



**Writing an Early Years and Childcare Strategy  
Support from the Local Government Association  
September 2022 – March 2023  
West Sussex County Council**

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## 1. Introduction

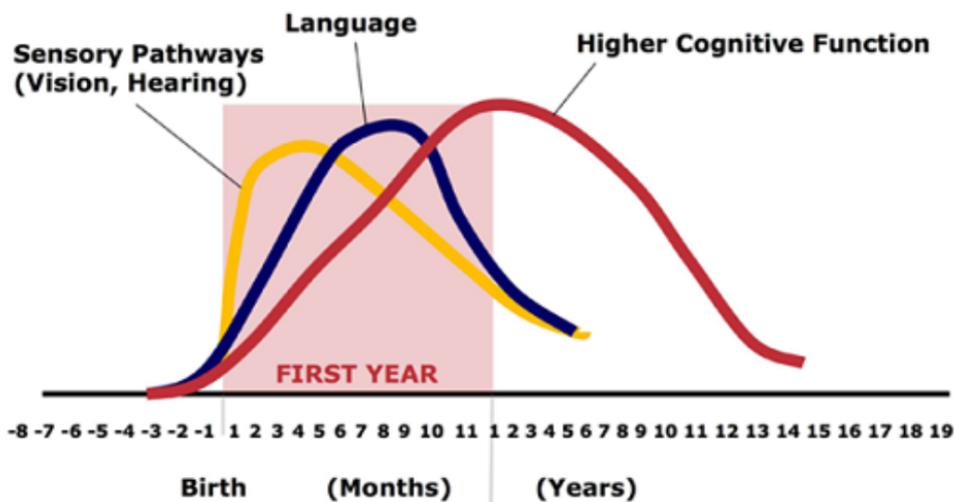
West Sussex County Council is on an exciting journey to transform services in the early years and improve outcomes for children and families. There has been a great deal of change within the services locally and a great deal of goodwill, commitment and experience to utilise.

An extremely experienced and knowledgeable team manage the agenda operationally, across several departments and agencies. There is an acknowledgement, however, that an overarching strategy, based on legal requirements, would help ensure that services do not become led by the latest initiative or funding stream. There is a keen will to ensure a child and family focus and the effective use of limited resources.

This piece of work has been seen as a great opportunity to support local changes, to ensure a strategic framework that supports the Council's legal functions and embeds efficient and enhanced service delivery and improved outcomes for children and families.

Research has shown us, time and again, that our development from conception to age 2 lays the foundation for our physical, emotional, social, educational and economic futures. The coordination of services through an agreed local strategy, to enable a universal and targeted framework of support from pre-birth to aged five, is critical for improving the outcomes of children, families, communities and society. In short, there is no better stage in a child's life in which to invest, if we are committed to long-term change.

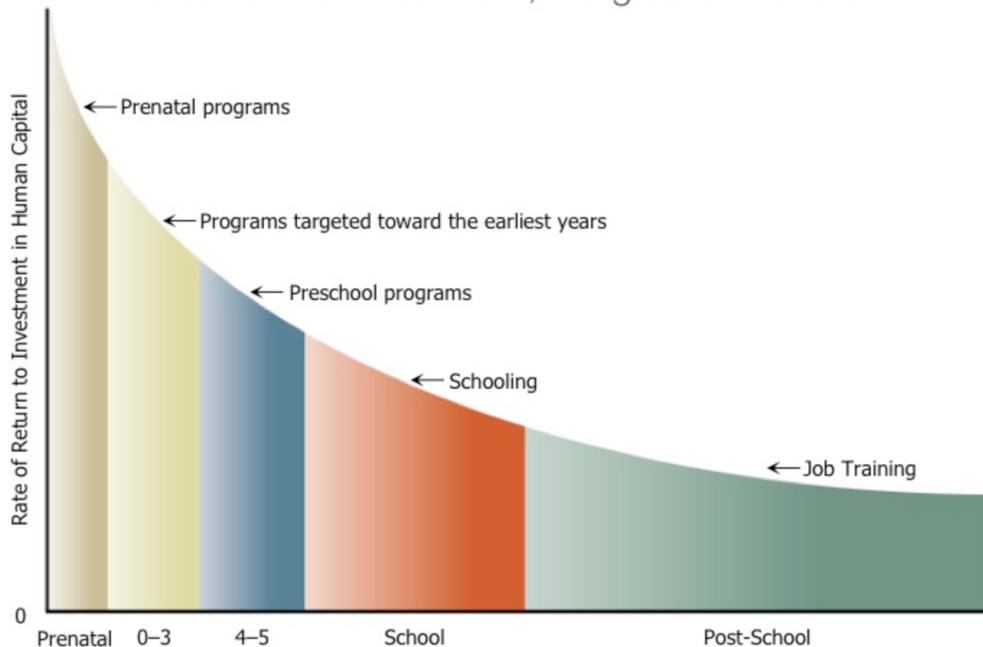
### Human Brain Development Neural Connections for Different Functions Develop Sequentially



Source: In Brief: The Science of Early Childhood Development. Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.

# EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IS A SMART INVESTMENT

The earlier the investment, the greater the return



Source: James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics

Both the pandemic and the cost of living crisis have exacerbated the challenges faced by families, and by those providing services nationally. An increase in the number of young children requiring additional support, along with resource pressures, is arguably creating a perfect storm, to potentially widen the gap between our least advantaged children and their peers. Whilst the pandemic undoubtedly magnified these issues, it should also be noted that they existed and were in fact increasing before.

At the time of writing, an unprecedented number of families who had babies during lockdown are coming into contact with services for the first time. A number of these babies will have been born into a society where the wearing of face masks was the norm, outside of their homes, and socialisation was very limited. The usual activities of baby clinics, stay and play sessions and other activities for new parents did not always take place for this group. Reports from families and professionals show that typical patterns of child development have been affected (in particular speech and language development and healthy attachments with parents, who may also have suffered stress). Our parents' confidence has also been affected by having missed out on opportunities to connect with other parents, gain advice and support and build friendships. All of which serve to secure a vital social network at what can be a

challenging and isolating time of transitioning to parenthood. For further information about the effects of COVID on children, young people and families, NCB conducted key research.<sup>1</sup>

The Local Government Association (LGA) has been delivering Early Years Peer reviews and bespoke consultancy support for a several years. Each review has shown that a vast amount of knowledge and experience exists throughout the early years sector and within local authorities and their partners. In addition to this, there are a wide range of highly successful projects and services being delivered, which are improving outcomes for young children and their families.

