyworker made it possible to take steps. She also made it possible to keep my benefits and do the training. The childcare, being sure to have a spot there, is also very important. If I have worries or questions, I can always go to her. She gives me the right information. PACE is important, the project must continue. Childcare is a very difficult point, there are waiting lists, or they just do not take you. I had previously planned to start studying nursing, I had everything in place but no childcare, so I had to give up." (a mother from Turnhout, 2018)

"I can use occasional childcare; my youngest daughter uses the garderie in the afternoon when I have an appointment." (a mother from Wattrelos, 2018)
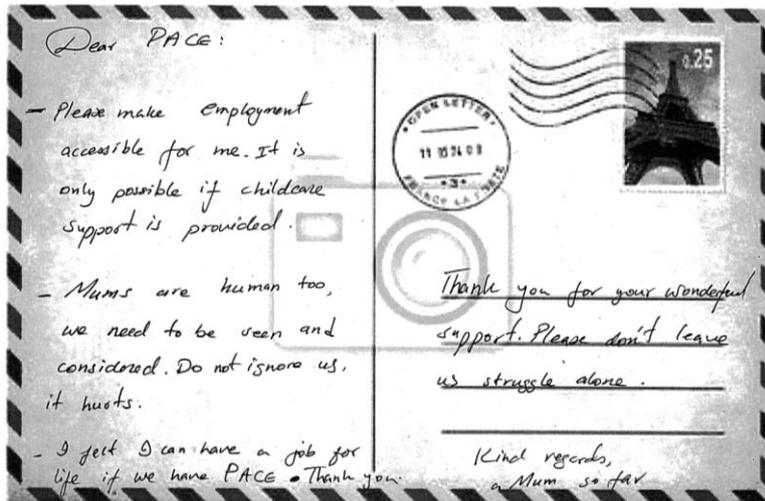

Figure 14. A mother's message for PACE, Brighton & Hove, 2020

Figure 15. A mother's message to PACE, Brighton & Hove, 2020

Still a struggle

Many parents' stories sound positive. Parents find their dream job or secure a spot in childcare. Still, behind these positive stories there is a lot of effort, from the parents and from PACE staff. Having sustainable childcare and employment is often the result of a long road with ups and downs. Even parents who seem to 'have it all' admit that there is no magic solution. This mother attests that combining a family with young children and employment is a struggle and a choice. She feels that it would actually be a lot easier to stay at home with the children.

> *"My husband's earnings reduce our benefits, but he is not eligible for benefits. We would need someone offering care in our home which is ok as they are Ofsted registered. You are fighting the system all the time. I have found my dream job for stimulation and satisfaction, but it would be easier to stay at home in terms of the system. There are too many loopholes and gaps between systems and processes." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

4.3.8 Accessibility of PACE as a project

> *"Dear Pace team, I am writing to you from a place where I feel safe and supported with confidence and resilience due to all your care and focussed assistance you have given me during those years when I felt most vulnerable. With lots of love." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

In this part, we focus on how parents experienced the accessibility of the PACE project as a whole. How easy or difficult was it to know about the project and to be part of it? How did they experience the geographical accessibility, the affordability and comprehensibility of the project as a whole?

Entrance: how parents 'find' PACE, or vice versa

PACE is often unknown to the target group of parents. Several parents attest that they have difficulties to find out which services they should and can access. Moreover, asking for assistance is hard. Detecting potential candidates and referring them in appropriately is therefore important. We see that some of the most successful manners to reach out to parents is through keyworkers who are present in settings where parents are already. These can be Children's Centres in the UK, the community centres in France and the Netherlands, and a range of welfare, education and employment services in Flanders. In some projects, PACE is part of the broader system where, for example, group activities are also organised e.g. social centre or city council. Parents have already taken part in activities or are already volunteering before they go to PACE. Parents indicate that it is often during informal conversations that PACE is discussed. Knowing the centre and its venue already makes the first step less difficult.

> *"The Health visitor and Early years learner helped me and opened the doors for me. Only a couple of months now, but I'm already a volunteer in a kitchen of a Children's Centre. I was not connected to a Children's Centre before. Early years learners play with the kids and talk with the parents. They are great people to push PACE." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2018)*

> *"I already knew the community centre. They talked to me about PACE, I was interested and attended a group meeting on the project. After that, I had meetings with the person who supported me personally." (a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)*

Other parents indicate that they know about PACE through other parents. Other parents' success stories and testimonies seem to be a good manner to inform and attract other parents.

> *"I started through a friend who introduced me to PACE. I felt a bit lost on the level of employment. I did know the community centre already for a long time." (a mother from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)*

> *"I had already seen it. I asked a friend who already came here, she said I should come too." (a mother from Mechelen, 2020)*

A third manner that leads parents into PACE is collaboration with other services. Still, here we see that even services that 'should know' about PACE often do not refer parents in a targeted manner. Many parents have heard of PACE through their social worker at the municipality, a health centre, childcare or the job centre. This means that it is important that these services know PACE well, that they know when and how they can refer candidates. Parents indicate that this is not always going well. The unfamiliarity of PACE to the services is especially a point for attention. Or the staff don't think about it and it only comes up when a parent explicitly asks where they help them.

> *"38 Volt is not known enough. But if it is intended for our target group, you will get there through signposting of other services. That is the way. For other parents [not from the target group] it is not necessary that they know it." (a mother from Mechelen, 2020)*

> *"But these services must then know it. And not everyone immediately thinks of 38 Volt or knows it. I had to ask for it myself." (another mother from Mechelen, 2020, in response to the previous citation)*

Only a very limited number of parents made acquaintance with PACE through a flyer. They saw this flyer in the centre they already visited. Or they heard from PACE from a friend who was already in PACE.

> *"One of my friends picked up a PACE flyer and she gave it to me." (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)*

Parents who eventually step into PACE, are saying that it comes at the right time in their life: they want work but could not succeed, they want a new phase in their life. If something is unknown, such as PACE, the practical threshold should not be too high. A location close or even embedded in the neighbourhood lowers the threshold. And then there is the first contact where a clear explanation, in a common language (often French or English), calm and friendly, is important.

Some parents indicate that the fact that they are part of PACE is actually a coincidence. They state that PACE should be more widely known and that more parents should get the opportunity to take part. Of course, this is only possible if there is enough staff and childcare to accompany these parents and if PACE is a durable part of the practice of a city or an organisation. During the project, several project partners decided not to advertise too broadly to prevent bottlenecks and waiting lists. Keyworkers can be very motivated but there are limits to the caseloads they can handle.

Availability, physical accessibility and affordability

> *"I have no friends and my family lives far away. I was glad my keyworker was there. First, she came to my house to visit me. We couldn't talk much at the time because I always wanted to prepare food. My keyworker then said that I better come to her office. This way, I was away from home and so I could visit her more (appointment about 1x per week for an hour + chance to ask questions via WhatsApp or telephone)". (a parent from Ghent, 2020)*

Parents highly appreciate the availability of "PACE", which is in practice the availability of a keyworker or a team of keyworkers. There is no waiting list. In most projects, parents were always able to contact someone.

There is a keyworker who does the follow-up. But there is a team that can intercept any question when the keyworker is absent. When there is childcare in-house, parents appreciate that there are no waiting lists. Project partners who collaborate with external (private) providers cannot ensure this but will do everything to make childcare as available as possible.

> *"It's easy that I can always drop by here. And there is always childcare, in other places there are waiting lists." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

Also, physical accessibility is important. A location that is embedded in the neighbourhood and that can be reached on foot or by bicycle lowers the threshold. The importance of customisation is recurring also in terms of contact: texting, office appointments or home visits. Parents highly value the physical accessibility of the settings that combined childcare and employment support in one place. On the other hand, parents were also critical about the fact that combining everything in one spot also means that the location is mainly accessible for people living in that specific neighbourhood. The French community centres face this problem to a lesser extent because they work with community houses in different areas of the municipality.

> *"It is already quite an undertaking to take that step for yourself, you have to cross a personal threshold. Accessibility, proximity is also important, public transport is expensive, if you cannot cycle then that is really a threshold." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

> *"For those who live far from here, on the other side of the city, it is also a barrier. The advantage is that you can come by whenever you want, there are no fixed hours." (a mother from Mechelen, 2020)*

The parents notice a difference with some other organisations in terms of affordability. The activities are for free. In terms of time, the activities are also adapted to their family situation. The appointments and activities are taking place during school and nursery hours. If needed, a keyworker will pay parents a home visit or meet in a neighbourhood café.

Usefulness, trustworthiness and comprehensibility

Some parents are not used to structure their daily lives. It helps them that PACE installs this themselves through a clear schedule of activities.

> *"You called me really fast and your appointments and mails made me do the things that I used to always postpone before." (a mother from Ghent, 2020 in a message to her keyworker)*

Parents who need it will receive a reminder for appointments. Also, the fact that the support is very tailored to a person's needs and situation makes the offer useful and usable. The usability sits in many details. When trainings are offered, the PACE staff will arrange for childcare on-site.

> *"The Café-Parents is once a month. The child can then go to nursery. The nursery also knows this in advance and gives PACE parents priority. This is an extra day on which the child can go to nursery. The parents receive the information and data on time, it is clear and it can thus be passed on to the nursery." (a mother from Wattrelos, 2020)*

When a parent needs a tailored childcare solution because (s/)he is working non-standard hours, staff will look for a childminder working flexible hours or at-home childcare. As mentioned above, in terms of trainings and support, the offer will be created or adapted to the needs of parents.

> *"The offer is usable. In particular, there is a need to take French lessons here to achieve our goals. PACE responded to this." (parents from Wattrelos, 2020)*

Parents highly value confidence and trust and appreciate the fact that the PACE keyworkers give them correct and reliable information. Several parents emphasise that their PACE keyworkers go to great lengths to make sure they get all the information and details for instance on a certain training, on possibilities for receiving benefits, which is according to them very different from how the public services work.

A significant number of parents are non-native speakers. These parents value it highly if there is the possibility to address them in a common language: French or English. If this is not possible, another parent is sometimes called in to interpret. This way the parent feels more at ease.

> *"It helps that it is affordable, close to where I live, they help me, there is no waiting list. And the keyworker adapts, she will talk slowly and take the time to explain the system to me. That is easier for me." (a mother from Turnhout, 2020)*

Interim conclusion

The degree to which the project is widely known in a city or area depends on the approach of the project partners. In some cases, limits are put on advertising the project to avoid bottlenecks. PACE is made very accessible to parents once they have gained access. Everyone is treated as an individual and on his or her own pace. This does not mean that everything and every service is suddenly available as magic. For instance, private childcare providers will still have waiting lists or limited opening hours, there are not more jobs available for parents because of PACE.

4.3.9 What do parents gain?

> *"Before 38 Volt (PACE), there was no hope." (a father from Mechelen, 2018)*

> *"Before PACE I was on a cliff, now I am on a bridge." (a mother from Gravesham, 2018)*

> *"The impact is much greater than the level of the individual. When I became single, I also had concerns for instance with my parents. It was very emotional for me that my father had to go to get milk because I couldn't do it. My feeling has completely changed now. It is not that I have much more now, but I'm back in control. That feeling is difficult to describe. 'I can now bring milk for my father'." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

Parents explain what benefits they experience from their participation in PACE. It is striking that all participants in the focus groups and interviews are very positive. They express a positive impact on many life domains. Most parents that provide us with input are still in the PACE project. Some have already temporary or subsidised employment. They give examples of what they have learned from PACE. They sum up the practical profit. There are driving lessons in some projects, language lessons and the ability to practice the language through contacts. Others have been in training or have learned to use public transport. This is not only valuable in the context of a future job. It is also an added value to build up their lives. Of course, there is an impact on their employment situation. However, parents speak most enthusiastically about the impact on themselves, their personal and social life. Their confidence and well-being have increased. They have come out of social isolation and are developed personally. They express it as control over their own life, being more than a mother, having time for themselves, having a structure in life.

