

**WIRRAL COUNCIL
SCHOOLS FORUM 29th SEPTEMBER 2020
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND
EDUCATION
EARLY YEARS WORKING GROUP UPDATE**

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to update Wirral's School Forum of discussions at the recent sub group, Early Years working group, with regards to; ***take up of early years free entitlements, take up of 2 year disadvantaged places, sufficiency + sustainability, Early Years SEND funding and the early years funding rate 2021 consultation.***

2.0. Universal 15/30 hours –3 + 4 early years free entitlements (EYFE).

Currently there are 5,387 children accessing a funded place, which is around 84%. Settings inform the return of children has been steady with some settings being full, whilst others not so and not quite clear of the understanding why, as yet. Wirral's Early Years Team continue to report attendance to the Department for Education (DfE) weekly, although register returns from settings, which has reduced significantly from an average of 43% to 33% with a particular drop in school data since the start of autumn term. To mitigate this early years (EY's) officers, attend the weekly attendance strategy meetings with education officers to further maximise data capture. Impact of this has seen a rise in school data returns this week. In addition, early years attendance monitoring is something the Liverpool City Region (LCR) EY's partnership is keen to continue with and recently have engaged with the Local Government Association (LGA) for peer support in adopting an LCR best practice solution.

3.0. 2-Year Funding;

Children eligible for free disadvantaged 2 year funding placements were not categorised within the "vulnerable" cohort to continue attending a setting, during the initial COVID19 lockdown period, unless the child's parent was a "keyworker" or the child met the "vulnerability" criteria. Subsequently, there was a decrease of take up of placements during the summer term of this cohort. In comparison, in Autumn 2019 Wirral's take up was 86% whereas currently it is 69%, this is in line with the national average of 69% for the Spring term 2020. Initially parents noted they were too anxious for their 2-year olds to return to settings, when all age children were encouraged back by central government early June. There has since been a drive by Wirral's Early Years Team to re-engage parents through robust targeting strategies, which is starting to see a steady increase of responses to eligibility notification letters.

4.0. Sufficiency + Sustainability of Places

There remains to be sufficient childcare places across Wirral. During the COVID19 summer period on average 55% of those identified as "vulnerable" continued

attended a setting. There were very few instances where parents needed support in finding alternate provision. Wirral's Family Information Service (FIS) worked at pace to broker childcare where required and most providers were extremely flexible in accommodating "ad hoc" arrangements to support both keyworker and vulnerable children, which on the recent DfE return accounted 3,000 children attending in these categories. During the summer term almost 33% of providers remained open, which increased to 98% by the end of July for the start of Autumn term in September. At the start of the weekly data reporting to the DfE Wirral had 372 childcare providers (inclusive of school provision for 2 + 3-year olds). To date there are 366, with 6 closures across the period. Of the 6, 4 were childminders that have either retired or decided on a career change. However, the childminder closure figure has been offset by newly registered, showing a growing confidence in the sector. The remainder 2 have been nurseries, 1 in Wallasey and 1 in West Wirral, both noted due to impact of Covid19 through a lack of sufficient children taking up places to sustain the setting. However, for the Wallasey setting there is a new provider interested in re-opening it.

Furthermore, out of school providers did struggle across the summer holiday period with existing registered parents finding alternate childcare and a reluctance of new parents taking up the offer. In addition, due to the delay in DfE guidance being released (end of July) it did not enable providers to project financial standing across this period.

The key concerns of all providers as we move further into the Autumn term are.

- end of the furlough scheme on 31st October, if parents' employment is terminated and they no longer require childcare.
- availability of staff deployment should staff need to self isolate and maintaining ratios.
- Funding for Spring term 2021, as potentially no further Central government **impact** funding support and providers could be expected to fund on actual attendance which still may be low.
- paying staff that themselves must stay home to look after children sent home from school, as a bubble has collapsed.
- reduced or lack of provider reserves to go through a second wave, following surviving the first wave.