The LGA peer review process nationally, however, has also identified a common gap; i.e., an overarching strategy for the range of Early Years Services from pre-birth to 5 (and childcare sufficiency beyond), which holds Local Authorities (LAs) accountable against legal duties and enables strategic ownership at the highest level, as well as ensuring the longevity and coordination of delivery over time.

During 2020-21 and 2021-22, a total of 17 LAs were supported to write an overarching strategy using the legal requirements as a framework. The LGA used a process, which engaged senior managers and stakeholders throughout and ensured that the voice of families was heard. Further funding was secured during 2022 and, following a webinar sharing the experiences and impact of the work in the initial group, a further programme of support was developed.

LAs were offered the support package on the basis that they had the involvement and commitment of senior managers to partake, forge ahead and invest in the process.

Ten LAs, in total, were successful in working with us throughout the period starting September 2021 and ending March 2023.

Camden  
Enfield  
Gloucestershire  
Liverpool  
Rochdale  
Stoke  
Torbay  
West Berkshire  
West Sussex  
Wiltshire

The overarching aim has been to support LAs in writing and creating their own Early Years and Childcare Strategy. The creation of this report aims to support that process by providing key information and a series of recommendations, which can be used in the final document.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncb.org.uk/what-we-do/research-evidence/our-research-projects/research-exploring-impact-covid-19-pandemic>

## 1.1 A Snapshot of West Sussex

West Sussex is a mainly rural county with the South Downs National Park running through it. The main population centres are along the coastal strip and in the north of the county, which includes the services supporting Gatwick airport. The area is mostly affluent with a diverse economy, performing strongly against the national average. There is, however, significant variation across the county, and with noticeable affluence often follows a gap between the least advantaged communities and the wider population.

Covid has had a significant impact on services and family lifestyle alike. The Council's Economic Reset Plan 2020-2024 describes the economy pre-Covid as performing strongly against the national average performance. West Sussex is home to around 859,000 people, with a higher than average population of over 65-year-olds and lower proportion of people of working age. The plan states:

*There is no doubt that COVID-19 is having a significant impact on the county's economy and the pre COVID-19 economic landscape is changing rapidly. Businesses are being hit hard, there are significant levels of businesses who are dormant, residents are losing their jobs and livelihoods, and the implications of the aviation industry crisis on Gatwick airport are far-reaching and impact the local, regional and national economy. The impact on the economy has severe social consequences too.*

The county has a two-tier local Government arrangement with the County Council and seven District and Borough Councils.

## 2. Summary of Recommendations

A series of recommendations can be found in sections 10 and 11, which includes feedback from all stakeholders involved in the process of writing this report from all 10 areas. This section aims to summarise key recommendations and priorities for West Sussex moving forwards.

- Identify resource to write and lead the overarching Early Years and Childcare Strategy. Writing the strategy, based on the recommendations in this report, could further support the engagement and commitment enhanced through the process of this LGA report. There is a phenomenal amount of expertise, knowledge and experience within the existing services and across agencies, and maintaining engagement will be key.
- In writing the strategy, develop greater connection to the council and other strategic plans; in particular, those which are interdependent on economic growth, health outcomes and regeneration. There are opportunities to have greater impact on child outcomes and on the wider council objectives by ensuring a two-way dialogue, strategically and operationally, which is secured by shared priorities across plans.
- Accountability and governance should be considered in the light of both writing the strategy and securing greater connections to the council-wide plans. An overarching

accountability group with terms of reference based on the Childcare Act and clear links to wider plans and operational delivery could help create a sustainable framework.

- Consider the matrix management of services, both internally and externally, so joint working is supported and not dependent on relationships. The overarching accountability group could also support this process by identifying key work strands, as identified in the recommendations in this report. Bringing operational and strategic staff together, to plan and deliver services through the Family Hubs model, will also be dependent on clear strategic leadership around key areas of work (for example childcare sufficiency).
- Develop a comprehensive dataset to understand the early years and childcare needs of children and families across West Sussex, and enable performance management across the Childcare Act aims. A particular focus should be placed on continuing the data collection work started around early years children with SEND.
- In the light of budget announcements on March 15 2023, a key priority around managing childcare sufficiency, and in particular market development, will be essential to achieving new government priorities. Market management will be critical to supporting the planned extension of 30 hours of free childcare for children from 9 months, and improving wraparound childcare for school age children. Again, focusing on the least advantaged children and children with SEND (who are often the same children) will be critical to narrowing, as opposed to widening, the attainment gap.

### **3. Methodology**

Each LA was offered 5 days of consultancy support and a recommended framework:

- An initial scoping meeting to shape the support needed
- Presentation and discussion with the Lead Member and Chief Executive, Director of Children's Services and Assistant Director
- Input at an appropriate Senior Management Meeting
- Key stakeholder engagement sessions, e.g., stakeholders who operationally manage services across the agenda, early years and childcare sector representatives, and parents and carers
- A report with recommendations
- A feedback session for Senior Managers/staff
- A Peer Network for all LAs engaged in the process and those who were previously supported, facilitated once a term with external speakers to support
- Regular communications and the sharing of information and resources (including a guidance and framework document for writing the strategy and supporting consistency across areas)
- Access to the LGA Knowledge Hub (Early Years)

The process of support was managed by Elizabeth Hodgman; Programme Manager Early Years LGA. Ann Van Dyke MBE, Consultant LGA, coordinated the support with all 10 LAs, provided the initial scoping meeting, facilitated input with senior managers and wrote final reports to create consistency across the recommendations.

Six LGA Peers also supported the process, in most areas, by coordinating and facilitating the engagement sessions with staff, the sector and parents/carers. All 6 peers supported the peer network for LAs engaged and contributed their experience to the final reports. The peers who supported were as follows:

Annabelle Burns – Rochdale - [Annabelle.burns1@nhs.net](mailto:Annabelle.burns1@nhs.net)  
Katie Clarke – West Sussex – [Katie.Clarke@cumbria.gov.uk](mailto:Katie.Clarke@cumbria.gov.uk)  
Kate Freeman – Gloucestershire, Torbay, Enfield – [kate@freeman.org.uk](mailto:kate@freeman.org.uk)  
Kate Stephens – Camden – [Kate.Stephens@devon.gov.uk](mailto:Kate.Stephens@devon.gov.uk)  
Jill Webb – Liverpool – [jill@jillwebbtraining.co.uk](mailto:jill@jillwebbtraining.co.uk)  
Flora Wilkie – Wiltshire – [Flora.Wilkie@local.gov.uk](mailto:Flora.Wilkie@local.gov.uk)  
Ann Van Dyke - West Berkshire, Stoke [ann@annvandyke.co.uk](mailto:ann@annvandyke.co.uk).

