

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL**

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel was held on 20 January 2020.

**PRESENT:** Councillors J Platt (Chair), C Dodds, T Higgins, S Hill, M Nugent, P Storey, G Wilson and J Thompson (As Substitute)

**PRESENT AS OBSERVERS:** A Metcalfe

**OFFICERS:** S Marley and G Moore

**APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** Councillors L Garvey and A Hellaoui

**DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

1 **MINUTES - CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL - 16 DECEMBER 2019**

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel, held on 16 December 2019, were submitted and approved as a correct record.

2 **ADDRESSING POVERTY ISSUES AND THE IMPACT ON LEARNING - EARLY EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT**

The School Readiness Manager was in attendance to provide the scrutiny panel with:

- information on the early educational support provided to those children from deprived backgrounds;
- an overview of the measures implemented to prevent the attainment gap becoming entrenched before children start school; and
- examples of the work undertaken by the best quality early years settings to tackle development gaps, especially key early language and literacy skills.

The scrutiny panel was advised that the aim of the School Readiness Team was to work with parents to help them understand that they were their child's first educator and to encourage and support them in that role. The School Readiness Manager commented that the team worked closely alongside the Achievement Team, as both teams were very much focused on early years development and progression. The School Readiness Team had responsibility for children's centres, the Family Information Service (the funded childcare element) and two Council nurseries (Stainsby and Bright Stars). The Achievement Team had responsibility for areas such as community learning and Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership (MAP).

**An Overview**

The scrutiny panel was advised that the School Readiness Team worked in a number of ways with families who had children aged 0-5 years. The School Readiness Team:

- helped children become ready for nursery and primary school;
- provided access to good quality childcare, including free early education for two, three and four year olds;
- supported childcare settings (nurseries and childminders across the town) in terms of the quality and standard of their provision; and
- linked closely with the Early Years Strategic Board to ensure joint working continued between both the School Readiness Team and the School Achievement Team.

In terms of providing access to good quality childcare, it was explained to Members that information could be found via the Family Information Service/Family Service Directory ([www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/fsd](http://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/fsd)). Information on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

(SEND), the local offer and funding eligibility criteria was also available on that page. The Local Authority had a statutory duty to ensure that there was sufficient childcare provision across the town for all of its 2, 3 and 4 year olds.

In terms of supporting childcare settings, Members heard that the School Readiness Team worked closely with staff on their safeguarding policies and procedures, paying particular attention to those settings who were at risk of slipping from an Ofsted 'Good' judgement. It was explained that if a setting had been 'Good' but then slipped to 'Requires Improvement', the Local Authority would no longer place any more funded children in that setting, until the setting was judged as 'Good' once again. It was also explained that if, following an Ofsted inspection, a setting was judged as 'Inadequate', the Local Authority would remove all funded children from that setting. It was advised, however, that the Local Authority had no power to remove the children whose parents paid the nursery fees. For funded children, the Local Authority had a duty of care. Members heard that, over the past 3 years, funded children had been removed from two childcare settings. When removal was required, parents had received a letter, which provided them with information on other nearby nursery settings.

In response to a Member's query regarding Ofsted, the School Readiness Manager advised that there were 4 judgements - Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement and Inadequate. Members heard that the School Readiness Team had a close working relationship with the local Ofsted inspector, meaning that the team was informed immediately of those settings that were going to be judged as 'Inadequate'. Due to the quality assurance process that needed to be followed, there was then a period of approximately 2 weeks before the inspection report was published.

A number of Members raised queries regarding childminders. It was explained that Middlesbrough had a high number of childminders in comparison to other local authorities. With regards to salary, it was advised that there was a set figure, per child. Members heard that the funding formula had recently been agreed by the Schools Management Forum. With regard to the number of children a childminder could care for, it was explained that there were different ratios, which were dependent on age, for example a childminder could care for 4 children under the age of 2. It was also advised that more childminders appeared to be employing assistants to enable them to care for more children. Private childminders set their own fees, depending on their business model. Members heard that the School Readiness Team provided childcare settings with information on market competition and advice on developing business models.

### **Funding**

It was advised that funded childcare was one of the strategies used to encourage parents to place their children in settings that would enable them to learn. The funding options available to parents included:

- The Achieving 2 Year Old funding for 15 hours free childcare per week - the funding was available to families on certain benefits. The most recent figure for autumn 2019, demonstrated that 87% of eligible children had taken up their place in a nursery or childminder settings in Middlesbrough.
- 30 hours extended entitlement funding was available for 3 and 4 year olds - the funding was available for parents who had a household income of less than 100K. The funding entitled parents to an extra 15 hours of childcare, which was in addition to the universal 3 and 4 year old childcare offer. 91% of those eligible had validated their codes for a setting.