At the closure of the focus groups with parents, we asked them to indicate on which life domains the parent had experienced an impact, whether positive or negative. Not all parents completed this document and the

exercise could not be done in all locations because of lack of time. In total, 30 parents completed the document. An example can be seen below.
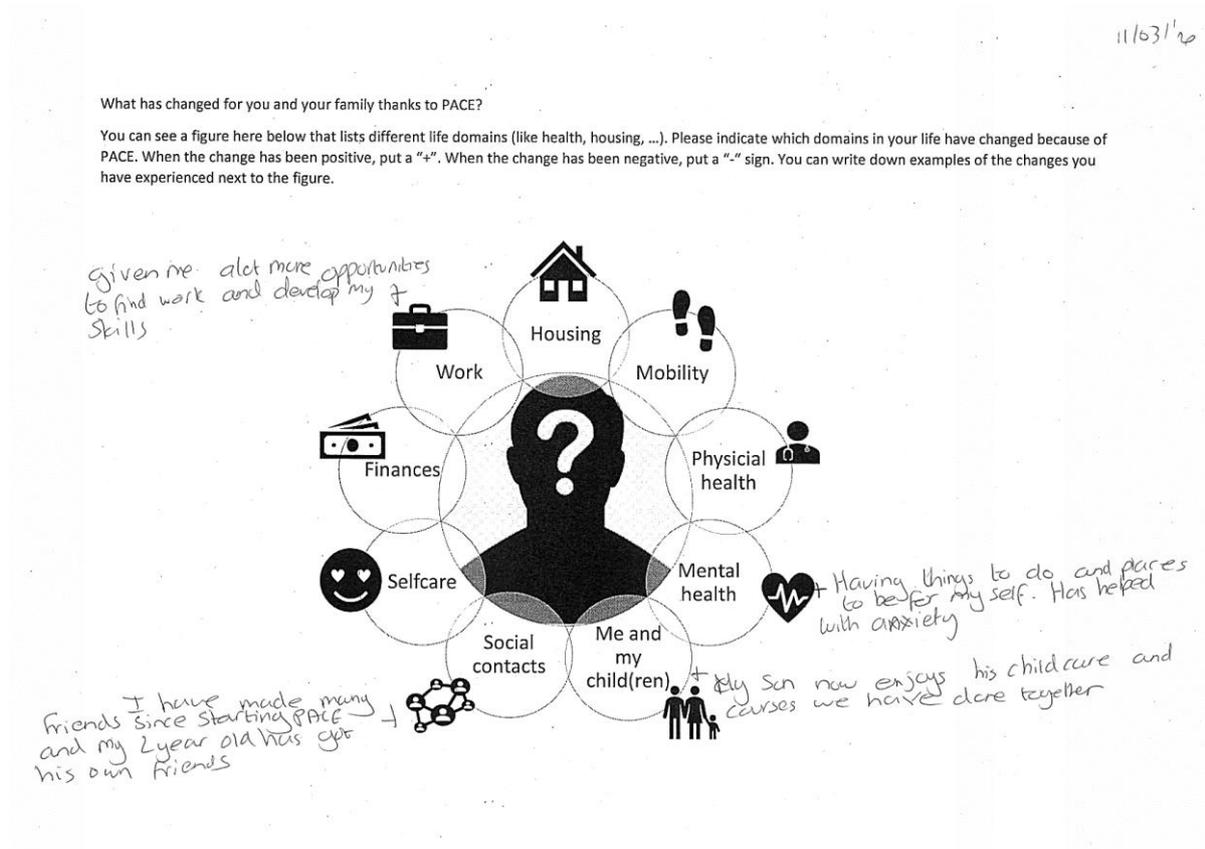

Figure 16. Example of a completed impact form.

Frequency analyses of this exercise do paint a picture of what domains PACE mostly has an impact on.

Me and my child(ren)

Parents report positive effects on their family life. Parents are happy to be able to count on a childcare solution or homework support for their older children. There is less stress at home, parents know better how to communicate with their children in different situations, develop better relationships with their children and also feel proud to set an example for their children.

> *"I am glad to set an example for my three children by working for my own money." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

> *"I share and talk more with my children." (a mother from Arques, 2020)*

> *"I have a better understanding of my children and their needs." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

> *"My PACE experience has made a tremendous difference to me and my family. It has not been an easy journey for many reasons but thanks to my keyworker and the team being there every step of the way we have been assisted with more than we could have wanted […] PACE has given me confidence to return back to work. I've had access to childcare,*

money advice, training, volunteering, workshops, internship and so much more. It has made us feel part of the community and not alone. As a family we have had to face many barriers especially financially, but PACE helped us gradually to get back on our feet […] It helps mothers and fathers be more than that." (a parent's closedown story from Brighton & Hove)

Out of the 30 parents that completed the impact document, 25 state that PACE had a positive impact on their family life and their relationship with their children.

Figure 17. A mother's message for PACE, Mechelen, 2020. English translation: *"Thank you for the support that you give me. I feel good and my child too. A thousand thanks."*

Social Network

Broadening people's social network was not an explicit goal of the PACE project, but it seems to be one of the major effects for parents. Going out more, meeting other parents and being able to share experiences with other parents is mentioned often during the interviews and focus groups. For some parents, the effect is indirect: it is the result of volunteering, following trainings or working. Other parents directly value the group of PACE parents which they get to know well. In the projects that also have a group offer, social contacts even show up as being the biggest impact. Parents feel that they have been able to develop a social network that they experience as permanent, even after the project.

> *"I talk with the WEB assistant, we talk to each other in group also, I now have many social contacts. I have my husband and children, but otherwise no family here. Hence those social contacts are important." (a mother from Turnhout, 2020)*

> *"I have made many friends since starting PACE and my two-year-old has got his own friends." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

Several lone parents and parents who recently immigrated to Europe explain how important this project has been in breaking their social isolation.
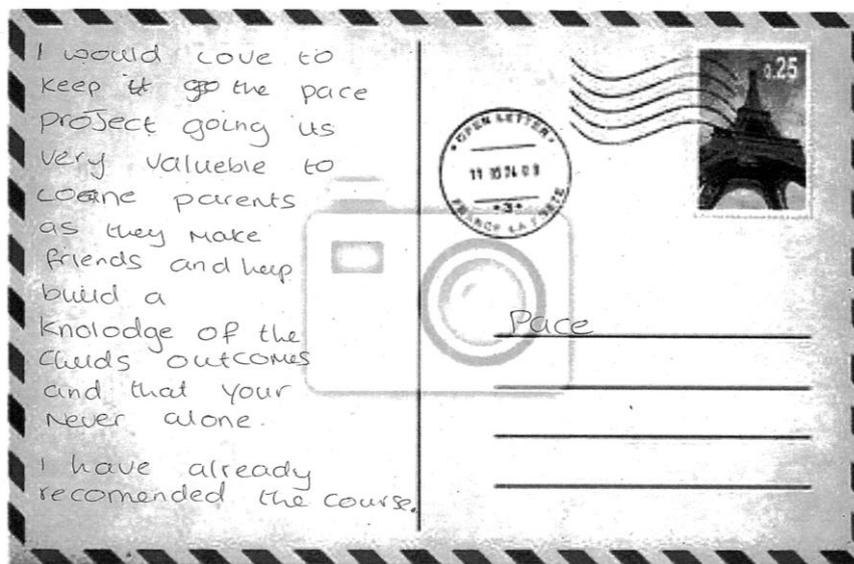

Figure 18. A mother's message for PACE, Gravesham 2020

Mental and physical health and self-care

Parents point to changes in their physical and mental health. They feel that they are healthier, going out to trainings or volunteering forces them to literally move more. Many parents refer to an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence. Others state that they feel less anxious or stressed because of PACE. Keyworkers help them to cope with difficulties in their personal lives, but also in relation to employment such as when a job interview did not turn out to be successful or had to be turned down because a parent did not have a childcare solution.

In the impact exercise, half of the parents indicate that PACE positively impacted their physical health. Sixteen out of thirty parents state that it had a positive impact on their ability and motivation to self-care, and twenty parents reported better mental health.

> *"I was always ill, I feel that because I work that I now have a goal again in my life. I feel really part of everything again." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

> *"My job gives me energy." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

> *"PACE supports and encourages me to take a break when I need it." (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

> *"I improved my grooming, I got dressed up to go to volunteer." (a mother from Gravesham, 2020)*

Employment

Guiding parents to employment is a key pillar of the PACE project. This is also very clear in the stories of parents. They talk a lot of how they either found employment or approached employment. The steps parents

took were diverse. Some parents were in a long-term education trajectory, others built up experience through volunteering or temporary jobs, others were still coping with health or family barriers.

> *"My keyworker helped me to apply as a cleaning lady at the city of Ghent even though I prefer to work in the kitchen. My keyworker taught me that it was important to participate in the tests as an exercise. Later I can do a test (apply) for a job in the kitchen. Before the test, the keyworker practiced a lot with me. She introduced me to important new words, showed what cleaning women do, what material they work with, what I should pay attention to, taught me about what I can already do ... I am very afraid of exams. Then I am way too much stressed and cannot tell anything more."* (a mother from Ghent, 2020)

To make the diversity among parents concrete, we present two examples from the focus groups. In Arques, out of four mothers who were initially present there, were two mothers ready to work, one of whom had a very specific idea of what kind of work she wanted. Another mother was considering an education, another mother was settings small steps but indicated not to be ready for work yet as long as her youngest child did not attend school.

In Brighton & Hove, we spoke with ten parents, including two fathers. Two parents had closed down PACE and were in employment. Three parents were applying for jobs, one father even had an interview the next day. Two parents were looking for work and one indicated not to be ready yet.

What seems to be typical for PACE is that most parents keep moving even when they are not working yet.

> *"I am looking for a job, in the meantime I do some dog walking and sitting and volunteering in an exercise class."* (a mother from Brighton & Hove, 2020)

Nineteen out of thirty parents who completed the impact exercise indicate that there has been an impact on their employment situation. However, it is difficult to interpret this number as some parents only indicated that there was impact when they actually had found employment, while others ticked this element when they felt they were closer to employment.
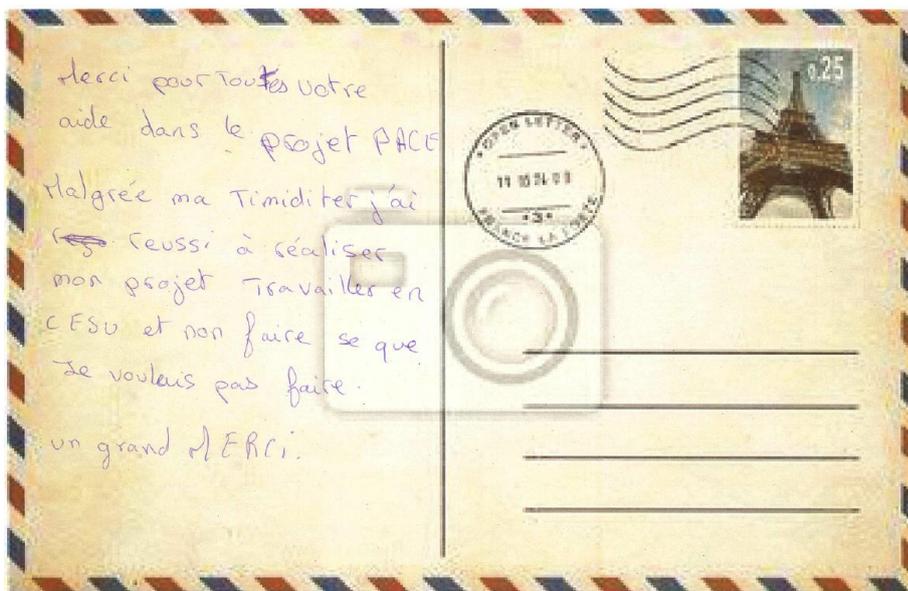

Figure 19. A mother's message for PACE, Wattrelos, 2018.