#### 4. What Are We Collectively Trying to Achieve?

*Science tells us that a child's experiences from conception through their first five years will go on to shape their next 50. It tells us that the kind of children we raise today, will reflect the kind of world we will live in tomorrow. It tells us that investing in the start of life is not an indulgence, but economically, socially and psychologically vital to a prosperous society.*

**Jason Knauf, CEO of the Royal Foundation, December 2020**

Ipsos MORI | *State of the Nation: Understanding Public Attitudes to the Early Years*,  
November 2020

Evidence that supports investment in the early years continues to grow. However, we have witnessed a series of challenges within our public sector over the years, which have not always enabled sufficient focus or coordination. Losing the inspection framework for early years at an LA level has resulted in it becoming a service area which is not always prioritised. High profile safeguarding cases have shifted the focus in all areas. Yet it has been proven that good pathways of support from pre-birth can influence positive attachments, improve family outcomes, and support take-up of the early years entitlements at 2 and beyond. Our entitlements offer 15 hours a week of good quality provision for our most vulnerable children and, along with the earliest universal services, can act as a critical and cost effective safeguard.

A series of national policies and drivers around specific themes within the early years (for example, Start for Life, the 1001 Days Campaign, Speech, Language and Communication), whilst welcomed, can also make it difficult to coordinate delivery locally and impede seamless and efficient delivery to families. Families (nationally) constantly tell us that they are, frequently, having to repeat their stories, each time they interact with new services. In particular, at present, there is a plethora of training opportunities being offered to early years childcare practitioners, who are already struggling greatly with capacity on the whole.

Financial pressures on LAs have also led to service cuts and re-organisations. These, in turn, can result in the fragmentation of early years services, making service coordination difficult and often under resourced. As a consequence of this, services are increasingly being positioned within other service areas, creating a bias toward different priorities, as opposed to acknowledging early years as a key stage in its own right and focusing on both universal and more targeted services within that.

Cross-departmental and multi-agency working at the top is more likely to be felt as seamless to children and families. Joint commissioning agendas and strategies, which recognise and embed early years as a priority are more likely to have impact at the point of delivery.

The aims of the LGA support and of this report are therefore:

- To support the LA to write an overarching framework for strategy and service delivery across Early Years and Childcare, which aims to improve outcomes and reduce inequalities
- To engage the right people in owning and having a voice within that strategy
- To support legal compliance by framing the strategy around the Childcare Act 2006 (updated in 2016 and 2018)
- To support current government policy direction, for example, Best Start and Family Hub outcomes, by creating a framework which coordinates new policies and services
- To support efficiencies locally, through coordinated service delivery and a needs-led approach
- To add value throughout by introducing recommendations from our collective experience and new ways of working
- To begin to create consistency across LAs
- To support LAs with economic, social and educational recovery from the impact of COVID

## **5. The National Context and our Legal Framework**

National investment in early years has continued for over 20 years. A series of expansions and reforms have been seen; for example, Sure Start programmes, Children's Centres, the expansion of the early education entitlements (to include our least advantaged 2-year-olds and working families), and a focus on speech, language and communication pre-pandemic.

Public sector resources have been under pressure for some time and this has been compounded by COVID-19 and the diversion of resources to support local responses. The development of our latest policies and funding streams around Family Hubs and the Best Start in Life programme aim to address that imbalance and refocus services around the most critical years, delivering services where families are based.

*The 1,001 days from pregnancy to the age of two set the foundations for an individual's cognitive, emotional and physical development. There is a well-established and growing international consensus on the importance of this age range; it is part of the World*

*Health Organisation's Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health<sup>15</sup>, the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative<sup>16</sup>, and in England, both the NHS Long Term Plan<sup>17</sup> and Public Health England's 2016 guidance on "giving every child the best start in life."<sup>18</sup>*

*The Best Start for Life, The Early Years Healthy Development Review Report,  
HM Government 2021*

The Childcare Act 2006 (updated in 2016 and 2018) was a pioneering piece of legislation, as it was the first act to be exclusively concerned with early years and childcare and early childhood services. The 3 key drivers in this act are:

- to reduce child poverty
- to reduce inequalities between children
- to improve well-being for young children

The Childcare Act enables a framework for delivery (and, conversely, legal challenge) under three key areas:

- The early years outcomes duties require the provision of early childhood services and joint working between agencies to reduce inequalities, improve outcomes and narrow the gap. The outcomes duties also enable pooled budgets to support joint delivery, with the aim of supporting easy to access services from pre-birth to 5 at a universal and more targeted level.
- The sufficiency duties require Local Authorities to ensure sufficient early education and childcare. Our least advantaged families are legally entitled to the early years education as children turn two, and all families of children aged 3 and 4. Working families are entitled to additional hours for 3 and 4-year-olds and the entitlements aim to support child development but also remove a barrier to employment by supporting access and affordability. The sufficiency duties also require LAs to secure childcare for children aged 0-14, (or 18 for children with a disability) with the aim of enabling parents to take part in employment and employment-related activities.
- The information duties require Local Authorities to ensure information for both childcare providers and families, in order to meet their other childcare duties.

Whilst the Childcare Act provides a framework for writing a strategy, it should also be noted that legal challenges have been made, in recent years, against councils across all three areas on the grounds of:

- The provision of early years services
- Insufficient provision of 15 and 30 hours of funded nursery education
- Charges made for places which families are entitled to for free
- Information (families not being adequately informed of their legal entitlements)

These legislative requirements are interdependent on each other. For example, improving the well-being of young children is reliant on securing integrated early childhood services, which support access to early education and childcare. Securing sufficient childcare requires

information, advice and assistance to parents and prospective parents, in order that they may demand (ask for) a high quality supply.

Our duties and effective service delivery require us to direct and support multi-agency commitment and working. In the early years and childcare sector, this requirement goes far beyond that of simply sharing information across agencies and departments. Improving child outcomes in the early years and through good quality childcare is a shared responsibility, in terms of direct delivery by council services, maternity and health services, Jobcentre Plus, schools, and the community and voluntary sector.

The delivery of early education and childcare is dependent on a market facilitation approach and our sector is shaped by market forces. Parental engagement and choice is critical to our service design and implementation, as none of the services offered within the early years and childcare framework place any obligation or legal requirement on parents to take them up. Engagement in services is entirely voluntary and therefore demand led. A significant proportion of our services, accessed in the early years in particular, are delivered in the private voluntary and independent sector (for example our 15 and 30 hour entitlements). Our information duties (and strategy) are therefore critical in ensuring that our services are found easily, navigated smoothly, and are engaging and positive at every stage.

