



OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

12 FEBRUARY 2008

SUMMARY OF CHILDREN AND LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL'S FINAL REPORT ON EARLY YEARS LEARNING OUTCOMES AND SURE START

Purpose of the scrutiny investigation:

Early childhood is crucial in terms of children's development and well-being. Growth is rapid and a significantly high proportion of learning takes place from birth to six years old. It is therefore a time when children particularly need high quality learning and development experiences.

Given the importance of early years development, the scrutiny panel sought to investigate service provision in Middlesbrough, with a particular emphasis on learning outcomes and the role of Sure Start.

Terms of reference:

The terms of reference of the scrutiny investigation were as follows:

- To examine early years service provision in Middlesbrough.
- To investigate the role of the School Improvement Service in early years service provision.
- To examine performance indicators associated with early years achievement and Sure Start learning outcomes.
- To assess levels of take up for Sure Start services, including work done to involve hard to reach groups.
- To identify the extent of, or requirement for, staff training at Sure Start centres.
- To examine an example of a Sure Start scheme and to speak to staff and service users about their experiences.
- To compare Early Years Foundation Stage Profiles in Middlesbrough to those of other areas.
- To assess the impact of key plans and strategies and national guidance on early years learning outcomes and service provision.

Findings:

The scrutiny panel heard details of the background to the establishment of Sure Start and its links with early years services, including external agencies

and the private sector. The panel was particularly interested in investigating whether there are any discernable links between the numerous Sure Start services and early years learning outcomes. Examples of various initiatives were considered, together with national guidance and policy which has shaped service provision. Information was also obtained in respect of performance measures which are used to assess the progress of young children and on plans to use this information in the future to help to shape service provision. It was also found that Sure Start services are to be expanded as part of the continued national programme.

Although there is no quantifiable evidence to show that Sure Start is affecting learning outcomes in Middlesbrough, the panel heard from parents, carers, Sure start and school teaching staff that the programme does make a difference. There is often a discernible difference in children who have been involved with Sure Start programmes in terms of behaviour, social skills and a willingness to learn.

Conclusions:

Based on the evidence considered during its investigation, the panel made seven conclusions. These are shown in full in the final report and relate to:

1. The very wide range of early years services provided by the Council/Sure Start in conjunction with partner agencies.
2. The planned expansion of Children's Centres across Middlesbrough.
3. The fact that that early years and Sure Start services are about much more than providing early years learning opportunities - for example they are beneficial in children's health, personal development and in developing social skills.
4. The fact that, to date there has been no quantifiable means of measuring whether Sure Start has had any impact on learning outcomes, although this will be possible in the future.
5. The impact that the large number of initiatives undertaken by Sure Start may have had on learning outcomes ie a dilution of emphasis on learning.
6. Levels of training and qualifications for Sure Start and children's day care staff exceeding requirements.
7. The need to ensure that Sure Start services continue to be targeted at "hard to reach" groups and that services are accessible and attractive to potential users.

Recommendations:

The scrutiny panel's final report contains six recommendations. These are shown in full in the report and relate to the following:

1. The need for Sure Start to identify learning outcomes as a priority, with services more focused on that objective.
2. The introduction of a monitoring or tracking system to assess the impact that Sure Start is having on early years learning outcomes.
3. Maximising the take up of Sure Start services.
4. The continued provision of training for children's day care staff.

5. The need to keep the scrutiny panel informed of the future development and roll out of Sure Start Children's Centres.
6. The submission of monitoring reports to the panel in respect of the expansion of services.

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