

Right from the Start

Early Years and Childcare Strategy Consultation

December 2023



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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Context

In September 2022, West Sussex commissioned a Local Government Association peer review to support the development of an Early Years and Childcare Strategy, placing the youngest children and their families at the heart of decision making.

Central government also announced an expansion of the funded entitlement for early years and childcare in April 2023.

This is good opportunity to support local changes, to ensure a strategic framework that supports the Council's legal functions and embeds efficient and enhanced service delivery and improved outcomes for children and families.

Research shows that development from conception to age 2 lays the foundation for our physical, emotional, social, educational, and economic futures. The coordination of services through an agreed local strategy, to enable a universal and targeted framework of support from pre-birth to aged five, is critical for improving the outcomes of children, families, communities, and society. In short, there is no better stage in a child's life in which to invest, if we are committed to long-term change.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

The early years has been in the spotlight for several years but more recently with a renewed focus from both the government and Ofsted. Both the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated the challenges faced by families, and by those providing services nationally. An increase in the number of young children requiring additional support, along with resource pressures, is creating a perfect storm, to potentially widen the gap between our least advantaged children and their peers. Whilst the pandemic may have magnified these issues, it is important to acknowledge the impact this had on families and children. Although it should be noted that some of the issues were starting to increase before COVID.

West Sussex County Council and the Integrated Care Board are on an exciting journey together to further develop services within Early Years and Childcare. The Engagement and consultation between 2021 and 2023 aimed to get feedback on the challenges within the system and the priorities that the West Sussex Early Years and Childcare Strategy needs to address.

To ensure alignment views were obtained from the following stakeholders:

- Parents.
- Carers.
- Early Years and Childcare providers.
- West Sussex employees who deliver services for children and their families.
- All services outside of the council that deliver services for children and their families.
- Anyone who has an interest in services for children and their families.

1.3 Summary of key responses

The main themes raised by respondents are as follows:

- Over 90% of respondents agreed that the priorities identified were the right ones.
- 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 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.

1.4 Next steps and key actions

- Explore further opportunities to obtain the views and opinions of the wider county demographic.
- Use the findings of the survey to draft the early years and childcare strategy and engage with multi-agency service leads from across the county.
- Develop two-way dialogue, to agree and secure shared priorities across strategic plans.
- Agree the lines of accountability and reporting, with terms of reference based on the Childcare Act and clear links to wider plans and operational delivery could help create a sustainable framework.
- Identify resource to write and lead the overarching Early Years and Childcare Strategy and lead relationships with service leads at a strategic level.
- Identify leads for and create multi agency working party groups to develop and implement actions to progress towards each priority.
- Development of a comprehensive dataset to understand the early years and childcare needs of children and families across West Sussex and enable performance management across the Childcare Act aims.
- Manage childcare sufficiency, and market development to achieve progress towards the government plans to expand funded entitlements to early years and childcare.
- Ensure that all statutory functions and requirements are met and ensure effective budgeting to meet the duty.

2. Consultation

2.1 Methodology

To ensure that the voices of all stakeholders were reflected in the strategy and to help shape the actions we should take to effect change, the early years and childcare team gathered the views of any person who had an interest in early years and childcare.

In September 2022, engagement of stakeholders began through the Local Government Association peer review. This consisted of three focus groups led by a peer reviewer, which focused on,

1. Parents
2. Providers
3. Local authority teams

A parental survey focusing on childcare needs was conducted in April 2023. Through the summer of 2023, informal reviews took place at the local Family Hub events. The questions and summary can be found in Appendix A.

West Sussex County Council employed an external consultant to conduct engagement sessions with senior and council leaders as well as wider internal and external teams. She was to write a draft strategy. The outcomes and views from these engagement sessions have been incorporated into the draft strategy and formed the eight priorities which were consulted on in the public survey.

A public consultation survey about the strategy and draft priorities were launched via the YourVoice platform on 18 September 2023 and ran for 4 weeks, closing on 20 October 2023. The questions of which can be found in Appendix B.

Publicity included:

- Inclusion in the Your Voice Residents' ePanel eNewsletter (circulation around 6,000).
- Direct mailing from the Director of Children Young People and Learning to teams and strategic leads or organisations external to the local authority and council.
- Weekly communications to schools, providers, and parents.
- Publication on the approved social media channels.
- The appropriate modifications were offered, although none were taken up.

Finally, an engagement event with strategic leads and senior managers took place on 8 November 2023.

2.2 Key Themes Arising

Respondents felt that the following themes should be included in the strategy.

- Investment in the early years.
- Access to high quality provision and education.
- Early identification and support for children with additional needs including SEND.
- Ability to access services that support family development when they are needed.
- More effective multi-agency working.
- Sustainability.

Investment in early years.