The responsibilities of local authorities were further defined by the Children and Families Act 2014, which seeks to improve services for vulnerable children and to support families. It underpinned wider reforms and policies to ensure that all children and young people can succeed, no matter what their background, which is further strengthened by the Equalities Act 2010 (which superseded the Disability Discrimination Act 1995).

This legislation is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (UNCRC) (1992). The Convention has 54 articles that cover all aspects of a child's life and set out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that all children, everywhere, are entitled to.

A full table of legislation around early years and childcare can be found at Appendix 1.

## **6. Wider Impact and Local Context, Council Corporate Plan, and Children and Young People Plan Priorities**

The early years and childcare duties require local authorities to work in partnership across a range of agencies and departments. The duties include a requirement to pool budgets where appropriate. They reflect the multigenerational impact that families, and indeed wider communities, can and should have on our youngest children; that our children are part of families, who are part of communities, who are part of a wider society.

The LGA support process has aimed to engage senior leaders in conversations about how families can be supported through direct strategic linkage, across adults and community services as well as children's services (for example, housing, regeneration, employment and community development). In short, the greater the two way conversation across these

agendas, the greater the long term sustainable impact on children and families and, in turn, communities and society at large.

We know that getting it right from the earliest stage is critical to achieving these aims. Good early years and childcare provision enables communities to break a cycle of deprivation. As Sally Hogg from the Thousand and One Day's campaign states, *'society is what happens when babies grow up'*.

During the support process, senior managers engaged in conversations around the impact early years can have on the wider council priorities. It was acknowledged that early years should be seen as a key stage in its own right and that the impact of not creating focus, investing and coordinating services early enough, could create missed opportunities for children, families and communities as a whole.

With respect to West Sussex, at the time of writing, the Council Plan was being updated. There are opportunities to further embed early years statutory functions within wider council planning. Childcare sufficiency, in particular, will be critical to economic, social and educational recovery from Covid. The existing council plan running from 2021–2025 identifies four priorities:

- Keeping people safe from vulnerable situations
- A sustainable and prosperous economy
- Helping people and communities fulfil their potential
- Making best use of resources

At present, there is no direct reference to early years being a critical stage of early intervention and prevention. Nor is there acknowledgement of the part childcare sufficiency can play in supporting economic activity and removing barriers to employment, in particular for women.

The Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy provides a clear focus on preventative working and includes 'Starting Well' as one of three priorities, aiming to achieve:

- Improved infant and maternal outcomes especially in deprived areas
- Children, young people and families have good emotional wellbeing and mental health
- Children grow in a safe and healthy home environment with supportive and nurturing parents and carers
- Children and young people leaving care are healthy and independent

The Health and Wellbeing Strategy supports significant elements of the legal requirements, and a Children First Board provides a key focus on joint working to improve child outcomes. A series of subgroups, focusing on emotional wellbeing and mental health, for example, are already engaged with early years; further analysis might support, broader connections and supporting the whole family agenda.

## **7. Our Starting Point, Supply and Demand**

This section of our report aims to support a data-driven needs-led approach to an early years and childcare strategy in West Sussex. Current data and an overview of provision, including consideration of the current supply of services, has been used to open a dialogue around how that might meet our strategic aims, alongside the needs of our families (through a population needs analysis).

### **7.1 Current Services (Our Current Supply)**

A good range of services exist for our pre-birth to 5s in West Sussex, spanning a range of universal and targeted support such as midwifery, health visiting, Children's Centres, information and the early years and childcare sector. They include services from a range of other departments within the council as well as partners. Many services accessed by families will, of course, be more generic to families (communities) as a whole; for example, employment support, housing, libraries and GP surgeries. Services are coordinated and delivered through the three Family Hubs, which create opportunities for co-location and joint working.

West Sussex, like all areas, face capacity challenges.

Universal services form a critical plank in delivery. The Family Hub model provides an opportunity to deliver services jointly; for example, maternity and neonatal care, information about childcare, parenting, and health advice. More targeted support through the early help offer is also available through the Family Hubs.

An integrated review is made available to families as children reach 24 months, bringing together, parents with health visitors and early years practitioners to review progress of the child and family.

The quality of the early years provision is high and levels of development for children are above national averages.

At the start of the 2020, and prior to the pandemic, there were 1338 providers registered with Ofsted in West Sussex. Throughout the pandemic, this was monitored closely to ensure sufficiency of places. A diverse market exists with providers offering places with childminders and groups across the private, voluntary and maintained sectors. There are also a number of out of school childcare providers offering breakfast, after school and holiday care.

There is unprecedented pressure on a sector that had struggled during various lockdowns to remain sustainable. Changing demand and the cost-of-living crisis nationally is impacting on the cost of delivery and also on the ability of families to pay for services. All of these issues are creating workforce challenges in the recruitment and retention of staff. The council have delivered and maintained a strong support offer, based on a proactive, strategically planned approach, which demonstrates that the majority of issues are now beyond local control.

Information about setting up childcare is also easy to find. A key consideration, in both sufficiency and quality improvement strategies, could be to attract and support potential new providers with information, advice and guidance based on the area needs. A turnover of provision and the potential over-supply could be positively managed, to further improve quality and the appropriateness of the sectors to meet family needs. On-going business support will be critical to this process.

