

**WIRRAL COUNCIL
SCHOOLS FORUM 30th June 2020
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES
EARLY YEARS WORKING GROUP UPDATE**

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to update the School Forum on the Early Years operations across the Summer Term, with a particular focus on the response to **COVID19**.

2.0 RESPONSE TO COVID19

2.1. Universal 15/30 hours – 2, 3 + 4 early years free entitlements (EYFE) funding arrangements re COVID-19;

On 17 March 2020, [the Chancellor confirmed](#) the government would continue to pay for free early years entitlement places for 2, 3 and 4 year olds even if settings were closed on the advice of the government, or children were not able to attend due to coronavirus (COVID-19). That Local Authorities were to continue early entitlements funding for all childminders, nurseries and schools.

Wirral's response: all funded payments for 2, 3 + 4-year free entitlements continued. There was a re-scheduling of summer term payments; estimates were paid out approx. one month earlier than anticipated. Ahead of the Department for Education (DfE) guidance on summer "headcount" arrangements Wirral took the decision to open the returns to the Private and Voluntary Sector, to again ensure actuals could be made in good time. This was actioned through existing early years portal, with schools taking a different approach due to different reporting system. A roll over of Spring term on roll data took place with a manual apportionment, for any new starters to schools' post Easter Break.

2.2. Double funding

At the onset of "lockdown", when early years settings were asked to remain open for vulnerable and keyworker children only, resulting in a number of settings closing due to low number or COVID19 issues, it was identified that some children would need to be placed elsewhere.

Wirral's response; where a child's primary setting of 15/30 hours universal funding was not open and the child needed to attend another setting, the closed setting retained the funding and the new setting received a "double funded" payment

following the recording on attendance logs. This was an agreed temporary arrangement until settlement of placements was resolved.

The arrangement was reviewed on 31st March, by which time around 10 children was supported totalling a sum of £6,547.40. The “temporary” arrangement ceased on 1st June, when all settings were invited to be open. Double funding is still considered only in exceptional circumstances as a needs lead approach.

2.3 Sufficiency During COVID19

Following the announcements made on March 23rd for a “lockdown” to commence of the 378 settings on Wirral (inclusive of F1 provision in 61 schools), 162 (57%) remained open, with remainder 216 closing. Closures were predominantly highest in the childminder provision, due to a lack of demand for places or through themselves having a follow the shielding advise from Public Health.

Following the number of closures at this initial stage, there remained throughout the 3-month period a steady number of providers continuing to offer childcare to vulnerable/keyworker children.

To date, week commencing 22nd June, there are 258 providers (68%) now open, a rise from 1st June following Central Governments easing of educational establishments for certain cohorts but particularly for all ages across early years.

There continues to be a high number of childminders, 69, that have not re-opened due to parents not requiring childcare having made alternate arrangements. Thereafter, the next highest number is amongst the extended care provision of which 22 state again no requirement at this time. ***There is expected updates on extended care for the summer holiday period from DfE shortly.***

Whilst sufficiency has been met across this period the remobilising of the childcare market is a cause for concern in terms of sustainability, not just now but looking to the future something of which the Early Years team regularly highlights in discussions with DfE/Ofsted.

2. Demand for places During COVID19

During the COVID19 period there was a steady demand of childcare placements for vulnerable and keyworker children. The demand audit of the week prior to “lockdown” informed there were approximately 1,500 places required however as we entered the period this significantly reduced to an average of 650 children across the 162 open settings.

F1 provision in schools had a much-reduced demand, potentially as older siblings were not attending school as parents worked from home and home schooled all children in their households.

From the change to educational settings guidance from 1st June the demand significantly rose, by around 55%, resulting in approximately 1,500 places being taken made up by;

- 1010 –key worker children
- 72 – were vulnerable children
- 342 – children not in either category

To note; all data reporting requires the caveat that only 40% of open settings successfully submitted weekly data accounts, required by the Department for Education.

2.4 Financial Support – Sustainability

Wirral's Early Years in working closely with providers, acknowledged the financial impact on Wirral's Childcare Providers particularly those that remained open in order to provide "**critical**" childcare for keyworker and vulnerable children, as called upon by Central Government during the COVID19 pandemic. In doing so experienced significant cashflow hardships whilst either awaiting financial support or found they did not qualify for the varied Central Government financial support schemes.

As a result, it was very much welcomed that a Childcare Response Exceptionally Circumstance Grant Scheme was approved, through appropriate channels, to make available emergency funding. An amount of 350k was secured and through a robust application process, the following number of settings have received financial support;

From 63 applications across two tranche periods;

- 39 small applications (£3,000 *pa) – childminders
- 5 medium applications (£7,000 pa) - preschools
- 16 large applications (£10,000 pa)– day-care nursery
- 3 applications did not meet criteria.

**pa - per application*

There is a small underspend on this grant that will be further considered to support settings where identified

Future sustainability discussions with providers highlight key areas for officers to take up with strategic leads and key connectors across the Early Years system;

- VAT – Early years providers being able to claim VAT back

- Business Rates – Clarity around Wirral’s Business rates position, potential continuation of business rates holiday for early years providers.
- Council reserves – the value and accessibility.
- Quality supplement and any surplus from review be put back into increasing the quality supplement rate for this year.
- Clearer explanation of underspend / contingency monies from Early Years devolved budget.

3.0 BUSINESS AS USUAL

3.1. Two Year Funding;

During COVID19 vulnerable 2 year olds eligible for free early years entitlement were not identified as being in the “vulnerable” category for “critical” childcare (***unless had an allocated social worker, EHCP or was a child of keyworker***), which saw a drop off in take up. However, this has now become a priority for the September cohort and take up is being promoted and applications monitored closely;

Take up as comparison; Summer 2019 - 804

Summer 2020 - 649

3.2 Early Years Free Entitlement Consultation

A working group has been established to review Wirral’s EYFE funding rates, with a view to preparing an outline for consultation during the autumn, to inform the 2021/2022 funding rates for Wirral. Subsequently the Early Years School Forum working group has asked for transparency of the preparation and reporting on the components that make up the budget. This is being considered by the financial/budgeting department.

3.3 Inclusive Practice Funding

Whilst access to these funds were available during COVID19 the requests significantly reduced. For settings that remained open some children were referred to a May panel, however due to reliance of health assessments there were some delays in awards.

As more children start to return to their early years setting a recent Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) has gone out to all providers, including schools to outline the following;

- If the child has attended between April – May, payment of Inclusive Practice (IPF) would be for the full term
- If the child has not attended between April – May, IP funding would apply from when the child returns
- If the child does not return in summer term for any reason the funding will be paused.

To note; IPF is devolved through the Early Years block similar to the Early Years Free Entitlement funds which have not been reclaimed, therefore to continue to apply this where children had not accessed their entitlements it would be a “top up” to the already committed public funding.

3.4 Transitions

We know that **transition is a process and not an event**. This is more difficult this year in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. Taking current circumstances into consideration a multi- agency approach has been taken, inclusive of Educational Psychologists, EY’s SEND, EY’s QTs and practitioners and carefully considered the process.

For September 2020 new documentation has been devised which invites the parents account of the “child’s experience” whilst being in “lockdown” and for those that have continued in settings the practitioner’s assessment.

In addition, with the potential gap of information exchanges between settings and schools and with the depletion of home visits to meet the children the new document offers some suggestions about additional and different ways of managing transitions.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Forum to note the report.

Paul Boyce - Director of Children’s Service