"If we put enough into early years now all services including police and the NHS will see a reduction in issues. Research has proved that the first 5 years of a child's life is vital to their development for the rest of their lives, and we need to prioritise that. We need to prioritise the services that deliver that support."

There was a feeling that leadership is not enough without the resources and investment and that true collaboration would be needed early enough to make a difference. However, there was a will expressed through the survey to be part of the change.

Access to high quality provision and education.

"Good Early Years education is vital but should come secondary to the importance of ensuring a positive 1001 days of a child's life - levelling this up before children access early years education should be the main priority."

Children first, growing happy, independent, and skilled children was the overwhelming theme that came from the consultation. A need for investment in and development of high-quality, knowledgeable staff who understand child development.

Respondents felt that central to the strategy would be ensuring there is alignment in understanding of child development between settings, schools, and services, so that they are ready for the child rather than the other way round.

Other themes focussed on relationships. Engaging and supporting parents in the importance of home learning was crucial to parents. Effective transitions and information sharing between settings, school and other services will be key to success. A focus on the changing needs of the child will also require a focus so that our learning environments reflect the changing world in which our children are growing up.

Early identification and support for children with additional needs including SEND.

"Inclusive childcare available to all meet the needs of all children so they can reach their full potential".

There was by far the most comments linked to this theme. All respondents identified the earliest identification and intervention is the most successful and that to support their children effectively, families would need expert advice, guidance, and access to support networks, in a timely manner.

Some respondents felt that high-quality universal services would impact on all children and remove labels that can pose barriers in the future.

Mental health and wellbeing featured highly in this theme with access to support and training for parents and providers to separate the impact of trauma from that of an additional need.

Fair funding rates for providers who support children in the early years with additional needs was a key topic. Providers also highlighted that access to specialist training and equipment to support pupils with complex medical and learning needs is prohibitive. Waiting times for referrals were a concern for parents.

Ability to access services that support family development when they are needed.

"I am concerned that services have been massively reduced for the very early years. There are no longer those services in place that support the normal transition to parenthood and give confidence to new mums and dads that they are doing the right thing."

"Services now only seem to exist once a problem has been identified. Early help is not early it is too late!"

"Clearer help and pathways. Especially for babies and young children for things like health questions and guidance on learning at home, not delivered online, face to face helps me."

"I think there needs to be an emphasis on building trust with families by collaborating with them, empowering, and supporting them, in a way that works for them so that change is more sustainable."

Parental comments related to equality and ease of accessing services . It was felt that for a the strategy to made a difference early enough there should be a review and focus on both universal and targeted services. A number of respondents cited services for expectant and new parents as being key, for example accessing health visitors and mental health advice.

Simplified and joined up pathways to information from services will be crucial to the success of the strategy.

Respondents also expressed the need to keep the voice of children, parents and families central to the strategy, and building reciprocal trust.

More effective multi-agency working.

"Families need information from the beginning of their parenting journey. The information needs to be widespread, and services need to collaborate to ensure each individual team can get someone to the right place for support or guidance."

"With a continuing reduction in services for families, information sharing with voluntary/charitable organisations would seem even more important."

"There is much talk of 'joined up' working, but little happens in practice."

Working closely with voluntary and charitable organisations as well as with other agencies and internal partners was seen as key to the success of this strategy.

Ensuring families get the support they need through strong processes and systems, with consistent information, advice and guidance being readily available.

Sustainability

"Recruitment and retention of qualified Early Years practitioners Ensuring that the funding entitlement is enough to allow settings to provide high quality early years care and education - the sector is desperately under-funded. Increasing ratios is not the answer - this actually decreases the quality of care and education and leads to loss of staff through stress."

"I don't think access to quality childcare is an issue - there is lots of good quality childcare available, however not everyone can 'access' these as the costs are prohibitive."

"Nursery and school budgets are too low and restricted for children with special educational needs and therefore only the most severe are receiving support, other children are forced to struggle on mainstream classes/schools there isn't the provision to help them all."