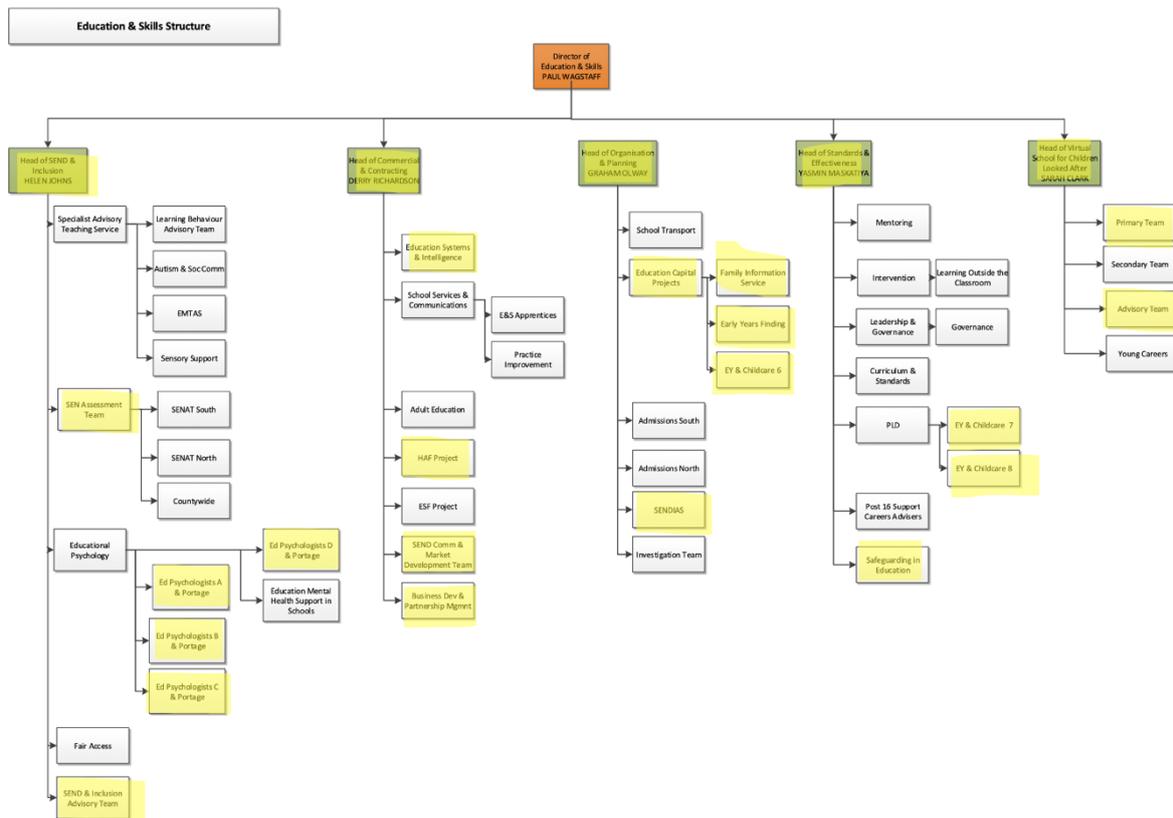
The Early Years Service was redesigned in 2021. This led to different elements of early years and childcare being integrated within teams across the broader Department. The strong rationale was to ensure a single view of a child's journey, from birth to adulthood, and to strengthen continuity through transition points with partner services. It was also designed to ensure senior leadership of Early Years was a key priority across all services areas and that different service areas were joined up in their approach. Although West Sussex does not have a Strategic Early Years senior leader, the Assistant Director: Education and Skills has overall budget responsibility and there is a desire, from this support, to identify ways in which governance and leadership within the current design of the service can be maximised.

Whilst the range of functions sit separately across several service areas within the Department of Children, Young People and Learning, there is a recognition that this could lead to service fragmentation. However, the key rationale for developing an early years strategy and securing ownership from across the department is key in mitigating this risk.

At present, the functions of early years funding, childcare, sufficiency, and family information sit separately from standards and effectiveness support for the sector. These elements, along with locally based delivery through Family Hubs, form critically interdependent parts of the pathway of services for families, from pre-birth to 5. There is a risk, in separating these functions, that efficiencies could be missed and settings receive support from different teams and individuals, missing opportunities for greater relationship building and impact.

There is a further risk that, within the current structure, the early years agenda is viewed as a subsection of (and lower priority than) the schools agenda, as opposed to a key stage in its own right.

The structure diagram below aims to show how just some of the elements of service delivery for early years (highlighted in yellow) span a range of departments within a single directorate.



Relationships beyond the Education and Skills Department Directorate are also critical to the agenda. Close working with children, social care, adult services, housing, community services and leisure, for example, are key.

The relationship management required in delivering the joint working requirements of the act are complex. Whilst it is not essential that all the key elements are located in one place, strategic management, and a formalised matrix and clear framework for decision making and operating, are critical to ensuring that the current good working is not purely dependent on historic relationships and individual knowledge and expertise.

There will be inevitable overlap across service areas (for example, safeguarding) and understanding and defining the matrix (roles and responsibilities) will be key for good joint working.

The current separation of health services could create an artificial division (seam) for families. The construction of an Early Years Strategy will require strong partnership links with health (for example, ensuring that the Health Commissioner is meeting health targets and measures are led by the Early Years strategy) for joint working at the point of delivery to be possible. Commissioning arrangements (i.e., contracts and performance management) should therefore reflect this.

The development of Family Hubs provides a focus on joint working at the point of delivery. An Early Years Strategy, owned across agencies and at a senior level, will be critical to ensuring that services are not diluted by other service areas, such as early help or inclusion for school-age children.

## **7.2. Service Design and Positioning of Early Years within West Sussex**

Within the design and shape of the delivery of services for children and young people in West Sussex, the positioning of early years and childcare services should reflect that it is an area of priority locally, which warrants discussion and decision making in a balanced way, alongside other areas of service delivery. Positioning alongside services such as safeguarding and education, can dictate the direction of travel, discussion and decision-making, allocation and best use of resources, and focus (achievement of aims). Some services (within the broader children's service) are defined by place, some by age and some by need/theme. Principles of design should be applied, where possible, across the children and young people's agenda to pro-actively promote joint working.

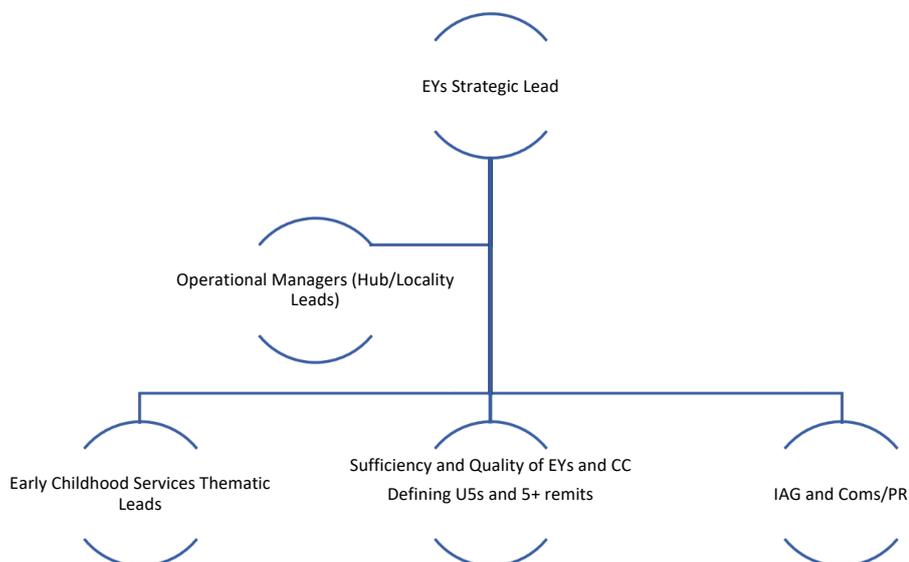
Some local authorities have situated their early years and childcare services as an equal partner to schools and safeguarding agendas. This has reported benefits in potentially being better able to:

- Commit and coordinate resources which invest to save
- Ensure connection with and impact on related agendas; for example, safeguarding (which can also impact on Ofsted outcomes)
- Perform better for children and families
- Make decisions which impact on compliance quicker

Aligning line management (and commissioning) arrangements to ensure an overarching service could enhance overall direction towards the Childcare Act Aims. The Act suggests a service structure which could be adopted, as illustrated in the diagram below. This is a suggested structure which takes a "blank sheet" approach, and, of course, all local areas will have existing structures to consider. The Sufficiency elements will also ensure market management levers are applied to childcare for over 5s (as per the Act) to ensure support for parents to work (economic recovery, reducing poverty and supporting child outcomes).

Shared aims and a supporting framework based on the Act could further secure the excellent positive relationships in place already, along with ensuring a set of seamless services (as felt by families).

## A Proposal for Service Design Based on the Childcare Act



We are required in legislation to facilitate partnership working with a host of agencies to achieve our aims. Health, Job Centre Plus and the Voluntary Sector are all critical partners we are dependent on for compliance. Managing relationships and influencing change is, therefore, an ongoing and vital requirement of our Strategic Lead, as shown in the next diagram.

The diagram illustrates just some of the key departments and agencies with whom the Strategy leadership and governance (and operational activity), relates and ultimately could pool budgets with.



Strategic leadership and governance has a key objective to design, deliver, work with and commission a range of services, which are still evolving. They also enable a focus on applying for and attracting new funding, to continue to grow the preventative element of children's services, in particular in the early years. We believe that a Strategy needs to be focused on an awareness of and readiness for our next policy changes, including but not exclusively:

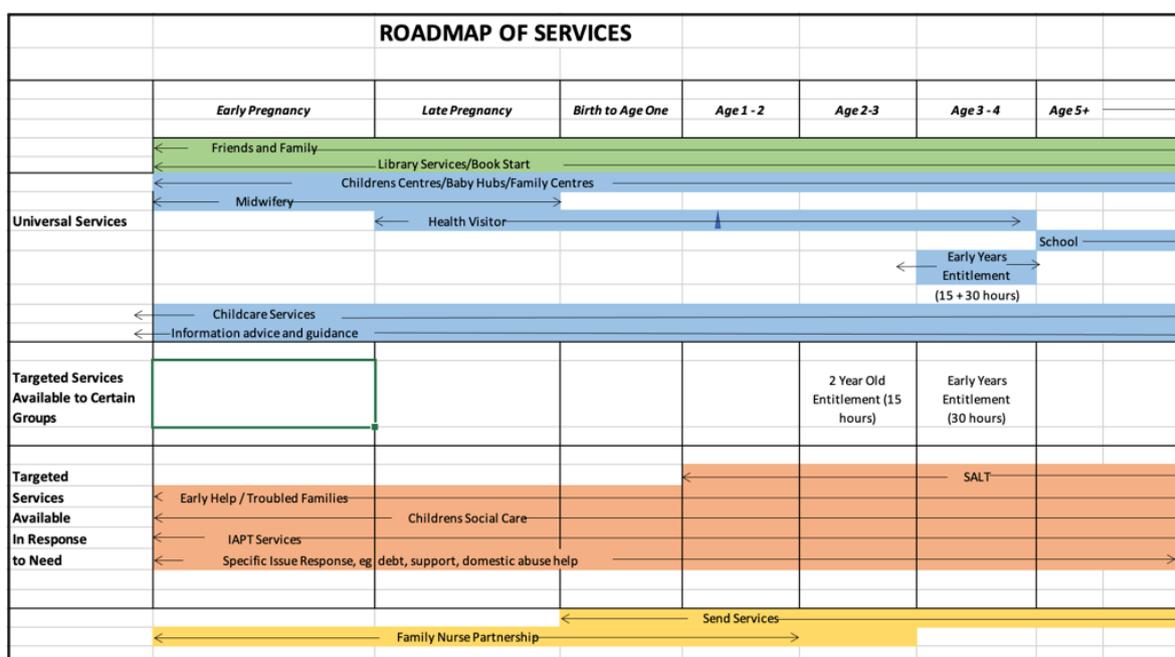
- The further development of the Start for Life and Family Hubs programmes. This will dictate our mode of delivery at a local level and require matrix management to

successfully steer multi-agency/cross-departmental working whilst retaining essential expertise.

- The continuing development of childcare (for example, the holiday activities and food programme supporting the sufficiency of childcare for school age children and potential reforms to the early years sector workforce).
- Commitments to expand early education in the future.

Services will also need to reflect the County Council’s needs analysis and strategic priorities. For example, balancing universal services and touch points with more targeted offers of support. The pathway of services could be mapped to create an open and transparent roadmap, building on the following:

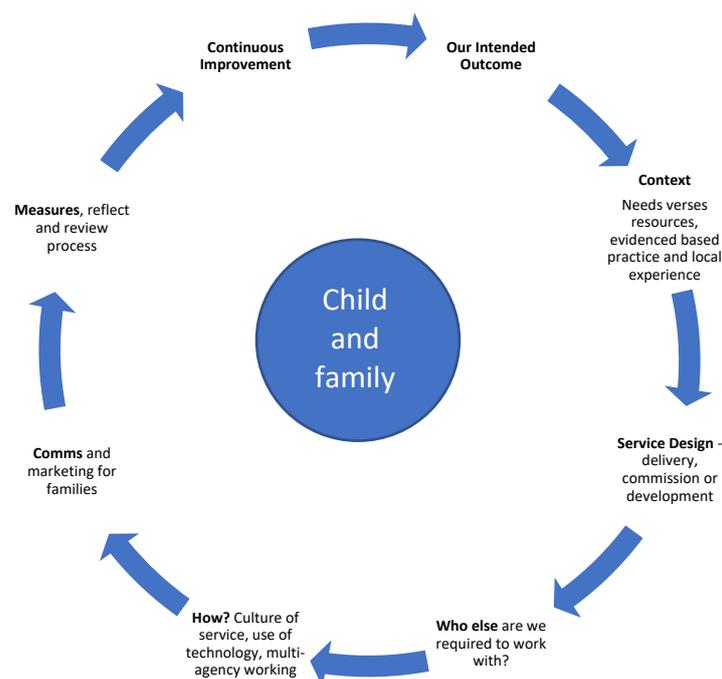
**Diagram to show how we will ensure services and touch points support our family journey.**  
(A larger scale diagram can be found at Appendix 2)



In making these suggestions, the LGA seek to take into account the learning from COVID, about smarter working. This has been highlighted by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (April 2020, updated September 2020), *The impact of COVID-19 on child health services*, and by H M Government (2021) *The Best Start for Life; A Vision for the 1,001 Critical Days, The Early Years Healthy Development Review Report*.