English translation: "*Thank you for all your support in the PACE project. Despite my shyness I have succeeded in realising my employment project and in not having to do something I did not want to do. A big THANK YOU.*"

Parents noted to feel supported also on a practical and financial level via PACE. However, they do not cite this directly as an example in the question of what they gained from PACE. In the area of employment, they even explicitly state that it gives them only very limited financial progress. This is mainly because most of the parents that expressed their experience with PACE are not yet in a stable job.

> *"I did not really make progress on a financial level, but it is of course a reintegration trajectory. I am now working with my mentor to look for a job that fits me." (a mother from The Hague, 2020)*

Out of the 30 parents who completed the impact document, five stated to have made progress on a financial level and two have experienced a positive impact on their housing situation.

Ten parents reported a positive impact on their mobility level through cycling lessons, learning how to drive or how to take public transport. In general, parents who were not mobile before learned how to move throughout their city and learned about services and places they did not visit before.

STEP 3: Update of the PACE programme theory

Based on the input from parents, we present another update of the PACE programme theory.

The changes made to the programme theory are highlighted in **red**.

Context

- Formal and informal barriers to childcare; unequal access with families in poverty having lower access to (high quality) ECEC.

Barriers in availability, affordability, accessibility (mobility barriers), prejudices on parents who are not working, parents' own beliefs on parenthood, separation is hard and make start of childcare emotional.

Inflexibility makes childcare less accessible especially for families who cannot plan and pay ahead.

Different families need different kinds of flexibility.

- Childcare system is oriented towards regular attendance which is an additional barriers for families with no or unstable employment.

Childcare regulations and funding systems make it difficult for settings to provide flexibility. This effect is sometimes exacerbated by pedagogical requirements.

- There is room for upskilling early years practicioners in parental involvement and working with vulnerable families.

Safety regulations <>parents physically present in childcare (mainly in UK)

- Lack of collaboration and communication between childcare-employment- welfare systems.

Childcare and employment are each other's barriers. Families end up in a catch-22 situation.

- **There is a push towards employment, with benefits becoming more conditional and being in paid employment becoming a duty rather than a right.**

Parents are expected to work but are not approriately supported into employment. Many parents want to work but don't know where to start.

Charachteristics of the labour market: parenting is not valued, unstable jobs, dimploma's from abroad are not valid; a lot of criticism on Public Employment Services.

- Vulnerable families have limited understanding of the childcare and employment systems *while making the combination between care and employment is mainly their puzzle to solve.*

Mechanisms

- Flexible and occasional childcare places, *helping parents to find and secure a place and giving them time to settle down* will make childcare more accessible for families with a distance to childcare and employment.

- Involving parents in childcare will make childcare more sustainable and can be a first step to volunteering (the data confirm a relationship between involvement in childcare and sustainability of the childcare solution).

- Training and coaching early years practicioners will lead to increased parental involvement and sustainable childcare solutions for vulnerable families.

- Volunteering in childcare can be a first step to employment (the data confirm a relationship between volunteering, in or outside of childcare, and being in sustainable employment).

- An intgrated approach, including new collaborations with welfare and employment and offering childcare during trainings will overcome barriers to employment.

- **A designated keyworker** offers tailored support and makes other services more accessible.

- A tailored approach using a PDP flexibly, with ownership for parents within childcare will bring parents closer to employment (the data confirm this, using a PDP is the strongest predictor of employment.)

- Offering a package of volunteering, trainings, individual and in group brings parents closer to employment.

Outcomes

- increased access to childcare for 654 families; sustainable childcare solution and parental involvement for 459 families, most (97%) of whom are involved in childcare; 173 childcare workers are more skilled and confident in working with parents.

- more childcare adjusted to families' needs.

- less distance to the labour market for 459 parents, with 162 being in sustainable employment.

- Parents report more confidence, better selfcare and mental health, better relationships with children and a broader social network.

- increased collaboration between childcare, employment and welfare services; including 103 new collaborations with welfare services and 91 with employment services.

- adapted childcare policy: more flexible and occasional places, integrated approach.

- impact on child poverty in the 2seas region.

more children who can socialize and develop thanks to childcare.

progress on overall quality of life, not only on the level of childcare and employment >< limited progress on finances.

"Terms and conditions"

- **Families are mapped and contacted:**
  Parents will need to be found and convinced to start childcare and employment support.
  The outreach work that is needed to map, contact and engage families depends on the local context and the characteristics of the families one wants to reach.
  Other services need to be aware of the project to signpost parents.
- **The integrated approach is supported by staff:**
  Early years practitioners get additional support from social workers or volunteers.
  Early years practitioners struggle with flexible and occasional childcare because they fear that it is not good for children's well-being and development. That is a concern that needs to be taken seriously in developing new practices and in coaching staff.
  The relationship with a designated keyworker or team of keyworkers is crucial; this keyworker needs mandate, information and support to get the job done
- **The integrated approach is supported by the infrastructure:**
  Childcare and employment are physically linked, transport and physical barriers to employment support are removed as much as possible
- **The integrated approach is supported by a network of services and organisations:**
  Agencies and organisations must be accessible and supportive and if not, parents need support in accessing their services or advocating for their rights.
- **Parents are supported in sustainable work rather than into work as such:**
  Work is become more flexible. This is more often the case for low-income employment or employment for low-skilled workers. These workers also more often end up at the "wrong side of flexibility", in precarious work, underemployment or in-work poverty.
  It should be financially rewardable to be in employment.
- **Having a sustainable childcare solution is related to being in sustainable employment:**
  If parents can count on a sustainable childcare solution, looking for sustainable employment is facilitated. Vice versa, if parents have a sustainable job and income, it becomes easier to access and afford sustainable childcare.

The last two parts of the impact report pertain to key elements on the organisational level and the impact of PACE on a policy level and upscaling. A last update of the programme theory will be presented after that.

5 Key elements on the organisational level

In this part of the impact report, we discuss the significant change on different levels of organisations and policy. Due to the complex interactional nature of these levels we first define the three levels.

Micro level: this is the level of the professionals (and their teams) working directly with the parents in the project.

Meso level: in this level we look at organisations as a whole. However, we noticed complex organisational structures in PACE. Some organisations are quite easy to grasp because they are quite small, others have more complex structures and encompass different services within one organisational structure.

We also look at inter-organisational networks of collaboration on this level. This is of major importance in PACE. Therefore, a separate part on collaboration is included where the different elements of change due to PACE are illustrated.

Macro level: on a macro level we look at the bigger picture. This concerns the possible change in influential policy related to childcare, labour market guidance and welfare transitions.

It should be noted that the elements of change described here are the factors that have been filtered by the researchers as important mechanisms of change in PACE, from a broad overview of the project as a whole. The set of elements described here is different from the elements that individual project partners would distil as crucial mechanisms on the level of their own organisation. Furthermore, in the context of the Context-Mechanisms-Outcomes framework that is the basis for this impact report, the position of the elements described in this section is slightly ambiguous. The factors described here are outcomes of PACE on an organisational or policy level. However, when looking towards the project from the perspective of the impact we want to achieve on the lives of families, these elements rather have the position of 'mechanisms', or 'terms and conditions'. When we describe how organisations have organised and reorganised themselves, we are on the level of mechanisms. When we talk about the actual results and impact of this (re)organisatio in terms of new collaborations or new ways of coordination within the organisation, we see this as outcomes.

5.1 Changes in mission and vision

A shift in focus is one of the key changes for organisations that have been involved in PACE. Before PACE, all of them were already engaged in working with and for families. However, in most cases this was done for a specific segment. Parents were supported in securing a place in childcare, doing volunteer work, participating in activities or in going back to employment. PACE has instigated organisations to think and work beyond borders. The starting point in supporting parents is no longer childcare, employment, welfare, health. The support is now organised around the whole families' needs, a family will be supported towards their particular needs, and childcare and employment support will get into the picture according to these needs. This implies a shift from a position of 'This is our offer, we can support you with childcare/employment support/…' to the question of 'How can we help you to improve your employment situation and your quality of life?'.

> *"The mindset of the professionals has changed. They are much more involved with other themes then the children, like employment." (a PACE keyworker from Brighton & Hove, 2019)*

> *"This approach means that we are getting closer to the families and that we no longer only have a childcare place to offer. Through this 'family approach' we are not only a provider but also a go-between [for parents] towards a wider context, tailored to their needs and at their pace." (city of Turnhout, 2020)*

> *"There has been a mind shift among staff members: staff now asks more questions to families. Not just supporting families but also asking them what they want and need, especially regarding employment."* (PACE staff from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)

Installing a **family-oriented vision and approach** is not without effort. In the context of PACE, we see that this demands a strong leadership, strong teamwork and investments in collaboration with other services. Furthermore, it is crucial that frontline staff, the people who work directly with the parents, is on board. There needs to be a "shared understanding of parents", as formulated by one of the PACE managers in 2020. This shared understanding, meaning that everyone looks at parents and families in a similar manner, requires underpinning through meetings, training, coaching. This is important to make sure that the shared understanding really translates into empathy towards parents, an open and positive attitude and a new kind of welcoming of families in childcare. Next to being empathic, understanding and awareness (or ready to be) of the broader living situation of families, the family-oriented vision and approach in PACE was characterised by tailoring the support to the parents' needs and pace.

Even in the community centres in France, that have always worked in a multi-disciplinary manner around the well-being of families in the neighbourhood, PACE has installed a new vision and approach. The staff from Wattrelos testified in 2018:

> *"It is often difficult [for parents] to build or rebuild oneself following a past, painful experience. The community centre has always worked on creating social ties. However, personal development was not a goal in itself. Thanks to the PACE project, we have been able to develop local actions and support systems so that each person can surpass themselves and regain self-confidence. Catherine[25], for instance, had a very difficult journey and the benefits of the project were quickly beneficial to her. She went from the status of being accompanied to the status of 'actor of her own journey', taking in hand her new goals and even exceeding them all alone by taking initiatives."* (Wattrelos, 2018)

The story of Catherine, a mother who evolved from a very timid person to taking initiative, doing volunteer work and rapidly moving towards employment, made the team reflect on their own practice. Before PACE, they would have presented Catherine with an offer of activities that might have been helpful to her. In PACE, the approach was to work together with her towards objectives that she had identified herself. The staff noticed that this made a massive difference for **parents** who became '**the actors of their own journey'**, with the staff as the coach on the side.

That his new position, being a coach on the side, is not always easy for staff, is illustrated by the citation below:

> **"***The staff helps parents to navigate the system. That is very important and very complicated. Here the danger is that professionals sometimes take over. They have a 'superhero complex'. They have to keep in mind that parents have to learn things for after PACE."* (a PACE professional from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2019)

On the other hand, staff members attest that a whole-family approach is usually rewarding. They feel that they can make a meaningful difference in people's lives from an overview of the whole situation.

> *"From the staff's perspective: there is now more positive praise, and more overview. They know about the whole life because of the internal collaboration. For instance, the family support worker will know about everything, not only about the parenting. There is more and better information sharing between the different staff members."* (a PACE professional from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2019)

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[25] Not her real name.

At the same time, this shift has not been an easy one for all organisations and staff members. Some project partners were able to install a new team structure to implement PACE. In 38 Volt in Mechelen for instance, a new childcare team and two PACE keyworkers were hired for the project specifically. For them, it was clear that the aim was to support parents in a holistic manner and to merge childcare, welfare and employment. Other organisations had to make the shift within an existing team. PACE managers indicate that it is not easy to make changes in a team that has been used to a certain approach for years.

> "PACE changed a lot in how we work. There must be this holistic approach in all areas, including health, work, … This way of working changes how community centres function. Before PACE, we used to have all kinds of activities for children, for parents. But there was no connection between the different activities… Are there negative effects? No, it is mainly a matter of perspective. Some members of staff have left. Maybe it was not a good time for them, for the new colleagues to come in." (PACE manager, Arques, 2020)

We see that different project partners have struggled with installing a new vision and mission especially in collaborating with external services. A PACE keyworker can work from a holistic whole-family approach but cannot impose this vision on the Public Employment Service or private early years settings straight away. First, these services and organisations are tied to their own statutes and targets. Second, it is not always clear to them what they can gain from the PACE approach. Taking them along in a whole family approach where parents are not seen as helpless and in need of support, but rather as active creators of their own journey, has been a slow process in many cases.