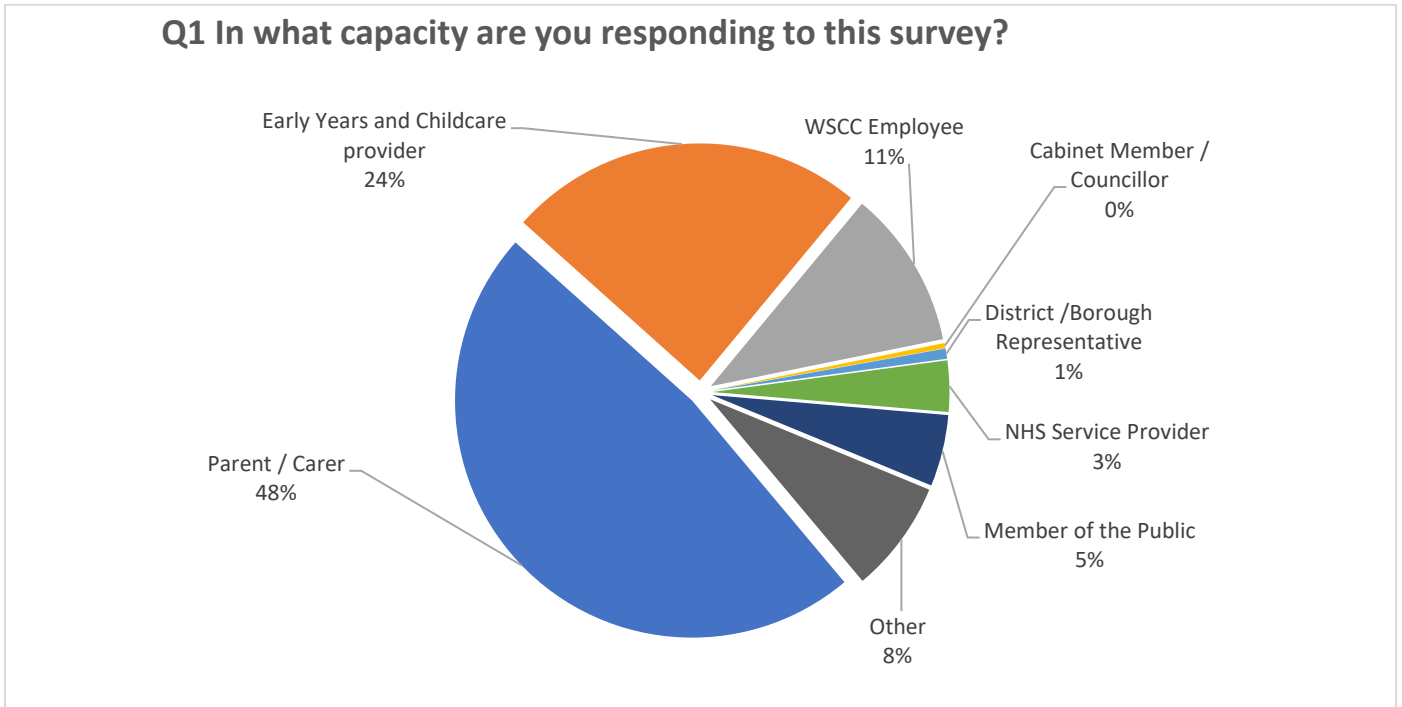
"Alongside high-quality early education, themes from the consultation included the need for support for the early years and childcare sector, including schools, to be financially sustainable. The current recruitment and retention crisis in the sector, along with staff not receiving a fair salary will be key challenges to consider within the strategy."

Parent comments related to the need for affordable, flexible childcare.

3. YourVoice Responses

287 people participated in the survey from the 773 people who visited the page. Direct email, referral and social media were the top sources of traffic for this survey.

48% (137 respondents) of the stakeholders were parent or carers, followed by 24% (70 respondents) were Early Years and Childcare providers. A combined 15% (44 respondents) worked within the profession either at a council or with the NHS.



3.1 Headline Views

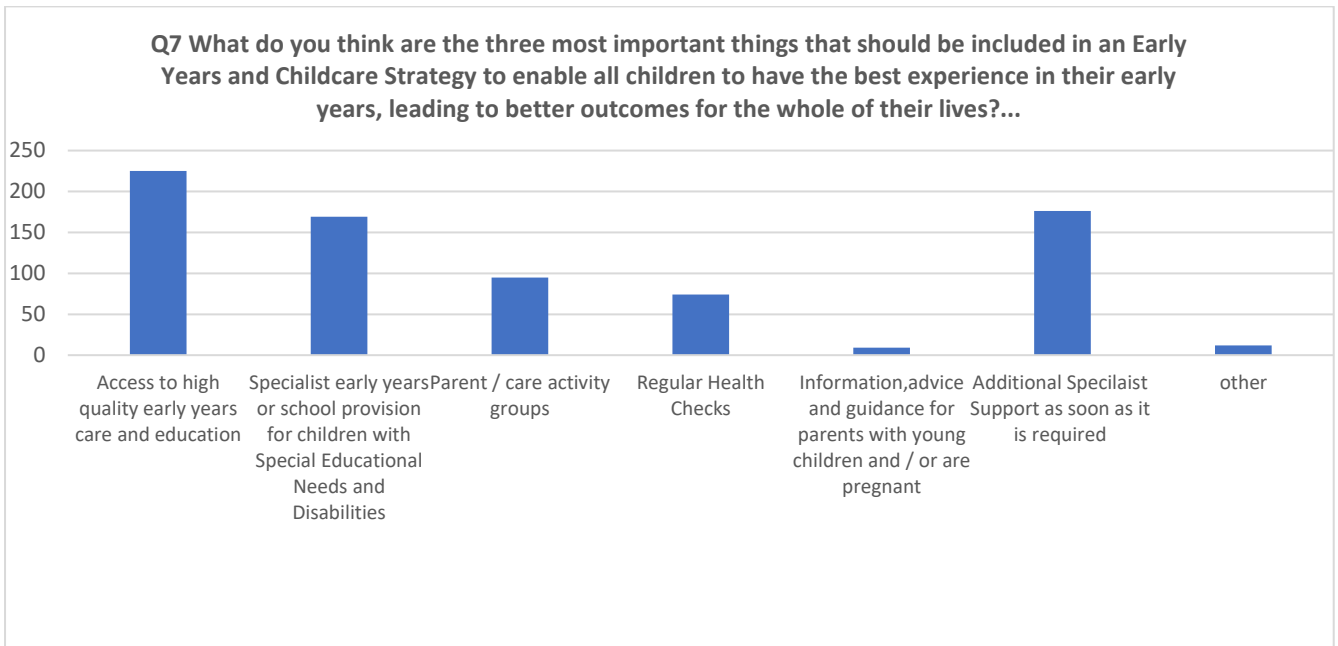
90% (258 respondents) agreed that there should be a multi-agency early years and childcare strategy. Of those that did not, their main responses were:

- Unsure of what this meant.
- 'Will it add value and make a difference?'
- Concerns over unnecessary bureaucracy and limiting innovative working.
- Concerns that unnecessary protocols and too many agencies can distort learning.
- 'Multi agency screams that things won't be done properly, and I would question that my child's needs won't be met.'

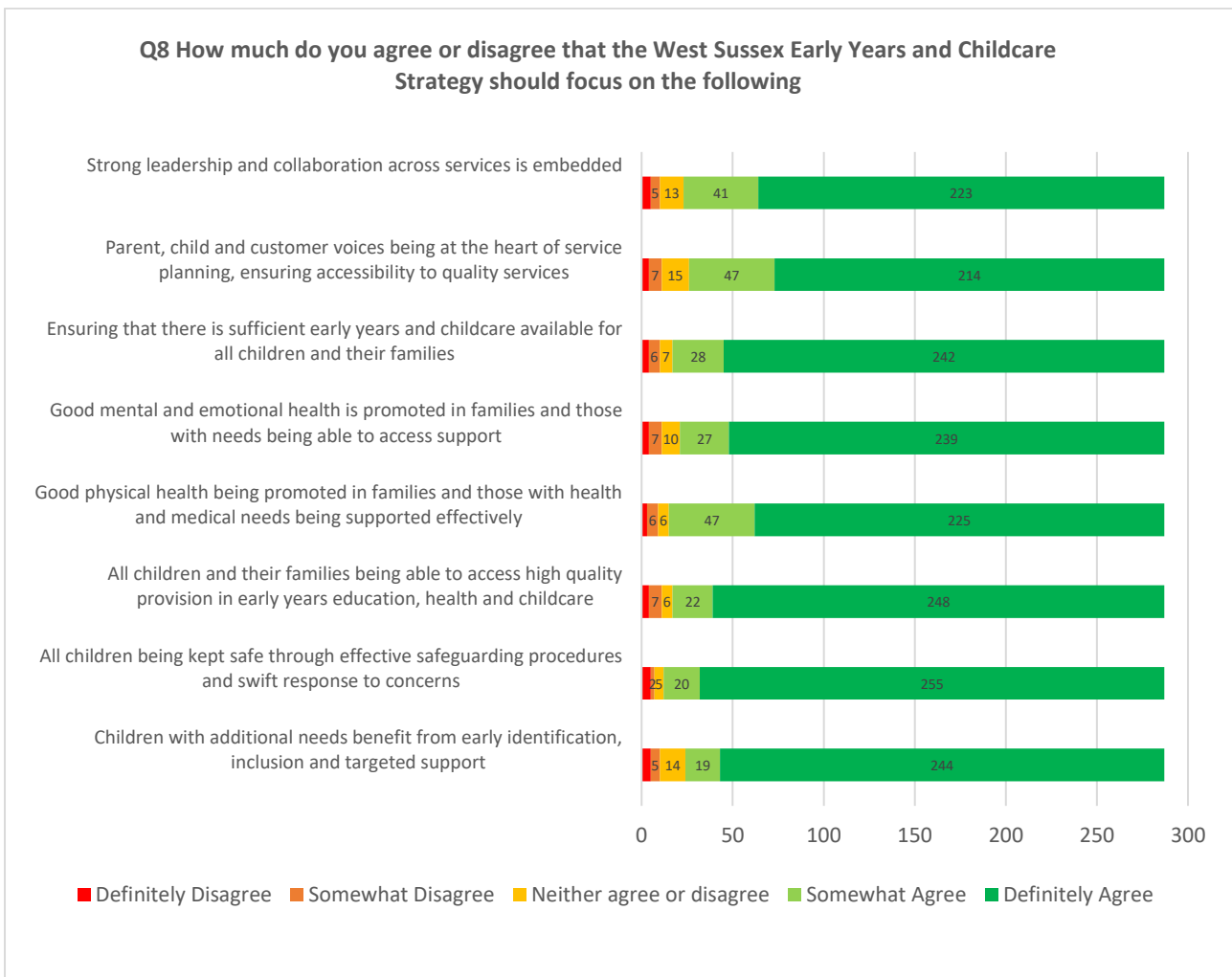
22% (64 respondents) felt they had strategies in place that included elements of early years and childcare. Most respondents cited the EYFS statutory framework, but other strategies of note included:

- Education and Learning Strategy
- Early years and childcare training
- Nurturing Minds
- Birth to Thrive

78% (225 respondents) of stakeholders felt that most important area was 'access to high quality early years and education', this was followed by 61% (176 stakeholders) stating that 'additional specialist support as soon as it is required' was important, finally 58% (169 respondents) felt that specialist early years of schools provision for children with SEND was important.



The survey asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed on areas of focus for the strategy. Over 90% respondents agreed with all of the statements but there were some differences in the strength of their agreement. The chart breaks down respondent's answers:



3.2 Respondent Summary and Demographics

Gender/Sex

	No. in Survey	Percentage in Survey	West Sussex
Prefer not to say	2	0.7%	
Female	254	90.7%	51.4%
Male	24	8.6%	48.6%

Age

	No. in Survey	Percentage in Survey	West Sussex
25-34 years	50	17.6%	11.5%
35-44 years	109	38.4%	12.4%
45-54 years	57	20.1%	13.6%
55-64 years	44	15.5%	13.3%
65-74 years	18	6.3%	11.5%
75-84 years	6	2.1%	7.8%

Ethnicity

	No. in Survey	Percentage in Survey	West Sussex
White British	251	88.4%	91.0%*
White Other	15	5.3%	-
Black	4	1.4%	1.3%
Asian	3	1.1%	4.3%
Mixed	3	1.1%	2.4%
Prefer not to say	6	2.1%	

*West Sussex result is White British and White other combined

Disability

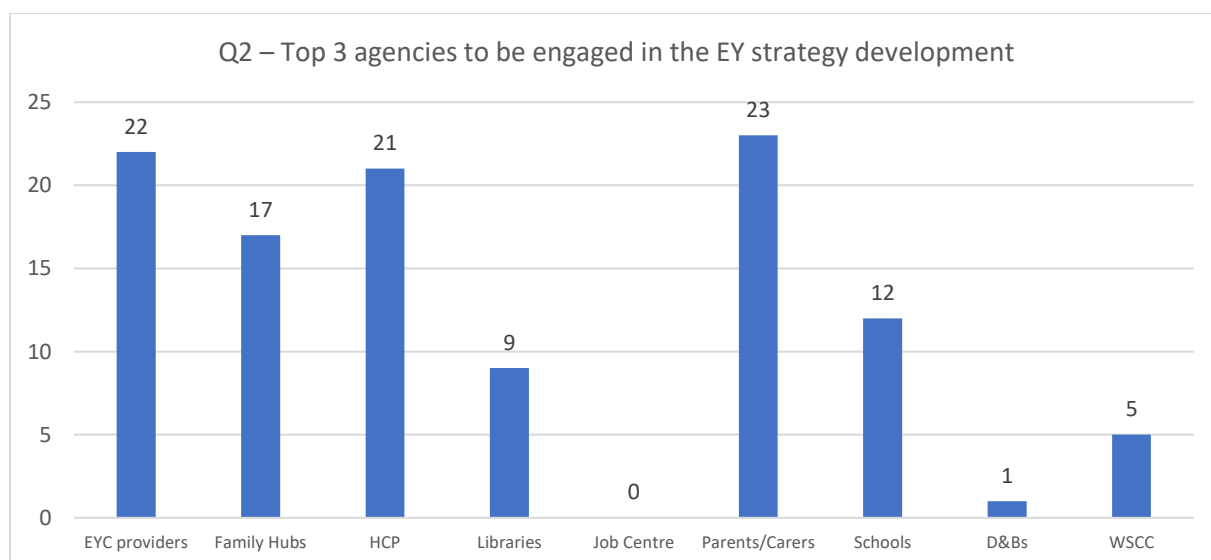
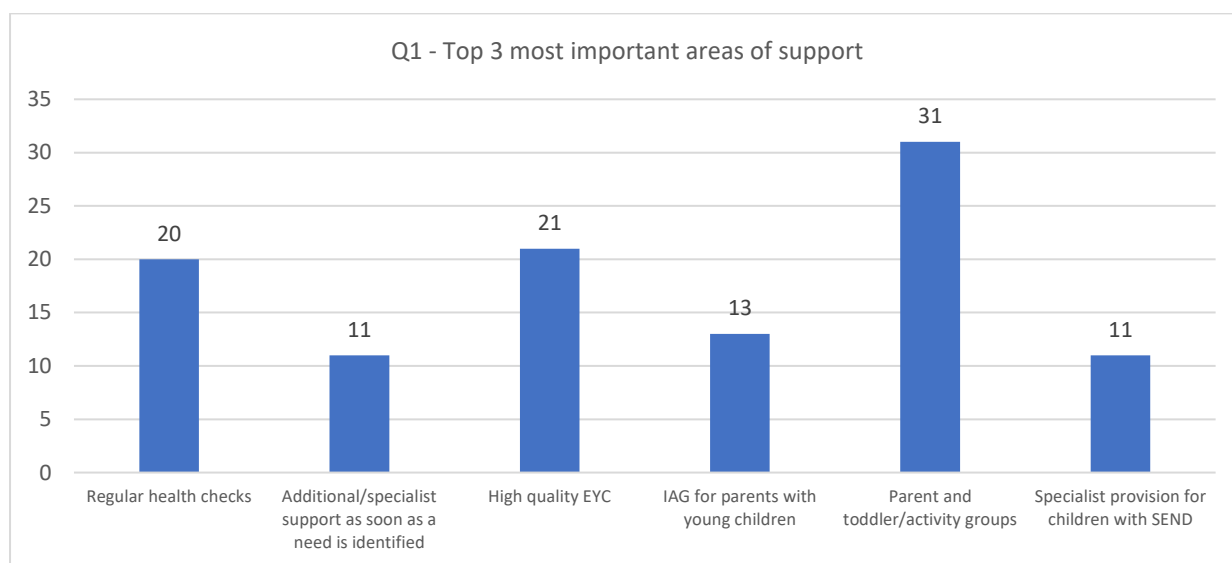
	No. in Survey	Percentage in Survey	West Sussex
Prefer not to say	10	3.5%	
No	247	87.6%	83.1%
Yes	25	8.9%	16.9%