To mitigate for the above, business support workshops are currently being considered to explore providers business continuity arrangements, in order to promote good practice such as; considering how financially bubbles are formed, bubbles set through mixing funded and fee paying children and possibly charges for self-isolation periods. Subsequently, the DfE are tendering such workshop facilitations.

5.0. Early Years SEND Funding

5.0.1 Inclusive Practice Funding (IPF)

Inclusive Practice Funding remained in place for those children still in attendance during the COVID19 summer period, it was paused for those who did not. Referrals for the fund continued to come into the early years SEND team and the IPF panel sat in August, to review 20 requests for Autumn term support. The IPF panel also agreed to support with transition funding of children entering F2 provision, where

required, if they were known to the Early Years SEND team throughout the summer term.

It is anticipated that there will be a strain on this fund as more children return to settings over the coming months. This is being closely monitored and where necessary alternate interventions to funding support will be applied.

5.0.2 Disability Access Fund (DAF)

Since January 2020, the early years team have received notifications from 0-19 health services of children early identified with complex needs, who could be eligible to apply for the disability living allowance (DLA), a criterion to access this fund. This enables better pinpointing of families to support with the application of DLA. Which in turn informs of provision adjustment requirements, to enhance mainstream provision as a suitable option. There have been very few requests for DAF during the COVID19 summer period, mitigation of this is by the SEND officers contacting settings directly to promote it.

To note: the data exchange established in January 2020 did pause through the COVID19 summer period, due to re-alignment of various colleagues' duties and is now being restored and reset.

6.0. Early Years Free Entitlement Consultation

In Wirral, Early Years Funding Entitlement (EYFE) is set as follows all funding providers receive the base rate of £3.76 this is topped up by supplement dependent on eligibility.

Supplement	Criteria	Rate
Quality	Qualified staff member to level 6 with early years specialism	13p
Flexibility 1	Flexible delivery between school hours 9-3:30	15p
Flexibility 2	Flexible delivery outside of school hours 8-9 or 3:30- 7:00	15p
Deprivation low	On average children attending the provision live in an affluent area	4p
Deprivation medium	On average children attending the provision live in a medium deprived area	12p
Deprivation high	On average children attending the provision live in a highly deprived area	19p

Wirral is aiming through a consultation process with providers to review the above and work towards a minimum hourly rate of £4.00 per hour, inclusive of supplements. However, it should be noted that the early years funding that Wirral receives is a finite sum. This consultation exercise will identify whether the £4.00 hourly rate can be achieved whilst keeping within the funding available. The consultation will be launched in this autumn term, for review and proposals in Spring term 2021.

7.0. RECOGNITION OF GOOD PRACTICE DURING COVID19

The Chief Executive of the National Day Nurseries Association recently wrote to Wirral's Chief Executive, Paul Satoor and Director for Children's Services, Paul

Boyce, in relation to the support the early years team has shown to the childcare sector during COVID-19. The National Day Nurseries Association is 'the voice of the sector' and has more than 60 networks of nursery operators that meet regularly across the UK.

The letter said:

"We understand that your Early Years Team has taken a number of actions during the pandemic which made this challenging period more manageable for providers. Our coverage up and down the UK means that we are often made aware of the relationship between local authorities and the sector. Where a local authority has been identified as having worked hard to get the balance right between high quality childcare being available for the few during lockdown; and future-proofing the sector so that post-COVID, sufficient childcare places are available for all that need them, we believe this should be highlighted and acknowledged. At a time that has been difficult for us all, we really do appreciate your support to a sector which is quite often forgotten, over-looked or ignored but yet so vitally important to children, families, and the economy. I would like to thank you for the collaborative working with providers in your area and for acknowledging the crucial role that childcare plays within the economy and its recovery."

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Forum to note the report.

Paul Boyce - Director of Children, Families and Education