In childcare, we have learned that it is key to start from a clear account on what childcare can mean and change for children and their families. Childcare staff attested that seeing the difference they can make in the lives of children and parents by offering childcare more flexibly and working with the whole family, convinced them to participate in PACE. An early years practitioner from Mechelen describes beautifully what is meant by a 'whole-family approach':

> I work as an early years practitioner. What makes my job fascinating is that I work with the parents in addition to the children. Together we work on giving the child the right opportunities for an optimal development. But it is also reassurance for the parents themselves that there is someone [in the team] with more or less the same background. The language is often a barrier. It makes it practical and easy for the parents that I am multilingual, Arabic, Berber and English and a little bit of French. For example, parents often come and ask for parenting advice, but also, they ask about correspondence that they do not understand, or they want to make an appointment with the doctor, for example. For us these are often things that are very self-evident, but for these people this can lead to a lot of stress. It is nice to know that you have done a very great service to these people in a very accessible way." (a childcare practitioner from 38 Volt, Mechelen, 2020)

In Gravesham (Kent), it took a lot of time and effort to convince private providers to get on board.

> "In Gravesend all the childcare providers are private businesses and supported by the Early Years & Childcare services and where the PACE project is managed.   We invited settings to take part in supporting the project initially when we started the project, but this proved difficult initially to try and get providers engaged in the project due to staffing allocations to ratio of children, which meant extra work for the managers and staff, as well as the costs." (a PACE professional, Gravesham, 2020)

After intensive networking and collaboration at different levels, several providers did agree to join a pilot on occasional and flexible childcare. This setting manager indicates that this was accompanied by a change in vision on families and in the meaning of (flexible) childcare for families.

> *"What has changed? Our attitude to thinking about the family as a whole unit and the improvement to their lives for being able to have the opportunity to maybe have a job from an interview that you have helped support." (a setting manager from Gravesend, 2020)*

According to the Gravesend PACE staff, in working towards a more flexible, whole-family approach in childcare, it is key to:

- Have the managers on board, make sure there is a shared vision. The fact that they could see actual examples of occasional childcare in reality, helped to get them on board and to see that it was possible to organise. Offering trainings and coaching for early years practitioners is needed to make this shared vision trickle down further into practice and really impact the way of working in an early years setting.
- Take concerns seriously and address them together. The main concerns were upon the child: will the children's well-being be ok? Will they be able to settle in well? Will they bond with staff? There were also concerns around staff: how will we manage the unpredictability? Staff is so used to continuity and doing things in a certain manner. Having team meetings or a network of staff from different settings meet with each other and address these topics is certainly helpful. At last, there are worries about the business model. It is important to support them with that and to make sure they know what to expect financially.
- Get organised: make clear how you will offer sessions more flexibly, how you will handle the settling down and the communication with parents when offering occasional sessions. Again, settings can support each other in this aspect. Turning a shared vision into practice is a crucial step, as illustrated by the citation below.

> *"Childcare providers: they are aware of need of flexibility in childcare. But they still don't know how to organise and manage it. There is still the challenge." (a PACE keyworker from Brighton & Hove, 2019)*

In working with public employment and welfare services, a major obstacle is that these are often complex organisations with very specific targets. They are tied to objectives and procedures and do not seem to have a lot of leeway or they are not used to making profit of it.

> *"It was a quest to find my way into the Public Employment Service. Their own vision is dominant. If parents go along with their objectives, these parents could get into PACE." (PACE-manager from Ghent, 2020)*

It is possible to get some people on board, but very difficult to get engagement from all levels, from the frontline workers to the upper management. Another obstacle is the frequent changes in personnel and restructuring of these organisations. The community centre in Arques had installed a strong collaboration with the local Public Employment Service in 2018 and 2019. When their contact person switched jobs, they had to start again. Other partners had similar stories.

> *"Unfortunately, this counsellor has to move to another city (1 hour from Arques). Anyway, she helped us to find another representative contact within the Longuenesse Employment Agency so that someone else can keep providing support to our PACE parents. It was a little bit hard at first to reach someone else and to find someone as understanding as the counsellor we used to work with. But we recently managed to recreate links again and to plan supportive actions to our PACE parents to help them reducing their distance to employment." (a PACE professional from Arques, 2020)*

5.2 More flexible and learning organisations

5.2.1 Creating a reflective climate in the organisation

PACE was a social innovation project. New models of childcare and employment are developed and tested in practice. Experimenting with new methods in practice requires and at the same time creates a reflective practice. With a reflective practice, we mean the practice of "periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and to others in one's immediate environment about what has recently transpired. It illuminates what has been experienced by both self and others, providing a basis for future action. In particular, it privileges the process of inquiry leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice." (Raelin, 2002: 3)

Sometimes organisations seem to be reluctant to engage in a reflective practice. It seems to contradict a culture of working hard, getting things done and achieving results. Raelin (2002) argues that the contrary is true and that a reflective practice can be very 'practical': it will lead to more effective and efficient services, increase motivation and engagement from staff and enhance the quality of the offer. In PACE we saw different examples of organisations installing a reflective climate, even though they did not always call it that. As a result, they became more aware of the assumptions behind their way of working, came up with out-of-the box solutions for wicked problems and improved their daily work with parents and their own team functioning. A reflective and learning climate prevents a new, shared vision to wither prematurely. It keeps the vision alive by reflecting on why and how things are done.

In 'soft sectors' such as childcare or family support, there is often a strong demarcation between the policy and management level on the one hand (the "thinkers") and the frontline workers on the other hand ("the doers"). Abolishing this dichotomy has myriad advantages: frontline workers are more motivated if they can co-reflect on their own practice and make changes in their work based on this, rather than executing the commands of a manager. Frontline workers will easily see the blind spots or thinking errors in the proposals of managers who do not directly work with the families, and vice versa a team leader or manager can help to work out a procedure that answers to a new idea from a frontline worker.

An example from PACE

In Brighton & Hove, for instance, regular team meetings were installed with the whole PACE team. This included the PACE manager and officer and the keyworkers (VSDCs). These meetings were not used only to debrief each other or set up new procedures, but to discuss the PACE practice in depth. To evoke reflection and sharing of experiences, the keyworkers were asked to write stories that, according to them, reflected the changes they had made in their own practice. These stories could reflect positive aspects of PACE, for instance, how they had succeeded in linking successfully with private nurseries in the area. The stories could as well be negative and reflect obstacles in the trajectory or difficulties on the level of other services or in people's lives. In both cases, the team members would challenge each other's thinking and either come up with a way to perpetuate a good practice or to adapt their way of working with parents or external services. As an example, the fact that some parents seemed to make little progress towards employment due to massive problems in their personal lives made them come up with the 'light touch' trajectory, meaning that keyworkers remained in touch with parents but slowed down the 'PACE pace' (i.e. less PDP meetings, less focus on employment and activation).

Brighton & Hove also installed a practice where everyone was taken on board when it came to network formation. The keyworkers participated actively in network events with other services. This practice was new and does illustrate a mind shift in the organisation: networking was no longer a matter of experts or managers,

also the frontline workers were involved. This resulted quickly in a more efficient collaboration with local businesses and Public Employment Services.

Another PACE case

In the childcare settings in the cities of Mechelen and Turnhout, a pedagogical coach supported the childcare staff. An important part of this coach's work was installing a reflective practice. In the course of the PACE project, a reflection model was developed specifically for use in early years settings. The goal of the model is to share ideas with early years practitioners about how the different areas of both parents and nursery workers' lives play a role in childcare, starting from a specific event. This reflection proved to be very helpful in the context of occasional childcare, which is characterised by a higher level of complexity and unpredictability than regular childcare.

5.2.2 Without a hitch?

In some organisations, team meetings and group supervision are common practice. Even then, small actions can help to boost the reflective climate.

In Saint-Martin-Boulogne, informal and formal team meetings were common practice before PACE. However, interdisciplinary meetings were not customary. The professionals attest that networking with colleagues from different units really helped to build a learning community. They now have 'cross border' meetings with staff from childcare, family support and employment together. They see this internal cooperation ("*Collaboration plus efficace entre les équipes et transversale* ") as one of the key elements of change in PACE, with impact on the lives of parents and families.

> *"We haven't changed anything. There are no new buildings, there is the same number of children, the same people, but wat has changed is our practice and mentality." (staff member from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)*

Staff members attest that continuous reflection on their own practice is important to become aware of what they have actually changed in their practice, what they can improve but also to be aware of their ambitions, that sometimes exceed what is feasible. The manager testifies that reflective meetings are also needed to make sure staff can celebrate success and at the same time be gentle to each other on the fact that they cannot change everything.

> *"We have the tendency to do more and more and not stop. You should also be able to sit together and reflect for a while. You must also be able to continue with the new approach after PACE and know what it is that you have to work on." (staff member from Saint-Martin-Boulogne, 2018)*

Photo @Steve Vrielynck – Centre Social Eclaté (Saint-Martin-Boulogne, FR)

Figure 20. The team from Saint-Martin-Boulogne in a PACE meeting.

Installing a reflective climate and practice does not come in a breeze. This was also the case in PACE. Some of the obstacles were:

- **lack of time and space** for professionals to meet and reflect. In many settings, in early years settings in particular, the number of hours that can be spent on training, coaching or reflection is limited. Early years professionals do the groundwork with children. If they want a meeting to take place, they will need to stay longer in the evening or meet while the children are sleeping. Installing a new climate of reflection in these circumstances is not ideal and will take longer than when staff can actually take time to think. This is paradoxical, because especially in childcare, there was a high need for reflection. As reported by several project partners, early years staff are trained to work with children and to help children develop. Looking from a whole-family perspective is new to them and will ask time.

- Change in views of people involved need to be addressed. Especially in childcare, but also in labour market support, sometimes the **classic view on support** is dominant, meaning that support and care is seen as a 'package of care' rather than something which is constructed in a mutual and interactional reality between the care provider and the parents. As is seen throughout the project, some fieldworkers had a hard time adapting to new views and realities infused by PACE. However, it is key that involved and visionary leadership is present to activate new views and to create a learning and reflective climate within organisations. As is seen in other contexts of working with vulnerable groups, this is a necessity as contexts and conditions of the involved groups and their needs change rapidly through time (Naert & Gijsegem, 2012)

5.2.3 Innovative reflectivity in organisations

During the PACE project, partners experimented with new forms of activating reflectivity. Different examples show a tendency to reinforce the position of parents within the own organisation. Instead of seeing them as mere service 'users', in some cases their role shifted towards service 'co-creator'. For example, in Gravesham, **parents** are **invited to evaluate** the Learning Links programme, which was part of PACE. There are group discussions together with staff, where parents can give their feedback on the programme. This process is insightful for parents and for staff, who gain more insight in what makes the parents appreciate the programme.

Similarly, in Brighton, a closedown form was introduced to parents to give feedback after their PACE journey. They also had the opportunity to have an interview with a fieldworker were the experiences of parents were discussed to learn for the future. Next to strengthening the reflective climate of services. This also strengthens the parents and reinforces the feeling of co-ownership of their own trajectory.

Another example was the introduction of **'video-coaching'**, were reflection together with a coach had a positive influence on the fieldworkers. By analysing videos of different interactions between the childcare worker and the children, reflection was promoted on themes as: the actions towards children during the day, the well-being of children in the setting, the role of the childcare worker etc.

One of the early years practitioners from Mechelen testifies on the value of the video-coaching method that was used during the pedagogical coaching in the childcare of 38 Volt.

