



CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Schools Forum Tuesday, 9th July 2024

REPORT TITLE:	EARLY YEARS WORKING GROUP UPDATE
REPORT OF:	SARAH HARPER / JAMES BACKHOUSE

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to update Wirral's School Forum on recent Early Years performance and service updates.

2.0 Early years sub-group discussions

2.1 The National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) submitted a request for the funding payment process to be reviewed submitting a proposal that saw a percentage increase in estimate payments and the actual payment reduced to just 10% of the overall term's payment. The NDNA also requested a change to 30-hour codes being accepted if they still need reconfirming at estimate headcount submission. Alternative proposals have been shared and are being discussed. It is likely that once a potential alternative proposal is agreed a survey would need to be held to enable all providers to have their say.

2.2 The early years financial incentive scheme was discussed due to the low uptake of the initiative. The group felt that it would be helpful to change the qualification criteria to include undertaking a qualification. The eligibility criteria will be reviewed during August, after the jobs fayre that is being held in July.

2.3 The capital programme will be launched after the pre-election period. There was discussion within the group around criteria specifically work that had been completed in readiness for September 24 and the launch of the under two-year-old entitlement. This is being considered by the project group.

3.0 Take up of Funding entitlements.

3.1 The table below details the working family's codes issued and validated for September 2024. Currently Wirral are above the national average across all age ranges.

	Codes issued	Codes Validated	Percentage	National average
Under 1-yr-olds	131	33	25.2%	14.4%
1-year-olds	770	200	26%	14.5%
2-year-olds	386	110	28.5%	20.69%

3.1 The table shows the take up of early years free funding entitlements for two-and-three-year-olds.

	Autumn-23			Spring-24			Summer-24		
	Pop	Take up	%	Pop	Take up	%	Pop	Take up	%
Two-year (disadvantage)	1002	962	96%	1002	939	94%			
Two-year (working)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A			
Three-year and four-year (universal)	6803	5430	80%	6803	6484	95%			
Three-year and four-year (working)	Not available	1905	N/A	Not available	1755	N/A			

3.2 Take up of 2-Year-Old (2YO) (disadvantage offer) for the Spring term is currently sitting at 94%, a decrease of 2 percentage points since Autumn term (96%). Take up usually dips in the Spring term. A robust engagement strategy to improve take up continues to operate through Wirral's Children Centres, gaining an understanding of barriers to take up. However, Wirral's percentage remains higher than the most recently published National average of 74%.

3.3 We continue to receive anecdotal feedback that some settings are offering less 2YO places and opting to maximise their 3- & 4-year-old offer due to the lower ratio requirements and current staffing issues. We have also been advised by a small number of providers that going forward they may opt to enrol less disadvantaged two-year-olds as working parents of two-year-olds are more likely to purchase additional hours. Wirral has set the funding rate for two-year-olds disadvantage entitlement at 4p more than the rate for two-year-old working parent entitlement.

3.4 The take up of 3–4-year-olds combined currently sits at 95% which is 3 percentage points above the new national average of 92%. Take up is closely monitored with a specific focus on the Wallasey area which has the lowest take up,

currently sitting around 88% than that of Birkenhead and South & West Wirral. Promotion of entitlements occurs on a regular basis.

4.0 Childcare Sufficiency

4.1 Childcare Provider Statistics

	Sept 23	May 24
Childminders	134	128
Day Nurseries	62	62
Extended Care	28	27
Independent Schools	3	3
Maintained Nursery Schools	3	3
Pre-Schools	29	29
Schools	62	62
Total	328	319

4.2 The number of EY Providers is declining, however we are still for the most part sufficient across the Borough, although not necessarily to meet requests of parents for specific days/sessions. The DfE estimate that by September 2025 we will require an additional 200 places in order to deliver the new funding entitlements. We are still struggling to find childcare provision for children with SEND. Work has been focused around ensuring providers feel confident to support children with SEND and understand the Equality Act and SEND code of practice.

4.3 A number of projects are ongoing to support expansion to funding entitlements, including a recruitment drive with support from Wirral's economic development team, chamber of commerce and other partners. A Jobs Fayre is planned to take place over two days in June. A working group has been set up to explore how best to deliver the Funding Expansion Capital Grant. A Project officer has been recruited to co-ordinate the EY financial Incentives Scheme pilot, launched by the DfE to test whether offering a financial incentive increases the number of staff entering the early years workforce.

4.4 Whilst there is an ongoing decline in registered childminders, new childminders are still coming through on a regular basis. Wirral is now working with 3 childminding agencies. The new childminder agency management team has met with the early years team to discuss how best to work together to support their childminders. The financial incentive scheme is open to childminders who may wish to take on a childminding assistant, and the Jobs Fairs planned for June will have specific sessions for people interested in becoming a childminder, with business support advice, and guidance from Wirral Childminding Association Representatives.

