

Report to Cllr Jacquie Russell Cabinet Member for Children Young People, Learning and Skills

March 2024

DRAFT: Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2024 -2027

Report by Steve Nyakatawa Interim Assistant Director (Education and Skills)

Electoral division(s): all

Summary

The Council have a range of statutory duties related to early years and childcare services including providing enough childcare places to meet the needs of families in West Sussex. This includes expanding early years entitlement by increasing access to free childcare which will commence in a phased approach from April 2024 to meet Department for Education Guidance.

The County Council along with partner stakeholders has developed 'Right from the Start' the Early Years and Childcare Strategy to support changes locally. It seeks to improve collaborative working and ensure a strategic framework to maintain efficient and high-quality provision that creates the best outcomes for children. The Strategy sets out the vision to support early education entitlements for children and their families from pre-birth to aged five, and wraparound childcare provision from birth to 14.

Recommendation

The Cabinet Member for Children Young People, Learning and Skills is asked to approve adoption of the Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2024-27.

Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 There has been a renewed interest in early years provision from the government and Ofsted. In recent years there has been an increase in the number of young children requiring additional support whilst resources have tightened. This has the potential to widen the gap between our least advantaged children and their peers. The challenges faced by families, and for service providers have been exacerbated as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.
- 1.2 Research shows that development from conception to age 2 lays the foundation for a child's physical, emotional, social, educational, and economic future and

investment at this stage of their lives will result in long-term positive change. This is cited in the 2021 research "[The best start for life: a vision for the critical 1001 days](#)".

- 1.3 The Study of Early Education and Development research from 2012 also found that attendance at high quality early years and childcare settings had wide ranging developmental benefits including: verbal and cognitive development, socio-emotional development including self-regulation.
- 1.4 The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education programme found strong correlations between the quality of provision accessed as well as the impact of home learning environments on young children.
- 1.5 In 2021, the population aged 0-19 years old in the county was approximately 184,000 (approx. 20.5%) (ONS).
- 1.6 In January 2024 there was a total of 1,188 registered early years and childcare providers across West Sussex, of those that have been inspected, 96.5% are good or outstanding.
- 1.7 All 3 and 4-year-olds and some 2-year-olds in England are entitled to 570 hours of free early education or childcare a year. This is often taken as 15 hours each week for 38 weeks of the year.
- 1.8 96% of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds benefited from a universal funded place in 2023 in West Sussex, with around half of these taking up an extended 30 hours place. 87% of eligible 2-year-olds took up a funded place this is considerably higher than nationally, where an average of 74% benefited from a funded place
- 1.9 In July 2023 the proportion of West Sussex children that attained the Good Level of Development (GLD) – a performance measure assessed at the end of a child's reception year was 67.5% which is comparable to the national figure. Outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds were lower with just 42.3% achieving a GLD compared to 51.6% nationally.
- 1.10 West Sussex County Council wish to enable universal and targeted support from pre-birth to aged five through its first Early Years and Childcare Strategy. The Strategy will drive local changes and create a framework to support implementation of the Council's legal functions and embed efficient and enhanced services.
- 1.11 There are several reasons, to adopt a county wide Early Years and Childcare Strategy that will support outcomes for children especially attaining a good level of development as they start school:
 - Services for pre-school children can be disjointed and partnership arrangements could be improved.
 - High standards of Early Years and County Council provision need to be maintained so the sufficiency of places and recruitment challenges are managed across the sector.
 - Earlier identification of children with SEND is required to assist more seamless transition to school.

- Engagement with children, parents and providers is improved so together, we can improve safeguarding and health and educational outcomes.
- The government expansion of the early years entitlement and wraparound childcare from April 2024 will add additional pressure to local authorities and the services as they will be required to support an increased number of children from an earlier age.

1.12 It is recognised that COVID has impacted on the experiences of families and children. This will inevitably vary between families, but it will have had an impact on the access to services and support received as well as the opportunities to socialise and develop language. An aim of this strategy is to ensure the best support for addressing inequalities which may have resulted from the pandemic.

1.13 The Early Years and Childcare Strategy is critical for improving the outcomes of children, families, communities, across the county, contributing to the [Our Council Plan 2021-2025](#) and the [Children and Young People's Plan 2022 to 2025](#).

