



## HEALTH AND WELLBEING BOARD

Wednesday, 9 February 2022

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>EARLY YEARS AND HEALTH</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION</b>

### REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides the Health and Wellbeing Board with an overview of the Early Years sector in Wirral. It outlines the importance of the earliest years of life, considers the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children, their parents/carers and the early years sector and sets out partnership plans for Covid recovery and embedding a robust Early Years Strategy to support children under 5 to fulfil their potential.

The report and strategy are aligned to priorities of Wirral Council's Plan 2025:

- Working for brighter futures for our children, young people, and their families by breaking the cycle of poor outcomes and raising the aspirations of every child in Wirral.
- Working for happy, active, and healthy lives where people are supported, protected and inspired to live independently.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Health and Wellbeing Board is requested to:

1. Note the partnership response to delivering early years support and services to children under 5 and their parents/carers throughout the pandemic.
2. Note the development of the Early Years Strategy and support the next steps for its launch, implementation, and delivery.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1.1 Wirral Council and its partners are committed to working together with families and communities to achieve the very best start in life for children. It is a collective ambition that all children in Wirral are happy, healthy, and grow into confident, capable and resilient young adults.
- 1.2 The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on all parts of the community and affected the ways in which people live and experience daily life. It is acknowledged that children across the borough have different early childhood experiences, as may their carers and families. There are many contributory factors to early childhood experience, including where a child grows up, the family they grow up in, opportunities to play and learn, support from the wider community. Collaboration across the Early Years Sector seeks to provide a meaningful response to the pandemic and ensure that services not only recover but are renewed to deliver the right support to local people.
- 1.3 As Wirral's early years providers work to complete and publish an Early Years Strategy, support from the Health and Wellbeing Board will strengthen the partnership contribution to tackling health inequalities across the borough.

### **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 No other options have been considered.

### **3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

#### **3.1 Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children Under 5 and their Families**

- 3.1.1 Nationally there are concerns that the Covid-19 pandemic will have had significant detrimental impact on infants and children under 5 years of age. It is acknowledged that the period from conception to age 5 covers critical stages of development, not only in terms of childhood outcomes but for later life too. For young children a significant portion of their lives has been lived in unusual circumstances, with parents and others wearing face masks, having to be socially distant, having their early education, relationships and routines interrupted.
- 3.1.2 Families who were already experiencing challenges may have found that problems intensified because of the pandemic and that their ability to access services and support was limited. Many young children had their normal social and physical activities restricted, such as access to playgrounds, outdoor space, toddler groups, nurseries, and Children Centres. These restrictions may have disproportionately affected children from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have had access to garden space or digital resources.
- 3.1.3 This report seeks to provide a detailed account of the importance of a child's early years, impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the local response and plans to renew the early childhood offer through a new, co-produced strategy.

## 3.2 The Early Childhood Offer in Wirral

3.2.1 Wirral's Children's Centre Offer consists of three hub centres (Seacombe, Bromborough and Birkenhead) and seven satellite/outreach centres. Children's Centres bring together a range of services for families and children from pre-birth to five years old. The core purpose of Children's Centres is to improve outcomes for children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers in:

- Child development and school readiness
- Parenting aspirations and parenting skills
- Child and family health and life chances

3.2.2 In addition to delivering the Children's Centre Offer, Wirral Council's Early Childhood Service supports families and the wider early years sector by:

- Enabling access to early education settings through the Family Information Service; accessing funding for 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds; access to Early Years Pupil Premium.
- Supporting the early years sector with training and development opportunities, quality assurance, set-up support, and managing early years childcare sufficiency.
- Provision of an early years Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Team and portage service.

3.2.3 The Healthy Child Programme in Wirral is commissioned by Public Health and delivered by Wirral Community Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust. With reference to early years, this includes the provision of Health Visitors and School Nurses. The Trust is also commissioned by Wirral's Public Health Team to deliver a Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) programme to parents aged 24 and under, partnering young mothers-to-be with a specially trained nurse who visits them regularly from early pregnancy until their child is aged between one and two.

3.2.4 Wirral benefits from a vibrant and experienced community of third sector organisations who work in partnership with public services to deliver under 5 activities, examples of which will be discussed later in this report.

3.2.5 Partnership working in Wirral is a strength and there are several forums to support and improve early years services. Key forums include the Ready for School Group, First 1001 Day Group, and Early Years Subgroup of the Schools Forum.

## 3.3 Children's Centres

3.3.1 A combination of approaches, or *blended offer*, has been utilised to deliver early years services throughout the pandemic. The Children's Centres have remained open at all times, providing an offer appropriate to changing Covid-19 restrictions. At times this has meant appointment only, at other times walk-in services and small groups, managed in accordance with Public Health guidance. Outreach and virtual

delivery have been used to maintain contact and support to a wider cohort of families.