> *"I personally have had a positive experience with this. It took some getting used to the fact that you were being recorded during your daily work and it felt a bit unusual, so maybe you subconsciously reacted a bit different to some things or some people. But afterwards we watched and discussed the videos together. I was pleasantly surprised of how you see your blind spots at such times. The coach did a very good job and I thought this really had an effect for myself."* (early years practitioner, Mechelen, 2020)

Also, the **impact of study visits and partner meetings** in different phases of the PACE project cannot be underestimated. For example, in asking about the parent perspectives or in talking about tensions and differences between projects and organisational views, reflectivity was activated. For example, discussion sessions on prototypes (see further) activated reflection of project partners on the way their services were organised.

> *"Thinking about the person-centred versus the system approach made me think about our organisation. I will do this exercise with my team at the community centre. This will really make us think about our work"* (a PACE project manager from Wattrelos, 2020)

Other examples of cross-border learning on international partner meetings were the exchange of concrete good practices, a reflection exercise on ethics regarding care and employment using the Deep Democracy method and action research on occasional childcare and parental involvement. In Interreg 2seas projects, mutual learning and reflection are encouraged. Making time for this element is a big advantage. The PACE partnership included two knowledge partners who further contributed to cross-border learning and reflection. One partner in particular, Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts, was responsible for action research and mutual learning.

Photo @Steve Vrielynck – Partner meeting at De Mussen, The Hague (NL)

Figure 21. A cross-border learning session during an international partner meeting.

A case from *PACE*

Parental involvement, it sounds as if it is a simple concept. Nothing less is true. First, policies influence perception. The way in which national policies frame parental involvement in childcare influences the way early childhood professionals look at this concept. This was no less the case in PACE. We noticed differences in understanding and views on the concept of parental involvement, not only in childcare practice but also on the level of the project managers. Ample discussion was needed to arrive at a common 'PACE' understanding of parental involvement and, before that, even of parenting and parents in childcare. This topic was discussed at several partner meetings in the course of 2017 and 2018 (see Figure 22 for an overview). It took many meetings before a shared framework on parental involvement was developed in 2018 by Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences and Arts, together with the two English project partners, Brighton & Hove City Council and Kent County Council.

	Mutual Learning on parental involvement (Brighton, June 2017) Goal: give context + arrive at a shared vision
	Presentation framework on parental involvement (Wattrelos, June 2018) Goal: get agreement on framework + encourage PPs to disseminate self-evaluation instrument
	Results of self-evaluation instrument: perspectives of childcare staff on parental involvement (as defined in PACE) (Kent, November 2018) Goal: present and discuss results, agree on further actions
	Innovation in childcare: the "human aspects" of childcare and their impact (Mechelen, Febuary 2019) Goal: discuss the impact we (want to) have in PACE in relation to welcoming and engaging families in childcare
	Innovation in childcare: small group discussion on "human aspects" (The Hague, June 2019) Goal: further finetune PPs input on this topic based on homework made in spring of 2019

Figure 22. Overview of mutual learning sessions on partner meetings on the topic of parental involvement.

This is only one of many examples we can give that show the importance of learning and reflecting together.

Part of the learning in the project was also to find out what the differences in vision or practice were, what they meant and why they were there. We saw that, given the complexity and diversity of each project partner's setting and context, it was not possible to come up with one size fits all solutions and methods, but that we could still learn from each other.

The prototypes on childcare and on employment support that were published in the context of this project[26] are results of this project-wide learning and reflection: they show that different approaches can be meaningful and impactful, and at the same time encourage staff to reflect on their own practice in relation to other practices. Why do we do what we do? What are the benefits and the limitations to this approach? What would it mean if we would adopt another model? Would it work for us and why (not)?

5.2.4 Formal an informal communication within organisations

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[26] Prototypes on childcare are described in the PACE book by Raes, Piessens & Willockx (2020). The prototypes on employment support will be published as part of Output 3.

Frontline workers as well as project coordinators of the different partners state a change in internal climate, as well as transitions in internal communication lines. Due to PACE new internal linking was facilitated, for example between frontline workers working with parents on general welfare issues and fieldworkers in childcare.

The **strengthening of the internal cohesion** between different areas of expertise within one organisation is generally evaluated as a good thing. One of the important once is overlap in contact points with parents and thus better accessibility of support. Also, a broad 'field of cohesion' in an organisation creates more opportunities to broaden the network of parents. As is seen in research with youngsters, the internal climate and contact-points within an organisation is an important steppingstone to become more proactive in building one's own networks and become stronger in life (Naert, Roets, Roose, & Vanderplasschen, 2019). Parents also recognise the value and stress the importance of contacts with different professionals as well as the value of the informal network with other parents in the programme. In PACE there were examples of this formal and informal communication, leading to new opportunities.

Informal communication opportunities were greatly valued by parents, both on the level of communication with staff and communication with other parents. Staff also acknowledge that formal and informal meeting opportunities with and between parents contribute to the quality of their support. It is during these meetings that they hear that a parent actually struggles in a relationship, or that parents admit to each other that they feel insecure as a parent.

> *"I now feel that I am not the only parent struggling trying to be a good parent to my children, that other mums feel the same, and this helps me to confirm that I am doing ok." (a mother from Gravesham, 2019)*

5.3 Joint-up working and networking

In PACE, it is not always easy to discern between intern and external collaboration as different partners have different constellations. PACE made it possible to create new formats of joined up working within as in between organisations and services. It seems however that some conditions need to be in place in order to make it work for parents. First, there is a need for a keyworker that can guide parents for a longer period and secondly, there needs to be some integration of services to make it work. In the literature, the first condition can be related to the function of a case manager. The second can be seen as network development and integration of service provision.

By going into some more detail of how PACE has influenced these elements we will elaborate on these functions and give examples.

5.3.1 Case management

In PACE the different partners all developed some kind of **case management function**. There is some debate about the definition of case management (Vanderplasschen & De Maeyer, 2007). However, the same elements seem to be present in most descriptions of the concept namely, the accent on coordination of care, matching care provision with the specific need of clients and ensure continuity of care (Naert & Colle, 2014).

There is a wide consensus on the different functions encompassing case management as defined by Moxley (1989):

1. Assessment
2. Planning
3. Interventions

- *direct interventions*: giving information and advice, training of competences, support, crisis interventions, coaching, etc.
- *indirect interventions*: outreaching, linking, advocacy, coordination, mediation signalling etc.
4. Monitoring
5. Evaluation

The way these functions are filled in and with what intensity can differ.

We used this background to detect different prototypes of working together to support parents towards the labour market and childcare (Raes, Piessens & Willockx, 2020). Looking at key elements of case management implementation, PACE succeeded in realising some key elements. Central to this function in PACE is the focus on the parents, a broader scope of case management and the aim to adapt support to the needs of parents.

5.3.2 Integration of services (Prototypes of joint-up working)

As is widely discussed in the literature on case management, in order to make it work there's a need to provide some system of care (Smith & Newton, 2007). The complexity of PACE is related to the combination of new interventions and inter-agency collaborations and the systems of care that were already present before implementation. In this part we zoom in on new forms of networks that were developed due to PACE and the benefits that professionals and parents adhere to these networks.
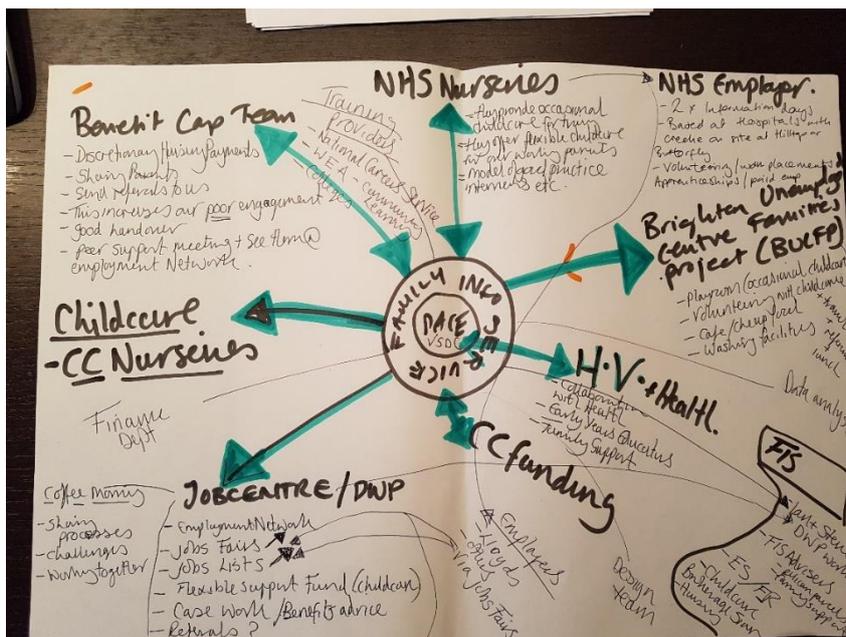
Figure 23. An example of a "PACE network".

New networks were created between the domains childcare, education, welfare and labour market support. The greatest benefit for professionals is that they now know each other. Research on collaboration stresses the importance of '**putting a face to a name**' in network development as this makes it easier to future contacts if necessary (Grace, Coventry, & Batterham, 2012).

> "The project provides local chances for better coordination and collaboration between regular services who support the trajectory towards work and social integration (Public Welfare Service and Public Employment Service) and the childcare services. The local needs and service gaps have become clearer. The network ensures a better access for parents in vulnerable situations" (frontline worker PACE, Turnhout, 2020).

PACE professionals also mention the **expansion of mutual trust**. Experiences are shared which also fuels reflection on one's own actions and the content of one's own services (see above).

> *"Based on working partnerships with Children's centres staff and Job Centre work coaches, we have found that we are able to develop good working relationships with colleagues at the local level. They have become familiar with what PACE offers their parents and will not hesitate to contact PACE." (PACE keyworker, Gravesham, 2020)*

In general, **two types of network development** can be discerned in PACE. First, the networks that originate **bottom-up** and more spontaneously, due to the extra input of PACE case managers working on the (new) intersection between childcare and labour market. Second, networks that realise a more formal and systemic back office where different areas of expertise are linked in order to create a good running **back office**, where case manager can easily make use of together with parents.

The development of these formal networks between organisations within PACE bring important focus areas to light.

Clear mission and vision

As research shows, it is of major importance to be clear about the aims and vision at the start of network development (De Corte, Verschuere, & De Bie, 2017). Other research shows the need to see this as a continuous process for collaborative networks (Naert, Roose, & Vanderplasschen, 2018). Not enough attention to do so can lead to shifts in agenda's and instrumentalisation of frontline workers for these other agendas. For example, the choice of the network to target the most vulnerable group of parents can conflict with the pressure to realise output towards the labour market. Therefore, keeping track of changes and signals in the network is necessary. Failure to do so can lead to misconceptions of the network value and create uncertainties in roles between organisations and individual professionals (Milbourne, Macrae, & Maguire, 2003). Network development is not an aim in itself. Therefore, **fitness for purpose** should be emphasised when selecting the best approach to partnerships (see also the framework of Corbett & Noyes, 2007). As we have seen in PACE, different intensities of joined up working were present, also related to resources and services that were available.

> ## 'Relationship intensity' of interagency collaboration (Corbett & Noyes, 2007)
>
> 1. **Communication** may involve the development of procedures for information sharing, regular inter-agency meetings or informal service 'brokering'. Individual programs remain totally separate.
>
> 2. **Cooperation** could involve the creation of inter-agency taskforces or advisory groups that review plans and/or the development of consensus regarding good practice.
>
> 3. **Coordination** is evidenced by formal inter-agency agreements, joint mission statements, joint training programs, contractual procedures for resolving inter-agency disputes and/or temporary personnel reassignments.
>
> 4. **Collaboration** could involve a single application process across agencies or common case management protocols. At this point in the relationship, parties are generally willing to relinquish some of their autonomy in the interest of mutual gains or outcomes. Changes in agency, group or individual behaviour to support collective goals or ideals are a feature of collaboration.
>
> 5. **Convergence** is apparent when agencies restructure their services, programs, memberships, budgets, missions, objectives and staff in an effort to pool their resources.
>
> 6. **Consolidation** features seamless interagency service delivery teams and the adoption of a common identity. Service users of converged or consolidated organisations are unlikely to be able to identify with which agency they are interacting.