2 National Policy Context

2.1 The Childcare Act (2006) contains statutory duties and legal requirements for Local Authorities (LA), and they are required to:

- provide early years services and joint working between agencies to reduce inequalities, improve outcomes and narrow the gap.
- ensure sufficient early education and childcare for the early years entitlements at two, three and four,
- enable parents to take part in employment and employment-related activities through enabling them to access childcare provision for children aged 0-14, or 18 for children with a disability.
- ensure information is readily available for both childcare providers and families to help them meet their other childcare duties.

2.2 The Children and Families Act (2014) placed additional responsibilities on Local Authorities to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and built on legislation in The Equalities Act (2010). This was strengthened by the SEND Code of Practice (2015). Subsequent guidance has further developed the requirement of Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018).

2.3 Free childcare is being expanded to support more parents returning to work after their parental leave ends. Currently, parents working over 16 hours a week with an income of less than £100,000 are entitled to 30 hours free childcare a week for children aged three to four. The scheme will be expanded so that working parents of all children over the age of nine months will be entitled to free 30 hours of childcare. There will be a staggered approach so childcare providers and councils have time to prepare for the changes.

- From April 2024, working parents of two-year-olds will be able to access 15 hours of free childcare.
- From September 2024, 15 hours of free childcare will be extended to all children from the age of nine months.

- From September 2025, working parents of children under the age of five will be entitled to 30 hours free childcare per week.

3 Proposal details

- 3.1 It is proposed to adopt the Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2024-2027 as set out in Appendix 1. The County Council want to ensure the best start for all children and support positive choices for families and are committed to eight priorities.
1. Facilitate the early identification of additional needs so that children and their families benefit from an inclusive, tailored support service with timely intervention, including effective transitions processes.
 2. Families are supported early by services to be resilient, building on strengths and encouraging self-help so that children are cared for and kept safe whilst balancing the need for safeguarding.
 3. All children and their families will have equal access to high quality provision and services which are local, where barriers to that access are removed, diversity is celebrated, and children are enabled to reach their full potential.
 4. Families are enabled to promote good physical health for themselves and their children from conception and beyond so that inequalities are reduced and those with health needs are understood and well supported.
 5. Families are enabled to promote good mental and emotional health for themselves and their children from conception and beyond so that inequalities are reduced and those with emotional and mental health needs are well supported.
 6. Participation from parents, carers, children and their community ensures that co-production is as the heart of planning so that services are fully accessible and meet the needs of their users.
 7. The Early Years and Childcare strategy is underpinned by a strong, collaborative leadership system to ensure ongoing focus and commitment to delivering the most effective services for children and families.
 8. There is sufficient, financially sustainable early years and childcare provision across the county to meet the needs of families and support is available for the sector to maintain a highly qualified workforce with desirable career pathways.
- 3.2 The Strategy will be implemented through a Strategy Delivery Plan which will be underpinned by Priority Action Plans. These will link activity to existing council and partner strategies and priorities. The delivery plan identifies key leads to drive collaborative action forward against key performance indicators that will be reported to senior officers. Partners will provide case studies to illustrate progress and evidence impact.

- 3.3 The intention is to report on progress to the Children's First Partnership Board so that the outcomes are overseen at a county wide level. There will be an Early Years and Childcare Working Group to drive the aims of the strategy, chaired by a partner to encourage ownership beyond the County Council. Details of how this will be made available to the public will be considered in due course.
- 3.4 The expansion of early years and childcare provision will be managed through operational governance within the Childrens Young People and Learning Department's operational structures.

4 Other options considered (and reasons for not proposing)

- 4.1 The alternative would be not to adopt the strategy and continue with early years services split across education skills and working in isolation from partner stakeholders, which risks duplication of work and disjointed services.

