

**WIRRAL COUNCIL
SCHOOLS FORUM 30th November 2021
REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND
EDUCATION SERVICES
EARLY YEARS WORKING GROUP UPDATE**

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to update Wirral's School Forum on both discussions at the recent Early Years working group, 5th November 2021, and service updates.

2.0 Take up of Universal 2, 3 + 4 early years free entitlements & 30 hours extended (EYFE)

2.1 The Autumn take up is still to be confirmed from the headcount and census, however indicative %'s for 2-year-olds, particularly, is showing an increase as below;

Summer 21 take up 80%

Autumn 21 Take up 85%

2.2 Whilst it had been expected that with the end of the Furlough scheme eligibility for 2-year placements may increase, it is acknowledged it has only just ended and more time is needed to assess the impact.

2.3 In relation to general take up of funded placements, there continues to be steady growth as parents' confidence for their child attending settings increased, although it is recognised that the spikes in recent weeks, of Covid cases, has a knock-on effect on new starters and sustaining attendances.

2.4 What has been positive this term is a sharp increase on the number of data returns from settings for attendance, from 44% to 71%, which will give a better understanding of attendance behaviours.

2.5 Overall, there remains to be sufficient places for demand. The areas of the sector who has had most impact of falling numbers due to parents changing their childcare arrangements has been childminders and out of school provision.

3.0 Early Years Portage Team

3.1 Wirral has had a Portage Service in operation for over 30 years now, which is funded through the High Needs block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). During recent years the service has experienced several periods of change, with the most significant being a reduction on the FTE staff structure, going from 8 FTE to 2.7 FTE around 2014-16.

3.2 As a result the service has had to; reduce the amount of time working with families in their home; reduce the number of sessions within a package of care for

families and cease going into early years settings to role model Portage principles to practitioners, which enables better transitional support for children with SEND.

3.3 Portage is a strength-based intervention which celebrates diversity and empowers inclusion for all. Parents who have been involved with the Portage team share how they felt listened to, had their wishes respected and have an improved confidence base from where they can be their child's champion.

3.4 Portage is key to early identification as the service offers support from birth and generally until a child is aged 3 and transitions into early education. Ideally children with complex SEND would be further supported on first entry to a setting where it is likely a child will progress onto an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) and Portage could work closely with the child's keywork and contribute to the evidence required for assessment.

3.5 As the number of children being identified earlier increases, (7.7% qtr1 2020 - 10.3% qtr1 2021) the demand for Portage interventions has also significantly increased. As a result, there is an ongoing waiting list, of which at any one time can have 30+ children awaiting allocation. It is expected that an FTE Portage worker would have a caseload of around 12 children. What is known is, caseloads particularly through the Covid19 pandemic have become more complex as families struggle to deal with the trauma of a pandemic and at same time come to terms with their child's SEND needs. This has resulted in more time needed to be with families, holding onto caseloads for longer and increased requests for EHCP evidence.

3.6 There will, therefore, be a review of the current arrangements to identify an alternative basis for delivery of the service to meet demand.

4.0 Inclusive Practice Fund (IPF)

4.1 There continues to be pressure on the IPF budget, as reported previously. With continued high volume of referrals from identification of emerging needs requiring the panel to sit more frequently. Since September, there have been 52 referrals and the panel will sit again in December. This takes the number of children currently being supported by IPF to around 160+, whereas the £450k allocated budget from the early years block can only accommodate 150. There are at least 2 more panels within this financial year.

4.2 Subsequently should the volume of referrals continue at these rates it is projected the £140k overspend reported in September's early years school forum report could rise to around £450k overspend. Taking the full amount within this financial year of funding support for children with an identified need in early years to near £900k, doubling the allocated amount.

4.3 It is known this rise is due to a regression of development through the pandemic, low levels of communication and personal and emotional developments skills, limited access to community activity which can boost developments, such as Children Centres and voluntary groups and a lower % of children having had their health developmental checks, for varied reasons.

4.4 It is suggested that a review of potential funding sources and the criteria for awards of IPF should take place to identify ways to mitigate costs. The latter to take place in Spring 2022 and in partnership, by way of consultation, with parents and early years providers.

4.5 Also to work with parents, partners, and organisations on the continued remobilisation and accessibility of activities that will boost the key areas of child development, as aforementioned, in their communities.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 High Needs working group discuss early years funding for children with higher level or complex needs.

5.2 Forum to note the report.

Simone White – Director of Children, Families and Education