Network development and maintenance

Linked to a clear mission statement, PACE shows that a lot of energy is needed to maintain the network and bring people together. Organising network events with different partners keeps the contacts warm. New people can be introduced, new themes and evolutions in legislation can be discussed. Also, during PACE different examples of network peer-to-peer coaching and training sessions in networks were set up. This could be done by extra professional input. PACE professionals did follow-ups, brought people together and kept track of the aims of developed networks.

> *"At the beginning it is a lot of work to get everybody aware of PACE. This is very important on all levels. We have invested well in our PR. … First you make contact and install a network. Then, put it in your network processing. Not just meeting each other but doing something with it. On an employment network, there was someone from housing. They also became part of the network. Then PACE puts it into a procedure, structure. It is now a reminder for the staff. [The networking] is embedded, structural. Beginning each on their own way. It starts in an organic way. Structure is bottom-up. They talk about it in meetings. (PACE manager, Brighton & Hove, 2019)*
>
> *Network is not a goal, but it is a way of making the work more effective and efficient. Putting networks in a structure helps parents to keep the overview and be in charge. For parents it must be clear, easy to read." (PACE manager, Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

This point is also important for the continuity of networks already functioning due to PACE and for upscaling the PACE approach. On a local level project partners had to make **agreements with other organisations**. When different services were 'in house', it makes the follow up of parents easier, this is the case in the centre social of Saint-Martin-Boulogne. When projects are imbedded in the local administration, this also seems to strengthen the mandate to act on different partners and to create the necessary linkages. Still, this needed **adapting and good coordination along the way**. In Brighton for example, a clear protocol was created during the project to discern between different network partners and to define the content of participation in the network. This protocol made it easy for everyone to comprehend the system and to guide people through the system. They defined three levels of cooperation. Next to this, they developed a strong approach to continuously updating and supporting their keyworkers. The keyworkers are often the PACE staff members who work directly with the parents and support them on their way to finding childcare and employment. These keyworkers need to be informed and updated on new possibilities, collaborations, procedures etc. Keeping them on board, informed, involved and agile, as opposed to working with rigid and strict procedures, asks for **a strong support system**. PACE keyworkers from different projects indicated that short lines of communication were helpful, as was the fact that (most of them) could work in a team that supported each other, could share caseload and discuss difficult situations.

The project partner from Brighton & Hove indicated at the end of the project that the joined up working and coordination was one of the most significant changes for their organisation, with a big impact on the support they could offer parents.

> *However for this story I wanted to focus on how coordinating support for new PACE parents when they first sign up to join the project is very powerful in terms of engaging parents and building trust.*
>
> *This is a significant change for everyone involved in the PACE team. Each team member has got to know each other better, understand each other's roles in detail, communicate regularly and look at the whole family's need.*
>
> *This close and careful co-ordination is also important towards the end of a parent's journey when they have found employment. This transition point for parents can be very stressful and the same approach to supporting them is used again.*
>
> *A significant role that has made this all possible is having the PACE Officer who is able to ensure smooth co-ordination and co-working across the FIS and Children's Centres. Focused on the parents needs and how to meet them across the team. (* "Most Significant Change Story"[27] from Brighton & Hove, 2020)

5.3.3 Pitfalls of joined up working

First of all, there are quite some differences in the two fields that PACE tried to connect. Childcare and the labour market, the public services related to these fields and the way different countries organise these life domains, make it hard to pinpoint were possible pitfalls may lay. In the end, the most important questions should be:

- Does the network of services reach the families they want to and should reach, including families living in vulnerable situations?
- Does the joint service delivery succeed in providing a higher quality of life for the parents involved?

The first issue is a very important one. It touches a crucial question that also popped up in the partnership in the course of the project: do we chose to work (only) with parents who are already quite close to employment, or do we also include families that still encounter many barriers to childcare and employment? The first

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[27] Most Significant Change stories were collected from project partners at different moments during the project. These gave insight into what changes were experienced as being most impactful for project partners

approach is an avenue towards getting good 'results' (i.e. many parents back into employment) but leaves the most vulnerable families behind. Choosing the second option implies a broader but also more challenging trajectory for parents, staff and organisations. This question is a fundamental ethical question and different elements play a crucial role. A first element concerns the accessibility of the network. In the different PACE projects, parents were reached through different entry points in the network. A system needs more than one entry point to ensure good connections with parents in difficult situations. Moreover, if problems on other life domains emerge (schooling, debts, lack of housing etc.), in what way is the service provision capable or willing to engage with parents in trying to find solutions for these problems too? Finding solutions to complex problems can be done in different ways. However, balancing out different tensions seems crucial to succeed. In a way, the systemic approach needs to be as transparent as possible for parents and needs to give a lot of mandate to the people working with the parents on a daily basis. In the literature, this tension is described as a **tension between a life world-oriented approach and a more systemic network approach** (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). This tension is present in all PACE interventions. There are actors that are more directed to connecting to the life world of parents and that put the agenda of parents at the forefront and starting point of all interventions. There are other partners that are more directed to expertise and guiding the parents within the system. A possible solution to handle this tension is to embrace it and let it fuel the reflection rather than trying to solve it. Research on network development uncovered two approaches that are present in networks and stand in tension, **namely the functional approach and the responsive approach** (Roets, Roose, Schiettecat, & Vandenbroeck, 2016).

The functional approach on collaboration aims at reducing the complexity of situations and slice them into different parts that can be handled by different forms of expertise. The main ambition is to create stability, predictability and control on the level of professionals. The possible pitfall here is a disconnection between what services offer and the needs of parents themselves.

The responsive approach emphasises the mutual dialogue about the experienced needs of parents. Needs are not prefixed in nature and defined by the experts (such as diagnosis) but interactively given form throughout the whole service 'delivery'.

In the research, it is the last form that parents appreciate most. However, a certain system needs to be in place too. As research shows, the voices of parents are very important to **limit the 'power' of the network** (Allen, 2003). They need to be as present as possible within the network of services and not only as an 'end-user'. In line with this presence, the ability to **have a freedom of choice within the network**, also not to participate, is an important factor. Parents should have the possibility to receive support, even if their choices not always reflect the choices of professionals. An example of this is to be able to choose the personal case manager or mentor.

This is linked with who receives help and who possibly misses the connection. Limitations and regulations might make it hard for frontline workers and this can lead to skimming off 'the best parents' or parents who are already presenting more evolved competences towards the labour market (in the opinion of professionals). This also happened to some extent in PACE.

> "We don't work with a waiting list. Who comes first, is first served. Perhaps there is a kind of organic selection, for example someone who does not speak Dutch and so on and behind this person is someone you know and who is mediatable, then we will perhaps take the second sooner." (PACE staff member, The Hague, 2020)

In the PACE project, partners were strongly engaged to work beyond boundaries and always tried to reach the most vulnerable parents. However, the pressure towards work and the timing to make this happen, can be destructive over time. Parents need the time and space to build their own trajectory on their terms.

> "Some [parents] don't get the opportunity. I just feel a bit sad about that." (a PACE staff member from Brighton & Hove, 2018)

During study visits in 2018, PACE staff was presented with statements to debate. One of these statements was '*The parents we really should reach, we don't reach*'. In most cases, staff actually agreed with this statement. They mostly felt that this was due to parents not being motivated, parents fearing the stigma of being associated with Children's Centres or Centres Sociaux [28] , parents not knowing about the project or experiencing major cultural and language barriers.

> *"The image of a centre social is bad: they don't want to be a 'cas social' [social case]." (a*
> *PACE staff member from Wattrelos, 2018)*

The second question refers to the end-user measurement. In essence, it is the **parents' review of the delivered services that has to be the litmus test of overall quality of support** and effectiveness of collaboration.

A **parent-centred approach** means that parents are involved along the way and that a collaborative way of working is present. In that way, there is no need for an evaluation in the end, because that evaluation is a constant process within the service delivery. Many partners keep parents continuously in the loop, by planning activities together with parents. In the French community centres, this was clear during each of the study visits. The researchers were welcomed by a group of staff and parents. Often it was not clear who was who. Everyone got a voice in talking about their experiences in PACE, and parents were clearly used to expressing their opinions and had been encouraged to do so.

Another example of working parent-centred is the use of the PDP. Not all project partners used this method or felt that it was really supporting parents onto the labour market. Still, several project partners used this as a springboard for a shared story and shared goals. A first precondition to make this happen is to make the PDP understandable for parents. In the city of Turnhout, that mainly worked with parents who did not speak the main language, the PACE keyworker integrated visual and creative methods for the PDP.

Figure 24. Using concrete materials to complete the PDP with parents.

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[28] Which are generally perceived as being there for the vulnerable parents, parents living in poverty

Also, the project partner in Wattrelos used the PDP to come to a shared understanding with parents. Parents consider the PDP to be part of their story, they own it even while it is sometimes kept in the organisation. According to staff in Wattrelos but also in other places, the PDP helps to build a relationship with parents.

> *"Using a PDP does not interfere with building a relationship of confidence with the parents. They already have a contract and are used to that. It is not a barrier at all. The PDP is used as a method to work on the relationship of confidence: what do you like, what not? Because they talk about personal things, the confidence starts to grow. Afterwards, you keep in touch, by calling occasionally (when they are in educational programme, for instance). That helps to keep the trust."* (a PACE staff member from Wattrelos, 2018)

Partners in PACE showed a lot of engagement to keep parents 'in the loop', even in sometimes difficult situations. Parents not completely 'fitting' in the target group description, were not left out, but all was done to provide good support.

> *"It is important not to judge, praising people and at the same time make them also responsible. We believe that they will come back, we are always positive. For parents who have many difficulties and who make no or very little progress to employment, we have a system of 'light touch'. We will always try to engage them again. They are still engaging because they are saying sorry. They are engaged, even if they don't show up. They always have reasons for not showing up. They have a complicated life."* (from an interview with two PACE keyworkers from Brighton & Hove, 2019)

But even when partners were very creative in using the boundaries of the own organisations and services, some policies make it hard to provide good support. For example, most PACE partners want to work with **intrinsic motivation of the parents** and not with any pressure or underlying motivator (e.g. Benefits). Sometimes however, other partners tried to use the PACE partners for their agenda, rather than working with the needs as defined by parents.

> *"When the local bureau of public labour market guidance transferred parent to us, this conflicted with our vision. We didn't want to be a transfer point for the local municipality, and we did not want to become known as snitches. If things don't work out with our approach than you progress, pressure and punishment is a whole other approach."* (PACE staff member, The Hague, 2020)

In some way, legislation can even be in the way of good service delivery. In a lot of cases, these are regulations managed on a macro level (see further). But also, the local level can have an important role in turning this balance in the positive direction.

5.4 The role of the local authorities

The PACE keyworkers and managers did not operate in a vacuum. Research shows the importance to understand the specific contexts of local ties and influences on service delivery and vice versa (Grace et al., 2012). PACE professionals are part of a larger organisation that is in turn somehow linked to a local authority. Their position has an influence on the mandate and the effectiveness of their work. A relatively small community centre has less power to weigh on the local childcare offer than a council for whom weighing on the local childcare offer is a duty. Even if the staff from a community centre succeeds in making a strong case for more flexibility in childcare, the result of their plea deal will still depend on the willingness of (private) providers, or on their capacity to collaborate with a local childcare platform that can exert some influence. A local council in the UK, on the other hand, has the duty to work in partnership with providers to influence childcare provision and ensure that there is sufficient childcare in relation to the local families' needs. This

includes securing flexible delivery of childcare for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment.[29,30] In PACE, we have seen that the capacity to make changes in the fields of childcare and employment does not only depend on the willingness or efforts from organisations, but also on their mandate and power. This also shows on the level of working with parents. For instance, some keyworkers in the project officially worked for a public service as part of a local council. This meant that they could easily access existing databases on parents' benefits and employment statuses or on their rights in relation to childcare funding. It also implied that they could more easily link with other public services in welfare, childcare and employment. In other cases, the keyworkers could rely on others within the local authority to provide this information fluently. However, there were also cases where a PACE keyworker was more distant from public services and had to work hard to get information in a family's situation, for instance related to employment. One can wonder why this is relevant, as parents can tell this or give the information themselves? We often saw that this was the case and that parents either were not up to date on their situation or were not able to explain this clearly because of language barriers.