*The increased volunteering, virtual multi-agency working and efficiencies created by reducing unnecessary physically face to face meetings and home visits may all be useful to include in a framework going forward. Incorporating digital familiarity within the public sector, digital access for families and co-production with families are also identified as vital to creating resilient services.*

As strategy and service delivery become more integrated and mapped against need, we should also consider a cycle to ensure the most effective and efficient ways of working:



In the way our services are designed, we should consider how, through the way we operate, the needs of working families are thoroughly considered throughout. There are a high number of benefit-dependent, low-income, working households in the area, and the way we work can be critical to whether families are enabled or prevented from entering employment. This can be particularly true for families of children with disabilities. It seems (nationally) that, the higher the need for support from services, the less likely a family will be able to generate income and lift themselves out of poverty if we are not mindful of how our services are designed.

West Sussex have already reshaped services for children and young people around a District and Borough model. Early Help, Family Safeguarding and Standards and Effectiveness senior advisers and Early Years Childcare Advisers are now working towards greater co-ordination of service support. To reflect the aims of an early years strategy it will be important to ensure that this work is next embedded within a pathway of universal service provision across a range of agencies.

### 7.3 Demand, Population Needs Analysis

Good service planning and the planning of resources are dependent on understanding what we are required to deliver (secure) and **who** the key customer groups are. A good population needs analysis will consider the number of children and families who are entitled to the services at both a universal and more targeted level. Understanding the needs of these key populations, broken into key groups, will be critical to ensuring a preventative, cost effective agenda and the best outcomes for children.

The LA has a vast amount of data already being collected and a good commitment to using it well for service improvement. A single dashboard could be developed, which brings together

a range of existing data, to better understand the needs of children and families in the area. The process of creating the dashboard could, in itself, facilitate joint working between a range of departments, and better align service leads and the data collection staff.

Good population data exists through the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment, broken down into Early Years and School Age children. Ethnicity data is also available.

Engagement with services is good; for example, 88 % of eligible two year olds are benefiting from their entitlement to 15 hours a week of nursery education and 101.7 % of three and four-year-olds access the universal entitlement.

There are approximately 8,630 births each year in West Sussex; a number which has remained relatively constant compared with most areas, seeing a steady decline. One in 10 children aged under 16 are living in poverty. Crawley has the highest proportion (14.8%) of child poverty of the local authorities in West Sussex. 3.8% of children and young people have a long-term health condition or disability that limits their day-to-day activities. 19.5% of children in reception were overweight or obese.

The West Sussex Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy<sup>2</sup> highlights the key issues and challenges to be considered in the make-up of our families:

- Although the child poverty rate is amongst the lowest in the country, there are 15,500 under 16s living in poverty in West Sussex.
- Only half of children receiving free school meals achieve a good level of development at the end of reception.
- The number of referrals to children's social care has risen consistently for the past four years; there were nearly 2,000 more referrals last year than in 2015.
- Whilst West Sussex as a whole compares well with the rest of England on issues such as obesity and infant mortality, there is considerable variation within the county.
- Social mobility is a significant issue in parts of West Sussex; Crawley has one of the lowest levels of social mobility in school-age children in the country. Gatwick Airport is a major local employer of people and the on-going automation of routine jobs may have major implications.
- Adverse childhood experiences, such as living in a household where domestic violence or alcohol or substance misuse is taking place, can have significant health impacts later in life.
- Outcomes of looked-after children and children leaving care are poorer than other children.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://jsna.westsussex.gov.uk/updates/west-sussex-jhwbs/>

## 8. Performance Management

To achieve the challenging aspirations set out in this strategy, robust performance management will be key. The approach to this, however, is a pragmatic one; with resources stretched, the challenge is to use staff time to work with families rather than collect additional data. There is a wealth of data already in the Local Authority and the aim of the performance management framework will be to bring this together, in order to highlight what is working well and where to focus improvement. The framework below uses existing measures commonly collated by LAs:

- Commissioning arrangements and performance management indications
- Analysis already in place for other government monitoring (e.g., the Early Intervention Foundation Matrix)
- Data already submitted to central government (e.g., Foundation Stage Profile and Health Data)
- Data already collected by individual teams (e.g., time taken to complete SEND Plans)

The development of this framework could, as a task in its own right, facilitate joint working and shared-ownership, building on the population needs analysis described in the previous section.

As an overview and example of how the LA use existing information and begin joint working on a performance management dashboard, the following table has been developed to support legal compliance.

<b>Priority and legislative requirement and summary</b> <i>(numbering relates to the Childcare Act legal section heading)</i>	<b>Strategic Objective</b> <b>How will we meet this legal requirement?</b>
<p><b>1. Improve the well-being of young children.</b>            Reducing inequalities between young children in the area. Well-being includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical, mental health, emotional</li> <li>• Protection from harm and neglect</li> <li>• Education, training and recreation</li> <li>• Social and economic well-being</li> </ul> <p><b>2. The Requirements to deliver Children’s Centre Services</b>            Requirement for agencies to work together and start to integrate services; this requirement was strengthened in 2009 by the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act. Section 5A of this Act brought in the requirement that English</p>	<p>Our objective will be to improve the well-being of young children through good quality services that are well understood, easy to access and support families’ needs;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To secure integrated early childhood services with seamless transition from universal, to preventive, to targeted services, meeting needs in the most efficient and cost-effective way;</li> </ul> <p><b>We will demonstrate this by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing the inequality in life expectancy at birth (PHE)</li> <li>• Reducing the number of children in absolute low income families (PHE)</li> <li>• Increasing the number of children achieving a good level of development aged 2-2.5 years (PHE)</li> </ul>