5 Consultation, engagement and advice

- 5.1 To ensure that the voices of all stakeholders were reflected in the strategy, the early years and childcare team identified a number of methods for seeking views to assist in shaping the strategy.
- 5.2 In September 2022, three focus groups of parents; providers and LA teams were formed as part of a Local Government Association peer review to support in writing and creating their own Early Years and Childcare Strategy. The peer review gleaned key information from stakeholders and made a series of recommendations, which helped officers start to develop the strategy.
- 5.3 From April 2023 all parents' carers and providers of Early Years services were invited to take part in engagement. An external Early Years professional was engaged who incorporated the feedback and themes into a draft strategy to enable final views to be sought.
- 5.4 The main themes raised during this engagement were:
- Investment in the early years remains a challenge and will need some review.
 - Equal access to high-quality provision and services will be required to ensure that all children have the best start in life.
 - Ease of access to information and pathways can be confusing, therefore a joined up and simplified offer should be available.
 - Review and reinstate universal services at all levels e.g., health visiting, pre and peri natal.
 - Access to information needed to be improved to enable both parents and providers to effectively support children with additional needs.
 - Close, collaborative working between services will be required to ensure services are continual and simple to navigate.
- 5.5 In September 2023, there was a public consultation to seek views on the strategy and draft priorities using the council's Your Voice platform which was widely publicised. Over 90% of respondents agreed that the priorities identified were the right ones.

5.6 In November 2023, an engagement event was held with strategic leads and senior managers. They considered the stakeholder feedback and themes which informed the priorities for the strategy set out in paragraph 3.1. A summary of the consultation and feedback can be found in Appendix B.

6 Finance

6.1 Revenue consequences

6.2 The Early Years Teams within the council are fully funded and staffed by the centrally retained element of the Early Years block of the Dedicated Schools Grant. The Strategy will form part of this existing teams work.

6.3 As a result of the expansion in early years entitlement the Early Years DSG block is set to increase by £37.5m (65.1%) in 2024/25. Of this, £26.6m relates to the introduction of 15 hours entitlement for eligible working parents of two-year-olds from April 2024 and for eligible working parents of children from age 9 months to 2 years from September 2024. The remaining additional funding is due to an increase in the hourly funding rates of £2.55 for two year-olds and 84 pence for three and four year-olds (£10.1m), increased funding to the Council's four maintained nursery schools (£0.3m), and additional Pupil Premium and Disability Access Funding (£0.5m). These allocations are provisional and will be updated in July 2024 for the January 2024 census count.

6.4 Capacity to support the expansion of the early years provision from April 2024 will be in part enabled by changes in the funding regulations from 2024/25, whereby the County Council will be allowed to retain up to 5% of funding for the under 2 year old, 2 year-old and 3 and 4 year-olds to support central costs in enabling the service. In setting it's Early Years budget for 2024/25 the County Council has retained 4% of these main entitlement funding streams to fund Early Years staff and specialist services such as speech and language therapy, training and equipment.

6.5 The remaining 96% of the DSG funding will be paid to providers based on an hourly rate which has been agreed as follows for 2024/25:

- £11.39 per hour for eligible children aged between 9 months and 2 years
- £8.27 per hour for eligible two-year-olds, and
- £5.82 per hour for eligible three and four-year-olds

6.6 Capital consequences

6.7 The Department for Education (DfE) have announced a Childcare Capital Grant to support the expansion of early years and childcare with West Sussex receiving an allocation of £1.872m. Within the guidance, the DfE have advised that the funds are provided to local authorities to support the provision of new places to support the expansion of 30-hours entitlement places for children aged 9-months to 3-year-olds and wraparound provision for primary school aged children.

6.8 The capital funding will be subject to further Key Decisions as part of the County Council's Capital Governance arrangements.

6.9 The effect of the proposal:

(a) **How the cost represents good value**

There is no additional cost associated with the strategy.

(b) **Future savings/efficiencies being delivered**

As partnership working progresses under the Strategy, the council may need to consider looking at the structure of its future early years teams.

(c) **Human Resources, IT and Assets Impact**

The work under the strategy will be driven within existing resources, systems and assets.

7 Risk implications and mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
Priority levels drop amongst key stakeholders. Gap in direct management of the Early Years and childcare Team and Head of Service leaving	Frequent updates to Children's First Partnership Board Recruitment of a Strategic lead Role is underway.
Capacity to deliver on the expansion of childcare is rightly prioritised which could reduce the momentum for joint working to realise the overarching aims of the strategy.	Early Years Lead or interim post is in place to allow for a focused decisions to be made in a timely manner whilst strategically liaising with partner stakeholders and maintaining momentum of the expansion and strategy within the teams.
An increase in children accessing provision from age 2 and the focus on earlier identification of additional need will increase pressure on teams within the Children's Services Directorate such as SEND and Early Help	Aligning strategies and ensuring budgets are pooled will mean that intervention happens at the earliest opportunity to reduce or prevent the support required in the long term, alleviating the pressure on teams
Disillusionment with the Strategy Delivery Plan among parents and practitioners.	Create an accessible, meaningful framework, governance structure and clear communications plan that keeps everyone informed.
Joint commissioning is not prioritised to ensure	An Early Years lead in role will champion and advocate for Early Years services and ensure it is prioritised across all partner strategies. This will