- 3.3.2 Children's Centres have maintained a high percentage of registrations throughout the pandemic. Quarterly reporting at September 2021 shows 91.38% of the under 5 population are registered to receive services through their local Children's Centre. To add context to this, the population of under 5s in Wirral at this point was 17,533. Within this are 2,742 infants under 1, who are a priority cohort for early support. In September 2021, 84.60% of those were registered with a Children's Centre and 55% were actively engaged.
- 3.3.3 Pre-pandemic, Wirral's Children's Centres had launched and embedded a digital platform on Facebook, *My Child Can*. The *My Child Can* resource is used to engage parents, share information and advice, promote learning and activities at home, and creates a space for parents to share experiences. From March 2020 to March 2021, the site was visited over 1.3 million times, engaging over 18,300 individuals. Content on the site during this period included Public Health messages, learning activities, storytelling, local service updates and support for parents whose children have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- 3.3.4 Of the 5,900 followers of the *My Child Can* pages, the majority audience is younger parents, with the largest demographic being females aged 25-44 years. Feedback from users suggested the content was well-received with many parents commenting on how useful the videos were in keeping children learning and entertained throughout lockdown.
- 3.3.5 For those parents experiencing digital poverty or have their own barriers to using social media, targeted doorstep visits and regular telephone calls took place. The Early Childhood Service made approximately 6,000 contacts during the period March 2020-March 2021. Learning from the experience and feedback from parents has shown that this *blended approach* works well with parents reporting that it is convenient and can feel more comfortable when having the opportunity to discuss issues in their 'own' environment. The Early Childhood Service will continue to offer parents a 'blended offer' based on this feedback.
- 3.3.6 The digital progression achieved during the pandemic received recognition from the Local Government Association which praised the partnership approach between the Council's Early Childhood Services, Midwifery, Koala Northwest, and 0-19 Teams.

### **3.4 Pregnancy and Pre-Birth**

- 3.4.1 Children's Centres work in partnership with Midwifery Services to maximise engagement in ante-natal support. Midwifery clinics have continued to be available in all Children's Centres across the borough during the pandemic. Clinics include access to specialist support, such as Peri-Natal Services, Elective Caesarean and Substance Misuse Midwifery Teams.
- 3.4.2 Pregnant women are registered with the Early Childhood Service which promotes Children's Centre activity, available support services, and works in partnership with Midwifery to ensure any needs are identified early. Access to specialist projects, such as the *First 1001 Days* project are enabled through this co-ordinated approach.

In addition, an Early Childhood Service Locality Manager provides representation on the multi-agency *Pre-Birth Liaison Meeting*, where parents-to-be with vulnerabilities are identified and appropriate support packages agreed.

3.4.3 Throughout the pandemic, the Pre-Birth and Infant Team and Family Nurse Partnership have continued to work with parents who need more intensive support in their pregnancy and when becoming a parent. Using a combination of approaches including face-to-face work under a covid risk assessment, regular telephone and video calling, support has continued.

### **3.5 Newborns**

3.5.1 The first 1001 days from pregnancy to when a child is approximately 2 years old are a critical time to develop a foundation for a healthy and fulfilling life. There is a clear, compelling body of evidence that shows this is a significant and influential phase in development, which has a long-term effect on future health, wellbeing, learning and even earnings potential. The first 1001 days set the groundwork for children developing emotional wellbeing, resilience and adaptability, competencies they need to thrive.

3.5.2 Wirral's *Frist 1001 Days* project launched in April 2021, a collaboration between the Early Childhood Services, the Foundation Years Trust, and Public Health, and is led by Koala Northwest. Information sharing across agencies has already become more integrated, specifically within Wirral's priority wards (Birkenhead & Tranmere, Bidston St. James, Leasowe & Moreton East, Rock Ferry, and Seacombe) and with Wirral's BAME community. Since launch of the project, 392 children and their parents have signed up for the programme engaging with one or more support services to improve health outcomes and healthy lifestyles in the earliest years of life.

3.5.3 Early Childhood Services in Wirral quickly recognised that Covid-19 restrictions could have a detrimental effect on new parents and newborn children. Reflections from one parent conveyed some of the wider feelings of new parents, "My baby is often referred to as a *Covid-baby*- this makes me really sad." Working collaboratively, the Early Childhood Service and Health Visiting Teams, extended their normal practices to engage with this group to try to ensure that their experience was 'as near to the norm' as possible. In 2021, 565 *Welcome to the World* packs were delivered to families as part of this approach.