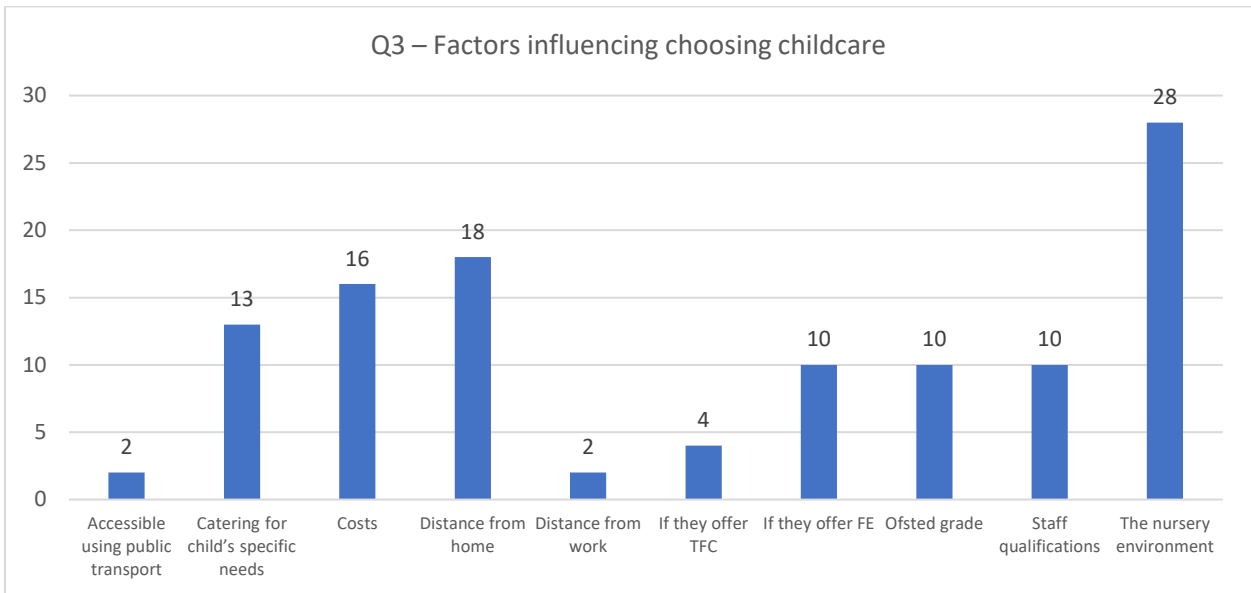
4. Children and Family Hub Survey Questions

4.1 Parent Responses

38 parents completed the questionnaire. The three areas of support that were most important to them were Parent and toddler activity groups: High quality Early Years and Childcare and regular health checks. They felt that parents and carers; Early Years and childcare providers and health care professions needed to be engaged in strategy development. The factors that influence childcare provision for them were the nursery environment, followed by distance, cost and extent it catered for specific needs. Some also added the staff attitude; how their child behaved and how they were when visiting and availability – as it can be hard to find spaces.