5.0 Business Support & Performance

5.1 Early years payment functions have recently moved into the Business Support team, this is a positive move, bringing very closely linked tasks together. The team have really benefitted in working more closely and learning about the different work areas that underpin facilitating the early years funding entitlements.

5.2 The new Liquid Logic Early Years and Education System (EYES) is due to go live on 19th August 2024 and the team are working hard to test the system and feedback requirements to the Project Team in terms of functionality requirements and issues. Training has been planned for early July, with early years providers due to be trained mid-July before the summer holidays. Capita will close on 9th August and the team are currently planning how best to manage the downtime between systems and are working on comms to encourage providers to validate codes for the new Under 2's entitlement before Capita closes.

5.3 The Early Years Transition task has recently been completed, with data being sent to schools as planned on 7th May, to enable them to support children who are due to start in reception this September and start transition discussions with early years providers. This year 75% of providers submitted, which is a real positive given the pressure the sector is currently under due to the recruitment crisis and scaling up to deliver the new funding entitlements.

5.4 To enable local authorities to receive their allocations of funding for the new funding entitlements, there will be a requirement to submit a termly census to the DfE, with the first collection scheduled to take place between 10th June and 12th July. The business team are working closely with Capita and other internal teams to plan how best to support providers through this data collection, given it will take place very soon after completing their summer term actual headcount task.

6.0 Early Years SEND

6.1 Due to changes within the early years SEND team a new structure is being created. The early years SEND officers will now sit within the early years' service. A manager's post is being created that will focus on delivering Local Area SENCO support.

6.2 The team are also reviewing their service delivery offer moving to a setting and child approach where previously the focus has been a child led approach. The team are planning a universal approach that all providers can access, with targeted and

specialist approach that only identified providers or children will access. A full offer will be shared in the next academic year.

7.0 Quality, Training and Practice Improvement

7.1 Currently **98.09%** of providers are judged good or above by Ofsted. Within this, only 2 settings are judged 'requires improvement' and none are judged 'inadequate'. The two settings judged requires improvement are receiving tailored support by a Quality Improvement Officer utilising the support framework.

7.2 The Effective Practice Quality Mark (EPQM) training package for the year commenced in May, based primarily on providers feedback and on Ofsted trends. Key areas this year are:

- Inspection preparation
- Coaching/mentoring
- Effective provision for 2-year-olds and children 9 months+

7.3 We have focused this year on an EPQM set of courses which sit alongside our core offer, which includes termly WellComm training, focused on effectively utilising the speech and language toolkit, and our curriculum course to support settings delivering consistently high-quality early years education. To date 41 settings have booked into courses (since April 24 to current date).

7.4 The Early Years Online Platform has seen engagement grow significantly, with **1,042** practitioners now registered. There is now **21** eLearning modules available ranging from conference recordings, knowledge refreshers and instructional videos. This has helped to greatly diversify our training offer and allows providers to engage in CPD via a different mechanism- this has been vital in terms of presenting a truly blended training offer.

7.5 Professional Development Programme (PDP) training: 20 settings are currently completing their training as part of Cohort 2. There are 33 participants in Cohort 3 (due to complete July 24) and 18 in Cohort 4 (due to complete in November 24). Feedback on the impact on this in settings has been hugely positive.

7.6 Quality Officers are currently completing the second cohort of settings within the Good Level Development (GLD) Pilot. The team has observed and assessed the quality of teaching, aimed at supporting children's access to high quality childcare. Feedback has been massively positive from settings, especially in terms of supporting staff confidence. One comment from a setting engaged in the pilot after

the observation process: “Thank you so much for such a great experience and for all the support and guidance. The visits have been extremely helpful, and the girls have gained such confidence in their job roles.”

7.7 Operation Encompass launched for the Early Years sector on Wirral in April which has been a really exciting development. 16 notifications for individual children impacted by domestic abuse have occurred since the launch date at the end of April, and settings have been advised on how to support these children in their provision. A large number of setting and practitioners have also attended the virtual Operation Encompass training sessions and accessed the online e-learning to further extend their knowledge in terms of safeguarding these children.

7.8 Settling Inclusion Grant (part of the Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund) observation process began September 23, with 14 applications (11 approved) up until the end of the 23/24 financial year. There has been one further application in this current year, feedback on the swift nature of this process and getting immediate support in place for children has been very good, and we have worked tirelessly to keep to the 5–7-day turnaround time. This has massively helped in terms of linking to an early intervention approach.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 School Forum to note the report.

Elizabeth Hartley – Director of Children, Families and Education