However, even in cases where collaboration with private childcare providers and employment and welfare services was seemingly easy, obstacles remained. This was often linked to the fact that these services tend to fall back on their own regulations and targets, while PACE asked them to go beyond these regulations and targets and even sometimes change their vision and mission. For instance, PACE asks childcare providers who have a focus on working with children to take into account the whole family and their situation. It also asks employment services for more time and flexibility in working with parents who, for instance, do not have a childcare solution. This is not an easy task, not because these organisations were unwilling to change or because they did not understand or endorse the aim of PACE. Rather because they felt to have limited leeway in making changes to their role and mission in society and because their frontline workers are very used to and convinced of the 'usual way of working'.

"The focus of nurseries is the child." (a PACE keyworker from Brighton & Hove, 2020)

Childcare providers and public services also must deal with 'resource dependency'. They depend on government funding and approvals. If this approval depends on them following strict regulations, which is the case in childcare and in employment support, they will be less willing and able to behave flexibly and adapt their procedures. Unfortunately, resource dependency can lead to organisations fully aligning their daily work to procedures and regulations, instead of using these procedures and regulations to support their overall goal which is, for instance, bringing people back to work (Public Employment Services) or supporting families on an economic, educational and social level (childcare) (Hart, 2012).

Still, joint up working is worth the effort or the battle. In PACE, we have seen how organisations, services, public agencies have become more aware of their mission and have reflected on their position towards parents and in society. PACE has also incited these services to look for cracks in the system and for the leeway to often work beyond their own boarders. It has installed new ways of collaborating that have been very supportive for parents, such as the way in which the PACE team in Brighton & Hove now liaises with Jobcentre Plus to make sure parents can access benefits.

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[29] Section 8 of the Childcare Act
[30] Model Agreement Early years provision free of charge and free childcare, retrieved from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/604417/Model_Agreement_FINAL_20170302.pdf

6 Impact on policy and upscaling

The aim of INTERREG projects is to test innovative services and then upscale them, integrate them further into existing systems and adopt policies if necessary. The PACE project is no exception to this ambition. The target that was set out at the start was as follows:

> *"Policy makers and childcare providers will be able to adjust their legislation, regulations and organisational framework to allow adoption of the innovative integrated method offering both childcare and a route to work. Providers can either set up specific childcare centres for a vulnerable target groups as well as implement the tested methods in regular childcare centres. 40 childcare centres will adopt the tested method." (from the AF; specific results Output 8)*

Has PACE succeeded in adjusting legislation and regulations? Have there been childcare centres adopting the tested method? In what follows, we first describe whether or not PACE project partners are able to implement PACE in their organisations in a durable manner and whether they have been able to 'contaminate' other organisations with the PACE approach. Next, we discuss changes in regulations and policies, on a local, regional and national level.

6.1 PACE contamination?

In this part of the project, we discuss to what extent PACE was implemented by project partners in their own organisations in a durable manner. Next, we discuss whether there were other organisations that adopted the PACE method. With the PACE method, we mean childcare settings offering occasional and flexible childcare and attending to families as a whole, taking into account parents' questions on employment and other life domains.

Almost all project partners plan to continue the PACE method within their own organisation. One partner indicates this will not be possible due to lack of funding. Three other partners indicate that they will need and are looking for additional funding to continue PACE in a durable manner. The PACE method for partners includes working with a designated keyworker, or a team of keyworkers, who support parents into employment and at the same time find a (flexible) place in childcare.

> *"Indeed, our organisation plans to go on with the PACE approach as our staff has been trained in that sense to engage parents and to support them through their way to employment." (PACE staff member, Arques, 2020)*

> *"We are planning to continue supporting parents to find work, childcare, volunteering and training using the PACE model of delivery with keyworkers, PDP process and childcare brokerage." (PACE manager, Brighton & Hove, 2020)*

Furthermore, most project partners have engaged in a further roll-out of PACE in their area. This mainly includes implementing the PACE approach in nurseries and other early years providers. The PACE approach entails working on parental involvement and working with parents as volunteers, offering more flexibility and occasional childcare sessions and liaising with keyworkers who can support parents into employment. The table below gives an overview of the status of PACE upscaling in early 2020.

Table 8. An overview of PACE upscaling in childcare.

PACE project partner	Number of early years settings adopting PACE approach	Explanation
Brighton & Hove	5	The PACE approach means: • Setting is taking part in the 'Parents in partnership' (REAL) training module. • Settings can give parents Information about PACE and how to refer/ apply. • Settings can give - have received the 'Poverty Pack' and know where to refer parents to for support with financial difficulties. • Settings are offering PACE parents flexible/occasional childcare sessions if needed so that they can attend training, interviews of volunteering.
Kent County Council/The Education People	11	The PACE approach means: • PACE champion identified in settings and agencies. • Signposting families for support. • Job Centre plus to link up with local settings and childminders. • All staff in settings and agencies working with families to incorporate the EFICL (Enhancing Family Involvement in Children's Learning) principles embedded working with families. • Work closely with the new Childcare Lead appointed in the Job Centre in January 2020 • For some: offering sessions more flexibly and offering occasional childcare sessions
Association de Centrex Sociaux de Wattrelos	1	One early years provider in the area is interested in the approach but has not yet implemented it.
Community Association Arques	6	Six early years providers are interested in the project. During PACE, the responsibility for childcare shifted from the local city council to the conurbation authority. This made it difficult to influence the childcare settings in the area. It took a long time to convince the conurbation authority of PACE. Currently discussions are ongoing, and we would be able to upscale PACE into the local childcare settings.
Centre Social Eclaté Saint-Martin-Boulogne	6	For us, the PACE approach means: - Combination of providing childcare and working on work. - Trying to provide childcare for atypical hours. - Adjustment of the opening hours in the childcare settings in the large region, so that they are better adjusted to working hours.

		There have been meetings with all the childcare settings in the larger region to adjust the opening hours and to convince them of the importance of the approach.
City of Turnhout	1	The PACE approach entails combining childcare and employment. Turnhout has been able to liaise with one private provider to implement PACE.
City of Mechelen	2	Exploring the possibility to further implement the PACE approach in the city of Mechelen. The dialogue with large childcare providers is ongoing.
City of Ghent	75	The PACE approach means that goals of the client and goals of the organisation are matching and where the approach is customised to the client in supporting and guiding the parents from childcare to work. The high number of settings in the column on the left refers to the number of early years settings that can implement the PACE approach within the city of Ghent, who has 75 childcare settings under own management.
De Mussen, the Hague	0	We answer 'yes' if the relationship between childcare and guidance towards work is recognised by the childcare settings and the steps are taken to accommodate parents in their needs. There has been no action taken on this level yet.

In total, 107 early years settings have adopted or will adopt the PACE approach. This encompasses the goal of 40 settings that has been described in the application form. The number is this high because city of Ghent can implement PACE in all their early years settings.

The upscaling of PACE is challenging particularly for project partners that do not have childcare under their own management and who are situated in countries with strict and complex childcare regulations. They are obliged to liaise with the agencies that do have the mandate to influence early years providers. The following example from Arques describes how a small result in terms of upscaling can hide a lot of effort.

> *"When the PACE project was approved, childcare in Arques depended on our city council. However, during the first year of the project, the conurbation authority (CAPSO) retrieved the competence on childhood and childcare. It means that on our territory we need to convince the conurbation authority, which is not a small business. We faced some reluctancy or unwillingness regarding the PACE project. We are not pessimistic, but realistic: we are still working on those barriers. Since a few months, we had a contact with someone working in CAPSO and who is working within the childcare department. She is very convinced by the PACE approach in order to adopt the methodology and to disseminate our practices into regular childcare services." (PACE staff, Arques, 2020)*

6.2 Impact on regulations

6.2.1 The state of affairs in June 2020

In 2020 we documented the changes in policies and regulations because of the PACE project, based on a brief survey that was sent by email. All project partners were asked to describe the changes that have been made or are upcoming. Their answers were thematically analysed by the researchers. The results are as follows.

First, it is clear that the changes on policy were **gradual and local**. New methods need to be developed and piloted before policy makers can be convinced on their relevance. In the course of PACE, two focus groups with policy makers took place which helped project partners to liaise with them and inform them about the project. What was the impact locally?

In several cases, **PACE influenced local policy agreements and was part of long-term strategic planning**.

> *"In Ghent, every new infrastructure request in childcare will include the possibility of a family room."*

> *"In Turnhout, the new policy agreement was influenced by PACE. Childcare was mentioned extensively in this agreement."* [31]

Many partners state that PACE has influenced the coordination between different agencies and services within their city.

Second, there have been changes on a regional level. For instance, in France, project partners were able to collaborate with the regional authorities on childcare such as with CAPSO and the Caisse d'Allocations Familiales (CAF). In Flanders, the governmental agency on childcare (Kind en Gezin) was informed on the PACE methods and will use this as input for new Flemish regulations on childcare.

Third, project partners reported an impact on the view and beliefs of policy makers. The **view of local policy makers** on flexible and occasional childcare changed: they became more aware of the need for flexible childcare and the need for integrated working was 'on the agenda'. In the Netherlands, characterised by a strict and complex childcare system, PACE was able to convince local policy makers to allow occasional and informal childcare by volunteers in community centre De Mussen. This might sound like a small change, but it is actually very new and innovative. Similarly, the French partners indicate that they were able to make authorities more aware of the need of working in an integrated manner and to make the more aware of the value of the job of childminder.

6.2.1 Obstacles to make changes in regulations

There have been changes on the level of regulations, but it is generally not easy to influence regulations that make life hard for parents in difficult situations.

First, to influence regulations, you need time and some level of power. Project partners testified that they needed repeated meetings with policy makers to be able to put PACE on the agenda and to make changes. Even project partners who were part of a local council encountered difficulties in 'weighing on' the local policy.

Second, the PACE methods and the vision behind it go against the overall economic climate, that urges people to get back to employment quickly and is more and more based on welfare conditionality for people who are not in paid work. PACE, in contrast, functions without financial punishment for people who do not progress. A tailor-made approach, including more time for parents who need this, is one of the basic elements. Here, we

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[31] The pace project delivered policy input for the new policy agreement 2019-2024 (https://www.turnhout.be/bestuursakkoord-2019-2024) and the new strategic long term plan of the public authority (https://www.turnhout.be/42-odaa-overzicht-doelstellingen-actieplannen-en-acties-11-februari-2020pdf).

even see a potential hazard to further implementing PACE. There is the risk that authorities will use the approach to get unemployed and inactive people back into work quickly, not taking into account the vision and basic attitude behind it (cf. Allen, 2003). Another risk is that it might lead to additional barriers to childcare. If access to childcare is reserved for parents who engage to go back to work, this might be an additional threshold for parents who consider working on the long term but are not ready to go back to work in the next months and to parents who want to use childcare without going back to work.

Third, PACE is confronted with tension between public and private service provision. If an authority wants to implement the integrated approach from PACE in a durable manner, this asks private providers in childcare to align their methods with the approach of public (welfare and employment) services. Related to this point, the fact that early years settings are more and more being privatised, makes it challenging to work on accessibility. Private settings always balance between making profit, accessibility and quality of care. If choices have to be made, accessibility is not priority n° 1 on the list. Even when working with public services only, they need to be able to counter market-based aims. This is a risk because of the infusion of market-based principles in policy administration since the 80ties. It would be advisable to use 'accessibility' as a reference frame in the checks and balances of new public management administrations. However, this requires rethinking the structures to include the real voices of the people concerned. It is crucial for the future and will decide how the balance tips. Social work with vulnerable groups is always situated in the tension between pacifying and creating opportunities to realise more social justice (Vandekinderen, Roose, Raeymaeckers, & Hermans, 2019). The role of interventions as PACE is to keep this tension going and put pressure on different policy levels, preferably with parents, to change their living conditions for the best.