Seven parents expressed an interest in taking part in the development of the strategy.





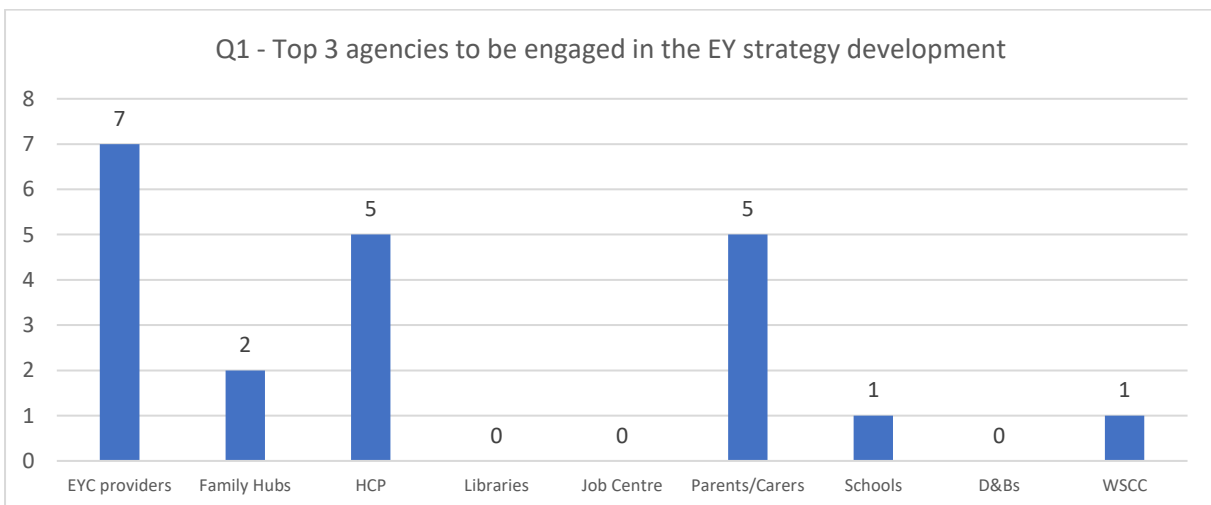
4.2 Practitioner responses

Eight practitioners responded to the questionnaire. They commented those Early Years and Childcare provider (including nannies); health care professionals and parent / carers needed to be engaged in the development of a strategy. Regular health checks: high quality Early years and Childcare and information, advice and guidance were the most critical areas of support to them.

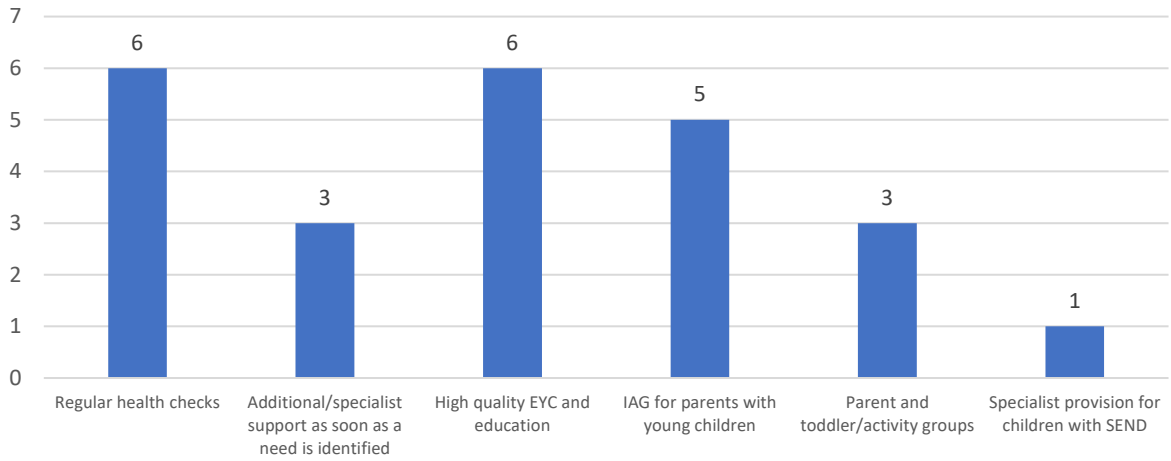
Five Practitioners responded to a question about what support was most beneficial from partners, and told us:

- Open communication between services and opportunities for children and practitioners.
- Open communication. Workshops to support them in helping their children. Funding. Supportive environment.
- Information and support groups, someone to be able to ask questions too, and guidance.
- More parent/carer and toddler groups to encourage learning and development.
- Family Centres, support groups.