3.5.4 *Welcome to the World* packs contain resources to support the bonding process and child/parent interactions at this crucial stage. The packs contain important messages, advice, and information such as safe sleeping, and reinforce messages that services are 'still here and still care'. Packs also include information on activities for families to do together which support bonding and attachment. They are simple, affordable, and safe for new parents to undertake with their children. The packs prompt parents to utilise the *My Child Can* Facebook pages and to find peer support safely online.

3.5.5 Delivery of the packs enables new parents to see a professional, face-to-face, gives an opportunity to raise any concerns, and discuss support opportunities from local community groups and/or organisations, particularly those associated with the *Frist*

*1001 Days* project. One parent feedback, “I really don’t know what would have happened if you didn’t knock on my door that day. I feel like it was fate, you have helped me and my family like you will never know and I feel so much more confident now.” Partnership services have reached out using social media and other means to try to ensure that parents can make contact when they need to.

3.5.6 Through collaborations during pregnancy and in supporting newborns, positive impact has been achieved in rates of breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks. Wirral’s 6–8-week breastfeeding performance has increased from 35% to 41%, the highest increase experienced in this indicator. It is positive that, aside from the overall increase, particular success has been achieved in Birkenhead locality, moving from a previous rate of zero to 36% by December 2021. Success in this area has been driven in part by the introduction of Breastfeeding Champions and partnership collaborations through the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative. In summer of 2021, Wirral’s Early Childhood Services and the 0-19 Community NHS Trust were successful in achieving Baby Friendly Accreditation from UNICEF. Our local approach provides targeted interventions in collaboration with parent volunteers and third sector organisations, supported and promoted by Breast Feeding Champions and local Baby Guardian.

### **3.6 Parenting Support**

3.6.1 Family Workers from the three Children’s Centres are trained in a range of parenting programmes, including Nurture (10-week programme and 4 x weekly workshops) and the Gateway programme for those affected by domestic abuse, which continues to be delivered on a one-to-one basis or in small, Covid-secure groups. Children’s Centre Family Workers work with families as part of the wider early help and prevention service offer.

3.6.2 In response to the pandemic, a task and finish group of Family Workers devised a virtual programme, *Top Tips for Parents*, which was delivered through Microsoft Teams. This programme addressed issues pertinent to parenting during lockdown, such as promoting routines and boundaries, praising children, and parenting children under 5. These programmes were recorded and have been shared with a wider cohort of families for whom they would be useful.

### **3.7 Healthy Child Programme**

3.7.1 Health Services, more than others have faced significant challenge throughout the pandemic. The *Community Services Prioritisation* document, published nationally, supported the service decisions which were made during the initial lockdown. Among the challenges faced by the health sector, digital challenges were prevalent. There was no agreed digital platform available, which needed to be addressed promptly to ensure that staff were supported, able to access, and use to undertake their roles.

3.7.2 Digital delivery of contacts was a new concept and incredible progress was made at speed during 2020. A trial of Accurx indicated that there may be improved access for all using *Attend Anywhere* which has seen successful uptake. Feedback from a child using this platform to connect with a School Nurse reports that the child “enjoyed” this online time with the professional and a feeling of being able to “talk more

openly". The child described being familiar with using digital platforms to engage with others and that it was more "comfortable".

- 3.7.3 Team across 0-19 Health Services and Therapy Services have formed working groups to monitor the effectiveness of interventions on digital platforms and to balance the needs of young people with safeguarding procedures, face-to-face contact, health assessments, and levels of community transmission. Guidance for staff was produced and regularly updated to ensure that the right balance was achieved.
- 3.7.4 A series of Equality Impact Assessments and Quality Impact Assessments have been completed routinely to support decision-making processes. These were reviewed by the Community NHS Trust's Tactical Command, implemented in response to the pandemic.
- 3.7.5 Access to Healthy Child Programme activity, such as physiotherapy, clinics, 9–12-month developmental review and 2-2.5-year developmental review, continued to be delivered throughout the pandemic in the Children's Centres. The pandemic impacted on numbers of reviews completed, with less developmental reviews taking place than pre-Covid. Working in partnership, Early Childhood Services Teams have provided support to the 0-19 Health Service by carrying out short reviews of children's progress. 177 short reviews were undertaken by Early Childhood Services on behalf of the 0-19 Health Service to support a reduction in waiting times and ensure a wide reach, as services have remobilised. Opportunities to discuss their child's development are welcomed by parents and any concerns highlighted in the short reviews shared with Health Visitors for further action and/or support.
- 3.7.6 Wirral's 0-19 Health Service have been robust in their approach to ensuring that progress is made to *catch up* on developmental reviews. Practitioners are noting that reviews are often taking longer to complete as families discuss their experience of lockdown periods, impact on their family, concerns for their child's development and personal circumstances. Staff practice relationship-based approaches and are taking time to listen to each family, however this has had implications on capacity. In response, additional hours and weekend working has been approved to ensure meeting the requirements of this key performance indicator.