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
sufficient and aligned provision	minimise duplication and maximise working efficiencies to have a positive impact on children's outcomes
The use of the centrally retained budget to support other services risks appropriate support being removed from the early years and childcare sector and the council not being able to manage the sufficiency of places or the quality of the places effectively.	Work in a joint way with other services to ensure that they are also covering the early years aspect of this work, this will be addressed through the working party groups for the priorities.
Silo working risks fragmentation of service design and adversely impacts the delivery of an aligned and effective service for children and families	Strong communications and engagement plans.

8 Policy alignment and compliance

8.1 Our Council Plan –

The Early Years and Childcare Strategy links to all four priorities of [Our Council Plan 2021-2025](#) and is focused on providing children with the best start in life. It is integral to the Children and Young People's Plan.

Keeping people safe from vulnerable situations – there is an emphasis on health, well-being, safety and resilience for both families and providers through joint working with children's services.

A sustainable and prosperous economy – central to the Early Years and Childcare Strategy is a focus on workforce development and financial sustainability of childcare providers. The expansion of funded entitlements and wraparound childcare sit within the strategy and will support families in returning to work.

Helping people and communities to fulfil their potential – accessible, continuous and high-quality provision for all children including those with additional needs and vulnerabilities and their families are available at the earliest opportunity, leading to improved outcomes before children start school.

Making the best use of resources. – the strategy will support this through a partnership approach and joint commissioning where possible to avoid duplication between organisations and create clear pathways for families from birth onwards

8.2 **Legal implications –**

The statutory and legal responsibilities of the Council with respect to early years and childcare are reflected in the work of the Education and Skills team and their existing roles and responsibilities. The objectives work within the current statutory role of a local authority and with clear reference to national policy and direction where the DfE has so determined.

8.3 **Equality duty and human rights assessment –**

The Strategy focuses on ensuring equality for all. It explicitly tackles both disadvantage and inequality based on socio-economic factors, vulnerability and special educational needs. It focuses on improving opportunities for high achievement for all whilst overcoming barriers to success for those identified as being at risk of underachieving, thereby aiming to provide equity and justice for all.

Data collection and analysis will monitor progress and improved outcomes of the diverse range young people and families to ensure that high quality provision and support is being accessed proportionately by the local population. All families, regardless of having a protected characteristic or not, will be monitored to ensure they are accessing provision in line with their peers, allowing interventions if needed.

8.4 **Climate change –**

Whilst there are no standards linked to the environment for providers of early education and wraparound care, providers will be encouraged to consider how to make their businesses more energy efficient particularly as they expand. Any new builds under the capital programme will be subject to the standards adopted by the County Council which have regard to the County Council's Climate Change Strategy. Children should also be taught about the environment as part of the educational programmes.

8.5 **Crime and disorder –**

We will ensure close working partnerships with Children's Social Care, Communities and Early Help teams, to strengthen joint working between all partners in tackling a reduction in families becoming at risk of being involved in crime. We will also work with safeguarding partners, police and local community programmes to ensure that we support the prevention of the youngest children in families becoming involved in crime.

8.6 **Public health –**

The Strategy supports Public Health specifically through the development of healthy life skills and improved wellbeing for children. We will be working closely to ensure strategies align and priorities are matched.

8.7 **Social value –**

The Strategy supports Social Value by helping individuals or groups in the community who may be disadvantaged or reducing inequality between groups. It aims to provide children and young people skills, opportunities and pathways to successful achievement and learning. This aims to improve longer term

positive engagement in society through ensuring young people have the skill, knowledge and confidence to contribute positively within society.

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Appendices

Annex 1 – 'Right from the Start: West Sussex Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2024-2027'

Annex 2 – Strategy Engagement Analysis

Background papers - None

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