One practitioner expressed an interest in being involved in the development of the strategy.



Q2 - Top 3 most important areas of support



Appendix A

YourVoice Survey Questions

Questions marked with (*) required a response.

1. In what capacity are you responding to this survey? *
2. Do you think that there should be a multi-agency Early Years and Childcare Strategy in West Sussex? *
3. If you answered 'No' or 'Unsure', please could you provide additional information.
4. Does your current role/service impact on children and their families? *
5. Does your service currently have a strategy in place that includes elements of Early Years and Childcare? *
6. If you answered 'Yes', please tell us the name of the strategy/strategies.
7. What do you think are the three most important things that should be included in an Early Years and Childcare Strategy to enable all children to have the best experience in their early years, leading to better outcomes for the whole of their lives? (Please select three) *
 - i. Access to high quality early years care and education
 - ii. Specialist early years or school provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities
 - iii. Parent/carer and child activity groups
 - iv. Regular health checks
 - v. Information, advice, and guidance for parents with young children and/or are pregnant
 - vi. Additional specialist support as soon as it is required
 - vii. Other (please specify)
8. How much do you agree or disagree that the West Sussex Early Years and Childcare Strategy should focus on the following:
 - i. Children with additional needs benefitting from early identification, inclusion and targeted support
 - ii. All children being kept safe through effective safeguarding procedures and swift response to concerns
 - iii. All children and their families being able to access high quality provision in early years education, health and childcare
 - iv. Good physical health being promoted in families and those with health and medical needs being supported effectively
 - v. Good mental and emotional health is promoted in families and those with needs being able to access support
 - vi. Ensuring that there is sufficient early years and childcare available for all children and their families
 - vii. Parent, child, and customer voices being at the heart of service planning, ensuring accessibility to quality services
 - viii. Strong leadership and collaboration across services is embedded
9. If you selected somewhat disagree/definitely disagree for any of the above statement, please provide additional information.

10. Are there any other priority areas that you think we may have missed and would benefit from being included in the Strategy? *

11. If you would like to receive updates regarding the Early Years and Childcare strategy and be kept informed of any other upcoming consultations related to Early Years and Childcare, please provide your name and email. We will only use your contact details for this purpose.

Parent Questions

1) What do you think are the most important areas of support to enable the best start for your child?

Please tick the top 3 that you think are the most important:

I most need access to:

- Regular health checks
- Additional/specialist support as soon as a need is identified
- High quality early years care and education I.e. day nursery, pre-school, childminder
- Information, advice, and guidance for parents with young children
- Parent and toddler/activity groups
- Specialist early years or school provision for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
- Other – please add

2) Who do you think needs to be engaged with the support to families and children in their early years to secure the best outcomes for them?

Please tick the top 3 that you think are the most important to be involved:

- Early years settings and childminders
- Family Hubs (previously Children and Family Centres)
- Healthy Child Programme – Health Visitors and School Nursing Team
- Libraries
- Job Centre
- Parents/Carers
- Schools
- District/Borough Council
- West Sussex County Council
- Other – please add

3) When choosing early years education and childcare provision (day nursery, pre-school, childminder) for your child, what are the three most important things to you?

- Accessible using public transport
- Being able to cater for your child's specific needs
- Costs
- Distance from home
- Distance from work
- If they offer Tax-Free Childcare
- If they offer Free Entitlement for 2, 3- and 4 Year Olds
- Ofsted grade
- Staff qualifications
- The nursery environment
- Other – please add

4) Would you be interested in working with us to develop the early years strategy?
Yes/No If yes, please add your name and an email address .

Practitioner Questions

- 1) Who do you think needs to be engaged with the strategy to support the best outcomes for children in their early years? Please tick the top 3 that you think are the most crucial to be involved:
 - Early years settings and childminders
 - Family Hubs (previously Children and Family Centres)
 - Healthy Child Programme – Health Visitors and School Nursing Team
 - Libraries
 - Job Centre
 - Parents/Carers
 - Schools
 - District/Borough Council
 - West Sussex County Council
 - Other – please add

- 2) What do you think are the most important things that should be included in an early years strategy to enable all children to have the best experience in their early years, leading to better outcomes for the whole of their lives?
Please tick the top 3 that you think are the most important:
 - Families most need access to:
 - Regular health checks
 - Additional/specialist support as soon as a need is identified
 - High quality early years care and education I.e. day nursery, pre-school, childminder
 - Information, advice, and guidance for parents with young children
 - Parent and toddler/activity groups
 - Specialist early years or school provision for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
 - Other – please add

- 3) What support do you need from partners to enable you to provide the best for children in your setting?

- 4) Would you be interested in working with us to develop the early years strategy?
Yes/No If yes, please add your name and an email address