In response to a Member's query, it was explained that settings worked in partnership to ensure continuity of care for the child, for example, a child may attend a school nursery on a morning (equalling 15 hours) and an alternative nursery setting on an afternoon (equalling 15 hours), that involved the alternative nursery setting arranging pick-ups with the school nursery.

### **Children's Centres**

The scrutiny panel was advised that another element of support was the children's centre

offer. The children's centre offer was delivered via the School Readiness Pathway, a model created in 2015 in partnership with health colleagues. The model consisted of multi-agency key contact points for each child and identified clear points for interventions to improve a child's learning and development. The model, which was promoted by the Local Government Association, was deemed best practice.

#### Universal Offer

The School Readiness Manager advised that there was a universal offer, whereby any residents of the town could attend any children's centre in Middlesbrough. The universal offer included Baby Play, Stay and Play, child and health clinics and parenting programmes - all had a focus on making every contact count and promoting conversations around early learning with parents and carers.

It was explained that the children's centre offer had a clear communication focus, with literacy being the vehicle. In terms of poverty, and children's life outcomes, literacy was extremely important.

The School Readiness Team had a dedicated member of staff who worked closely with The Book Trust and The National Literacy Trust to ensure the team's work was evidence-based and demonstrated best practice. The School Readiness Literacy Pathway was a multi-agency model, with contacts at key developmental points in a child's life, progressively building on from one contact to the next. The books that were available were linked to development and milestones.

Members heard that the Borrow-a-Book scheme was launched in 2017 in all of the children's centres and was about removing barriers to families accessing libraries. Data from January to December 2019 had shown that an extra 727 families had joined the library via children's centre sessions and 759 books were issued to parents at those sessions.

In respect of the universal offer, parents also had the opportunity to attend parenting programmes. The programmes available were the 0-5 Family Links Early Years workshops and the Public Health initiative HENRY (healthy eating and nutrition for the really young). The scrutiny panel was advised that children's centre staff delivered both parenting programmes on a termly basis. Positive feedback had been received from parents in respect of the programmes.

#### Targeted Offer

The targeted offer was delivered in partnership with health colleagues. When a child turned 2 years and 3 months, an Ages and Stages Questionnaire was undertaken by health visitors. The questionnaire was a national tool that used a scoring system to measure where a child sat in terms of their developmental milestones. If a child was identified as not meeting their milestones, then they were referred into the School Readiness Team. The School Readiness Team then worked with the family, in the home for a 6 week period, to deliver the Play and Learn Together intervention. The intervention was a tool created by the team to share specific key messages with families, including helping parents to understand how they could help improve their child's learning and development. The work focussed primarily on improving communication but also involved developing fine motor skills, such as improving the thumb muscles. When the work was completed, the health visitor reviewed the child's development milestones at their 3 month review. At the present time, there had been a 97% success rate.

#### Early Help Offer

The scrutiny panel was informed that one of the team's newly developed interventions was available to all those under 5 who sat within families open to family case work in Stronger Families. On average, that figure included 248 children at any given time. The intervention was entitled 'Chat, Play, Read and Sing' and children's centre staff shared specific key messages with families aiming to close the word and attainment gap. It was explained that the team would visit the family home on one or two occasions to deliver the intervention.

The School Readiness Manager advised that the Department of Education was promoting the intervention to develop best practice nationally.

In response to a Member's query regarding parents who were reluctant to engage, the School Readiness Manager advised that the majority of parents did engage with the team. However, it was explained that, for those few who were reluctant to engage, joint handover home visits were planned between Stronger Families and the School Readiness Team. The School Readiness Team would only become involved with the family, once the Lead Practitioner had advised it was the appropriate time to offer support. The team was well equipped to encourage families to participate, as staff had been fully trained to engage with families.

In response to a Member's query regarding support for children with SEND, the School Readiness Manager advised that there was an Early Years Specialist Support Service. The service trained staff in settings to support children with SEND. A Member requested further information on the training that was delivered in respect of SEND.

Ultimately, the School Readiness Team aimed to ensure that children were ready for nursery by working alongside parents to help them understand the importance of a good home learning environment and to support them in making effective changes.