### **3.8 Speech, Language and Communication**

- 3.8.1 WELLCOMM is a speech and language assessment tool that is used consistently across Wirral by the early years workforce. The Council's Early Childhood Service works with other settings, such as nurseries, to complete WELLCOMM assessments, giving parents and practitioners an indication as to how the child's language is developing and whether further support is required.
- 3.8.2 In 2021, 678 WELLCOMM assessments were completed by the Early Childhood Service. Following the outcome of the assessment, strategies and support can be put in place to support children's progress. A number of children will require more specialist intervention and Speech and Language Therapy (SALT). Whilst awaiting the initial SALT appointment, Early Childhood Services engage the family in activities to support progress.

- 3.8.3 Wirral's Early Years partnership group worked alongside colleagues from the Local Government Association to devise and implement a Speech, Language and Communication Pathway for Under 5s. This included working in partnership with parents to produce a pathway which is clear and supportive. Wirral's partnership group and Head of Service for Early Childhood Services, continue to work with the Liverpool City Region to further enhance and develop approaches.
- 3.8.4 To enhance local approaches, Wirral has launched the *Dolly Parton Imagination Library*. This is a book gifting scheme designed to inspire a love of reading for children and parents. Each month, children enrolled on the project aged 0 to 5 years, receive a free, high quality, age-appropriate book which is posted to them. Enrolled children will receive 12 books a year up to the age of 5.
- 3.8.5 Children eligible for the *Dolly Parton Imagination Library* are identified through Health Clinics and Live Birth Data exchanges to Children's Centres. Children are registered at approximately 3 months old. All partners within the *First 1001 Days* project can register infants and get additional access to a shared Book Order System to input referrals and manage information securely and sign up to Wirral Library Services. Currently there are over 200 infants receiving books.
- 3.8.6 The *Dolly Parton Imagination Library* is initially targeting the priority wards in Wirral (Birkenhead & Tranmere, Bidston St. James, Leasowe & Moreton East, Seacombe and Rock Ferry). Partnership agencies have contributed to funding the initiative, including the *Cradle to Career* project. Wirral's Children Looked After under the age of 5 are also benefitting through an associated arm of the scheme.

### **3.9 School Readiness**

- 3.9.1 During 2021, 3,091 referrals for school readiness support were received by the Early Childhood Service. Of these, 35% were submitted by parents, which is a strong indicator that parents are aware of and trusting in their local Children's Centre Offer. Another significant referral source was the 0-19 Community NHS Trust, making 26% of referrals, thereby indicating strong integrated working.
- 3.9.2 A key element of becoming school-ready is engaging with early years education, which can be achieved through engaging with Children's Centre groups of taking up the offer of 2-, 3-, and 4-year-old funding for childcare. We know that for children identified as eligible for 2-year-old funding, due to benefit criterion, being a child in local authority care, or having Special Educational Needs and Disability, the journey towards school readiness is very important. Engaging this cohort in early education is a primary focus. During 2020 the take up of 2-year-old funding reduced significantly from 93% to 69%. It is understood that the Covid-19 pandemic was a significant factor in this decline, and similar statistics were recorded across the country. In 2021, take up is increasing, and is at 86%. A *School ready* campaign is being promoted across the multi-agency partnership and helping to support more families back into early education settings.

### **3.10 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)**

- 3.10.1 Early identification of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) has increased significantly during the pandemic, rising from 7.7% in June

2020 to 10.3% in June 2021. Demand for Portage interventions for families and Early Years SEND Officer support for nursery settings have also increased. In response to growing demand, a comprehensive workforce development programme is being delivered, which includes:

- Making Sense of Autism (8 x courses delivered- 116 practitioners trained)
- Good Autism Practice (57 practitioners trained)
- New to the Role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) (3 x sessions delivered)
- The Role of SENCO for Childminders (awaiting delivery)
- SENCO Cluster meetings held with Focus Speech, Language and Communications (SALT Guest Speaker) and Transitions (Educational Psychologist Guest Speaker)
- Writing a request for an Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (2 x briefings)

3.10.2 Funding for Covid-19 response has been accessed to increase capacity within the 0-19 Community NHS health Team, including an ADHD Nurse, Speech, Language and Communication Needs Practitioner, and Early Years Integrated Health Practitioner. This is adding much needed capacity to services in meeting increased demand.