Fourth, as is seen in other research, it is possible to augment the influence of people themselves on a more structural level. However, this is a slow process and change is sometimes hard to measure. However, organisations in urban communities, working close to the people and their lived realities can build opportunities to develop critical civic praxis by engaging in ideas and social networks of people and by doing so creating cycles of hope in a struggle for social justice (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). In PACE, the emphasis has been more on changing the individual instead of changing systems. However, reaching the people and really connecting to their needs is a first step to build collective signals and action. Here we see a challenge for coming years. It will become necessary to also upscale the stories of parents.

STEP 4: Update of the PACE programme theory

We here present a final update of the PACE programme theory, based on the elements discussed in the last two parts of the impact report.

The changes made to the programme theory are highlighted in **pink**.

Context

- Formal and informal barriers to childcare; unequal access with families in poverty having lower access to (high quality) ECEC.

Barriers in availability, affordability, accessibility (mobility barriers), prejudices on parents who are not working, parents' own beliefs on parenthood, separation is hard and make start of childcare emotional.

Inflexibility makes childcare less accessible especially for families who cannot plan and pay ahead.

Different families need different kinds of flexibility.

- Childcare system is oriented towards regular attendance which is an additional barriers for families with no or unstable employment

Childcare regulations and funding systems make it difficult for settings to provide flexibility. This effect is sometimes exacerbated by pedagogical requirements.

- There is room for upskilling early years practicioners in parental involvement and working with vulnerable families

Safety regulations <>parents physically present in childcare (mainly in UK)

- Lack of collaboration and communication between childcare-employment- welfare systems

Childcare and employment are each other's barriers. Families end up in a catch-22 situation.

- **There is a push towards employment, with benefits becoming more conditional and being in paid employment becoming a duty rather than a right.**

Parents are expected to work but are not approriately supported into employment. Many parents want to work but don't know where to start.

Charachteristics of the labour market: parenting is not valued, unstable jobs, dimploma's from abroad are not valid; a lot of criticism on Public Employment Services

- Vulnerable families have limited understanding of the childcare and employment systems *while making the combination between care and employment is mainly their puzzle to solve.*

Mechanisms

- Flexible and occasional childcare places, *helping parents to find and secure a place and giving them time to settle down* will make childcare more accessible for families with a distance to childcare and employment

- Involving parents in childcare will make childcare more sustainable and can be a first step to volunteering (the data confirm a relationship between involvement in childcare and sustainability of the childcare solution)

- Training and coaching early years practitioners will lead to increased parental involvement and sustainable childcare solutions for vulnerable families

- Volunteering in childcare can be a first step to employment (the data confirm a relationship between volunteering, in or outside of childcare, and being in sustainable employment)

- An intgetrated approach, including new collaborations with welfare and employment and offering childcare during trainings will overcome barriers to employment

- **A designated keyworker** offers tailored support and makes other services more accessible

- A tailored approach using a PDP flexibly, with ownership for parents will bring parents closer to employment (the data confirm this, using a PDP is the strongest predictor of employment)

- Offering a package of volunteering, trainings, individual and in group brings parents closer to employment

- **Joint-up working** from a **shared vision** on parenting and supporting parents to work.

Outcomes

- increased access to childcare for 654 families; sustainable childcare solution ~~and parental involvement~~ for 459 families, most (97%) of whom are involved in childcare; 173 childcare workers are more skilled and confident in working with parents

- more childcare adjusted to families' needs

- less distance to the labour market for 459 parents, with 162 being in sustainable employment

- Parents report more confidence, better selfcare and mental health, better relationships with children and a broader social network

- increased collaboration between childcare, employment and welfare services; including 103 new collaborations with welfare services and 91 with employment services

- adapted ~~childcare~~ policy mainly on local level : more flexible and occasional places or strenghtening integrated approach; 107 childcare settings might or will adopt the PACE approach.

- impact on child poverty in the 2seas region

more children who can socialize and develop thanks to childcare

progress on overall quality of life, not only on the level of childcare and employment >< limited progress on finances

"Terms and conditions"

- **Families are mapped and contacted:**
  Parents will need to be found and convinced to start childcare and employment support.
  The outreach work that is needed to map, contact and engage families depends on the local context and the characteristics of the families one wants to reach.
  Other services need to be aware of the project to signpost parents.

- **The integrated approach is supported by staff:**
  Early years practitioners get additional support from social workers or volunteers.
  Early years practitioners struggle with flexible and occasional childcare because they fear that it is not good for children's well-being and development. That is a concern that needs to be taken seriously in developing new practices and in coaching staff.
  The relationship with a designated keyworker or team of keyworkers is crucial; this keyworker needs mandate, information and support to get the job done.
  The keyworkers are agile and flexible, they are supported by (case) managers.
  There is good informal and formal communication between different staff members. There is a reflective working climate.

- **The integrated approach is supported by the infrastructure:**
  Childcare and employment are physically linked, transport and physical barriers to employment support are removed as much as possible

- **The integrated approach is supported by a network of services and organisations:**
  Agencies and organisations must be accessible and supportive and if not, parents need support in accessing their services or advocating for their rights.
  Joined-up working starts from a shared mission and vision, there is strong coordination on the network that needs to be maintained and updated along the way. Tensions between public and private sectors need to be addressed and transcended.

- **Parents are supported in sustainable work rather than into work as such:**
  Work is become more flexible. This is more often the case for low-income employment or employment for low-skilled workers. These workers also more often end up at the "wrong side of flexibility", in precarious work, underemployment or in-work poverty.
  It should be financially rewardable to be in employment.

- **Having a sustainable childcare solution is related to being in sustainable employment:**
  If parents can count on a sustainable childcare solution, looking for sustainable employment is facilitated. Vice versa, if parents have a

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7 The KEY MESSAGES from PACE

How can parents with young children and at distance from the labour market be supported towards childcare and employment? How to make sure the supportive measures enhance their overall quality of life? And how to support them into sustainable childcare and employment?

7.1 Create an integrated service that includes childcare and employment support

The worlds of childcare and employment are two separate worlds. They are not well aligned, nor on policy level, nor in daily practice. It is up to parents to 'gluing and quilting' it together. This is challenging for most parents and especially for parents in vulnerable circumstances, for whom childcare and employment are less accessible.

- The first and most important key message from PACE is to coordinate and integrate the support of parents into childcare and employment.
- Integration also means including other life domains. Parents in vulnerable situations bring their whole story and complex needs. Support should be arranged accordingly, including the necessary links to construct viable answers for parents.
- A mind shift in childcare and in employment services is crucial to create an integrated offer. Childcare needs to be aware that parents are 'more than parents', employment services and agencies and employers need to acknowledge that childcare is a crucial condition for parents to get (back) into work.
- Joined up working in practice means that childcare and employment organisations 'work together to make it work', transcending the tensions between public and private service provision. Childcare can offer occasional sessions, adapt opening hours or offer sessions more flexibly. Employers or public employment services can adapt working hours, buy in occasional childcare places and align the hours of trainings or job interviews with the opening hours and available spots in childcare.
- The joined-up working should be translated on the level of staff. Create links between childcare and employment through keyworkers. These keyworkers can work from within childcare settings or they can work closely together with childcare. This can be done through providing a physical meeting place in or close to the childcare where parents can meet the keyworker or having a keyworker present in childcare to make the first contact with parents ("in-sourcing").
- Invest in sustainable collaborations by setting up agreements, defining shared targets and defining roles and responsibilities. The collaborative network needs to be maintained, updated and re-evaluated.
- Take care not to create new barriers for parents through hook the right for a place in childcare to employment support. Integrating childcare and employment will make both more accessible, but parents still need to have the choice to access childcare without working towards employment and to provide their own childcare solutions.

7.2 Provide a designated keyworker for every parent

- In most cases, parents are confronted with different barriers to access the labour market. The focus should be on getting people back on track instead of pushing them towards work. This means addressing the different barriers they face and at the same time building up their confidence.
- A designated keyworker who is sensitive to parents' needs and invests in a trusting relationship with parents is key. The support should take place in a safe and welcoming environment.

- o The keyworker needs to have expertise on the domains of childcare and employment and should be part of a larger team that can provide support, key information and contacts.
  - o The keyworker helps parents to navigate childcare and employment services and to access other services. To achieve this, the keyworker needs access to the local network of services.
  - o Keyworkers need to be agile, updated and supported. This requires a strong support system, internal coordination and case management. They preferably work in a team of keyworkers who can share caseload, learn and reflect together and guarantee continuity of support for parents.
- Provide a 'package offer', including a wide range of offers in volunteering, training and education, (group) activities and concrete employment support (writing CV, mock interviews, etc.). This is centered around the individual support of a keyworker who supports the parents on their journey.

7.3 Revalue care and care tasks

- Value the role and meaning of parenting.
  - o On the level of parents and families by: 1/ giving all families the right and the choice to access childcare services; 2/ investing in (in)formal networks of parents through low-threshold activities and brining parents together; 3/providing broad support to families including parenting support
  - o In working with parents towards employment by: 1/giving parents agency in how they create a balance in their family. Work should be a right and not an obligation; 2/taking into account the care and care tasks of parents and making them visible for public employment services and employers
  - o In childcare through involving parents as equal partners and as 'complete persons', being more than parents.
- Revalue care professions and the role of childcare in society:
  - o Invest in continued coaching and professionalization of professionals in the early years sector and advocate for a re-valuation of their profession.
  - o The COVID-19 crisis made clear how crucial childcare is in society and to allow parents to work. The expectations of the early years sector are high and so is their responsibility. This is completely out of balance with the resources and the societal 'status' of the sector and the professionals who work in it. Invest in a childcare 'lobby' that emphasises the return on investment when investing in childcare.
- Emphasize the value of a high-quality early years sector to policy makers, considering the 'triangle' of childcare's social, pedagogical/educational and economic function. Dare to question the privatisation of childcare. Childcare should be a public service, affordable and accessible to all. If private providers face tension between making profit (or not making losses) and accessibility, the latter will be in the disadvantaged position.
- Advocate for regulations and policies that allow childcare to realise what is expected from them. The current policies and regulations push early years providers towards a very stable and overregulated system with little room for flexibility. There should be organisational flexibility combined with continuity and stability on the pedagogical level.

7.4 Create ownership for parents

- Parent should be in charge of their own trajectory form the start. This means that the interventions are rethought into places of exchange and interaction, rather than places where support is 'given'. This calls for a constructive view on interventions.

- Start from the parents own goals, their needs, wishes and possibilities. A Personal Development Plan can be used to formulate shared and understood targets and to make progress visible.
- Look for possibilities to work together with parents, to take their individual struggles to a more structural level. Connecting to their needs is a first step.
- Pay attention to conflict and parents disappearing from support. These signals mostly refer to connection problems and need to be addressed. It is important that keyworkers are trained to handle conflicts and sometimes difficult situations and keep aim at preserving the connection with parents.

7.5 Advocate for parents' rights and for structural changes

- It is important to give a lot of mandate to the keyworkers working with the parents. They should be able to advocate for and with the parents within the network and in contact with services 'outside' the network.
- A rights perspective should be the underlying frame of reference on different levels. Building new networks should be done with a clear mission and vision grounded in these rights.
- Aims and objectives should be kept 'open' and flexible enough to connect with the complex realities of parents. Linked to this, advocacy should be directed to systemic flaws limiting the access to rights of parents.
- Organisations and networks should include continuous signaling these barriers to the involved policy levels and keep track of changes.

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