### **Tackling Development Gaps**

The scrutiny panel was informed that the Local Authority had staff within the School Achievement Team (Early Years Development Lead) and the Stronger Families School Readiness Team (Early Years Quality Lead). It was explained that those members of staff worked with all settings to ensure children from the most deprived backgrounds were given the best of opportunities by working with schools and settings in a number of ways:

- The Early Years Development Lead provided bespoke support to nurseries and schools, based on an individual needs basis. The support focussed on all aspects of learning and development to support improved outcomes for all children.
- Cluster meetings had been established termly to share key early year's messages and provide opportunities for practitioners to share good practice. The forum was providing opportunities for relationships to develop, with more teachers and practitioners moderating together and sharing good practice and resources.
- Moderation drop-in sessions had recently been established to encourage Reception teachers to make accurate judgements when assessing children's progress towards achieving the early learning goals at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. It was hoped that by providing termly opportunities and sharing experiences, outcomes would improve. At present, children were assessed after 2 weeks in school, the School Readiness Manager advised that it would be more beneficial for assessments to take place after 6 weeks.

Members were advised that the Local Authority received funding from the Government, entitled the Direct Schools Grant. For the early years, the grant was based on a January census of 2, 3 and 4 year olds in settings. The figures from the census were then used to calculate the grant for the following year. The scrutiny panel was advised that the Local Authority could not keep more than 5% of the funding, there was a requirement for the funds to be given to schools. The School Readiness Manager advised that the Local Authority kept less than 5% of the grant, as did neighbouring authorities. The money kept by the Local Authority was used to fund the Early Years Specialist Service and children's SEND. A Member requested further information on how the grant had been allocated, the School Readiness Manager advised that the Finance Business Partner would be in a position to provide a breakdown. A discussion ensued and the scrutiny panel and the School Readiness Manager were in agreement that it would be more beneficial for the census to take place in July, when take up was at its highest. The scrutiny panel agreed that a recommendation would be included in the draft final report to ensure that the request was submitted to the Secretary of State.

A Member queried how many members of staff were located in the School Readiness Team, the School Readiness Manager advised there were currently 13.1 FTE posts with 2.3 FTE

posts vacant since last year. Members raised concerns in respect of the posts that currently remained vacant.

Members heard that the team undertook a childcare sufficiency audit. As previously stipulated, the Local Authority had a statutory duty to ensure there were sufficient childcare places available for Middlesbrough's 2, 3 and 4 year olds. The team had secured a £30K grant, from the Government, which had been used to commission the childcare sufficiency audit and the person commissioned had used the Mosaic approach to profile every household in Middlesbrough with under 5's. The work reported that the most deprived areas were those with the highest level of need. It also identified that there was a surplus of settings in the most affluent wards and a lack of settings in the more deprived wards. The School Readiness Manager advised that a report would be presented to the Executive, in the near future, to provide an analysis of those findings. It was highlighted that the School Readiness Team planned to work with providers to discuss solutions.

There was currently no data set for attainment on entry to nursery. The Local Authority had undertaken work to encourage schools to start recording data on entry to nursery, however, only 6 schools had shown a willingness to record that information. Members were informed that it was essential to capture an accurate baseline of individual children's attainment as early as possible to inform planning to maximise learning. The scrutiny panel was in agreement that a letter should be written to all Chairs of Governors to convey the importance of collecting data on entry to nursery.

#### **AGREED**

**That the information presented at the meeting be considered in the context of the scrutiny panel's investigation.**

### **3 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - AN UPDATE**

Since the panel's last update, the Overview and Scrutiny Board has met once on 9 January 2020. The Chair presented a verbal update on the matters that were discussed at that meeting, including:

- Teeswide Safeguarding Adults Board - Annual Report and Strategic Business Plan
- Strategic Plan Update at Quarter 2 2019/20
- Final Report - Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel - Foodbanks
- Executive Forward Work Programme
- Scrutiny Chairs Update

#### **NOTED**

### **4 ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED**

#### **Future Meetings**

The Democratic Services Officer provided the scrutiny panel with information on the forthcoming meetings.

#### Evidence from Voluntary Sector Organisations (VSOs)

It was advised that arrangements would be made for 2 or 3 Voluntary Sector Organisations (VSOs) to attend the scrutiny panel's next meeting on 17 February 2020. It was commented that the VSOs in attendance would demonstrate positive impacts and evidence-based practice in respect of tackling poverty, removing barriers to learning and raising the educational attainment of disadvantaged children.

#### Evidence from Schools

A selection of schools, with a high number of pupils living in poverty, would be invited to the

scrutiny panel's meeting on 23 March 2020. It was advised that the scrutiny panel would receive information on the measures and interventions adopted by schools that have successfully raised the educational attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, including evidence-informed approaches to pupil premium spending.

**NOTED**