3.10.3 A panel consisting of health professionals, SALT practitioners, Educational Psychologist, Early Childhood Services and Early Years SEND Officers meets regularly to ensure that funding and/or resources are allocated to children and settings at the earliest opportunity to support good development.

### **3.11 Early Years Strategy**

3.11.1 In 2019, Wirral's early years partnership commenced work on an Early Years Strategy. Whilst completion and publication has been delayed due to the pandemic, the extended timescales have allowed for meaningful co-production with parents and families to take place and learning from recent experience to be incorporated.

3.11.2 The strategy will set early years into both a local and national context, considering key learning from work such as *The Allen Review (2011)* and *Marmot Review (2010)*. Local performance information will inform priorities as the strategy defines *school readiness* and communicates an early years vision for Wirral. Priority areas within the strategy include:

- A Unique Child
- Positive Relationships
- Enabling Environments
- Learning and Development

The strategy seeks to build on existing strengths such as the *Parenting Journey* and partnership working. It will include an Outcomes Framework and contribute to the Wirral Plan objectives.

3.11.3 Parents have been involved in the development of the strategy and third sector partners are undertaking further work to produce parent-friendly guides. The full strategy will be presented to the Health and Wellbeing Board in due course.

#### **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

#### **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

#### **6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS**

6.1 There are no resource implications arising from this report, however, Wirral Council and its partners have an ambition for integrated services and a whole-system approach to achieving aspirational outcomes for children and families. The Early Years Strategy will provide an opportunity to integrate universal early years' services with more targeted and specialist support for vulnerable groups/geographic areas. For instance, aligning the aims of Better Birth, Healthy Child Programme and Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) will support the delivery of a shared outcomes framework with shared objectives for commissioning, resources, delivery models and workforce. As a result, effective partnerships and integrated working will lead to co-production, transparency and strengthened communication across Wirral's early years system.

#### **7.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

7.1 Failing to deliver a co-ordinated approach to early years services presents the risk of missed opportunity, both in terms of meaningfully tackling issues that lead to health inequality and in optimising opportunities for children and families. Achieving the best start in life will contribute to improved long-term outcomes for children, young people and families in the borough.

7.2 The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged service delivery and increased pressures within many local families. To mitigate against this risk, regular communication, monitoring and co-ordination continues to take place across appropriate forums, with additional resource/funding being accessed and priorities kept under regular review.

#### **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

8.1 Engagement with parents, children and families is consistently sought in the Early Years Sector. With each Children's Centre benefiting from an Advisory Board and parent volunteers, involvement in programmes of work is standard practice. The programmes and strategies referred to in this report benefit from parental feedback, staff engagement and discussion through a number of in-person and virtual forums. As detailed in section 3.11.3 further co-production activity is being undertaken with third sector and parents on the Early Years Strategy.

## **9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment will accompany the Early Years Strategy on publication.
- 9.2 Understanding and acknowledging the differences of ‘a child’s lived experience’ in what he or she sees, hears, thinks, and encounters on a daily basis is key to the work outlined within this report. It is well-known that a child’s experience impacts on their personal development and welfare, whether that be physically or emotionally. Quality and consistency in the provision of all early years services is vital so that every child makes good progress and no child gets left behind. Evidence shows that higher quality provision that offers children security, comfort, choice, engagement and opportunity has greater developmental benefits, particularly for the most disadvantaged children. Children thrive within inclusive environments that support their individual and diverse motivations, interests and needs. This is an underlying principle which is considered in all early years projects, services, and the forthcoming strategy.

## **10.0 ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 Being accredited to UNICEF’s Baby Friendly Initiative, Wirral’s Children’s Centres and 0-19 Community NHS Trust are promoting, wherever possible, breastfeeding to parents. Breastfeeding can have a positive impact on climate as it significantly reduces carbon footprint.

## **11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 As detailed in this report, Wirral Council works with many community partners, supporting them to develop their capacity, secure external funding, and provide opportunity for volunteering and employment for local people. Lifelong learning is promoted through the Children’s Centre Offer, working with families to increase social mobility. Each Children’s Centre, through their Advisory Board, works at community-level to ensure that centres are responding to the needs of their local area, taking a strengths-based approach and promoting community wealth.

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## **APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 -

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

[Marmot Review report – 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives | Local Government Association](#)

[Health Equity in England The Marmot Review 10 Years On full report.pdf](#)

[Childhood in the time of Covid | Children's Commissioner for England](#)  
[Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)

[Early Intervention: The Next Steps \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

**SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
Not applicable	Not applicable