<p>Local Authorities must <i>'so far as is reasonably practicable, include arrangements for sufficient provision of Children's Centres to meet local need.'</i> Local need was defined as the need of parents, prospective parents and children.</p> <p><b>3. To secure integrated early childhood services</b> Duty to facilitate and work together with partners to ensure children, parents, (including prospective parents) and families have access to services from the partners. Partners include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early Years provision.</li> <li>• Social services.</li> <li>• Health.</li> <li>• Employment and training.</li> <li>• Information and assistance (Section 12 FIS).</li> </ul> <p>Within this section, the LA has a duty also to identify those parents who could benefit from the services but may not access them (for whatever reason) and encourage parents to access services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measuring school readiness – children achieving a good level of development at the end of reception year (PHE)</li> <li>• Narrowing the gap between the lowest achieving 20% in the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile and the rest of the cohort (DfE)</li> </ul>
<p><b>6. To secure sufficient childcare for working parents</b> Ensuring that there are sufficient childcare places for working parents and those parents who wish to access education or training as a way into work</p> <p><b>7. Secure free of charge early years provision</b> This is around ensuring sufficient places for those children in receipt of the funding.</p> <p><b>Sections 8-10 describe the discharging of the sufficiency duties and section 11 the repeal of the childcare sufficiency assessment duties.</b></p> <p><b>13. To provide information, advice and training to childcare providers</b> Providing advice and training to persons providing, and those who intend to provide, childcare in their area and who are registered)</p>	<p>We secure sufficient high-quality childcare and early years provision, working with providers from all sectors.</p> <p><b>We will demonstrate this by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring the number of childcare places on the Early Years Register (Ofsted) and any changes</li> <li>• Monitoring the number of non-Early-Years-registered settings, and change in last 12 months (Ofsted)</li> <li>• Increasing the number of childcare settings with a good or outstanding Ofsted rating</li> <li>• Increasing the percentage of eligible 2-year-olds accessing early education entitlement</li> <li>• Increasing the percentage of 3 and 4 year-olds accessing early education</li> </ul>

<p><b>12. To provide information, advice and assistance to parents or prospective parents</b></p> <p>Must establish and maintain a service providing information, advice and assistance to parents, prospective parents, children and young people.</p>	<p>We will provide information, advice and assistance that is clear, easy to find and easy to understand.</p> <p><b><i>Once performance management indicators are agreed, 'dashboard' indicators will be available here (e.g., annual mystery shop? Parent feedback loop?)</i></b></p>
<p><b>Inclusion</b> is a cross cutting theme in the Childcare Act, specifically:</p> <p><b>Section 1</b> requires Local Authorities to improve well-being and reduce inequalities between young children in their area, so work done on planning and commissioning childcare must all be aimed at these goals.</p> <p><b>Section 3</b> requires Local Authorities to promote childcare to parents who may not otherwise access it, which will clearly include parents of disabled children.</p> <p><b>Section 6</b> imposes a duty on Local Authorities to secure sufficient childcare in their area for parents who wish to work or study in relation to work, so far as is <i>'reasonably practicable'</i>. Section 6(2) states that, in deciding whether childcare is sufficient, Local Authorities must have regard to the needs of parents for <i>'the provision of childcare which is suitable for disabled children'</i>.</p> <p><b>Section 8</b> gives Local Authorities a power to assist any person who provides childcare. This includes providing financial assistance. So, if an adjustment needed by a particular childcare provider to allow a disabled child to access its services goes beyond what is reasonable, then section 8 will allow the Local Authority to meet some or all of the cost</p>	<p>We will be inclusive in everything we do.</p> <p><b>We will measure this by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing the percentage of Education, Health and Care Assessments completed in the 20 Week Statutory timescale</li> <li>• Improving the performance of Children with SEND support outcomes in EYFSP</li> <li>• Specifically; measuring sufficiency for children with SEND, as a distinct part of the sufficiency assessment, e.g., through identifying take up in this group compared with the overall population, provider surveys and consultation, family engagement and feedback from partners.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Workforce development</b></p>	<p>Our objective will be to enable, celebrate and support our staff, to continuously improve.</p> <p><b>We will measure this by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff surveys</li> <li>• CDP opportunities</li> <li>• Feedback from families</li> </ul>

<p><b>Transitions</b></p>	<p>Our objective will be to ensure that our pathways into, out of and across different services promote good life skills and the ability to manage change.</p> <p><b>We will measure this by</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing placement movement (setting/school/service)</li> <li>• Reducing exclusions</li> <li>• Reducing complaints</li> <li>• Parent surveys</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
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## 9. Risks

The most obvious risks, at present, are that any delay in identifying and supporting needs which could be met early, creates a potential risk of escalating these and other needs later on. This scenario increases strain on the child and on the whole family, as well as increasing the cost of publicly funded support later on.

Nationally, our serious case reviews are highest within the 0 to 5 age group, and even higher within the group amongst 0 to 2-year-olds. Universal services, from conception to 2 in particular, can support healthy parenting habits, positive attachments, and good relationships with services from before birth. Early identification becomes possible only with universal services in place, and universal support can also support good take-up of early years and childcare delivered in the PVI sector, including the early years entitlements, which in turn act as a safeguard. Arguably, no other services can currently offer 15 and 30 hours a week of high-quality intervention for a least advantaged child at age 2, and for all children at 3 and 4.

There are additional and more immediately felt risks of legal challenge too, from families not knowing about or not able to access their legal entitlement to 15 and 30 hours of free nursery education, alongside the challenge of discrimination for families of children with SEND.

Families of children with SEND tend to access far less of the early years entitlements and access services which tend to be during work hours. This can often lead to part time entry or deferred entry to school and, consequently, create a barrier to employment for those families over a number of years. The LA should begin to look at data sets for this group in particular, as the socio-economic status of these groups is likely to be much less advantaged than the population as a whole. Could it be that our services are currently designed in a way that potentially holds our families in poverty, and are our most disadvantaged families accessing the least amount of their legal entitlements?

The cost to these families, in terms of their entitlements to 15 and 30 hours of early education and childcare, and a loss of income through very limited access to employment, should be considered. We know that maternal education, mental health and income level impact heavily on child outcomes.

There is, of course, a more immediate financial risk to the local authority from potential legal challenge. The cost of an early education place, for example, can be approximately £4,000 per year, per child. The cost of legal proceedings often far outweighs the cost of a place, and the LA also loses the direct income stream gained from the take-up of early education places (in particular the retained element). For example, for every 10 children who do not take up their early years entitlements, approximately £40,000 of income is lost to both the LA and sector (and within that the retained element). It is also worth remembering that the vast majority of early years and childcare provision is delivered by the private and voluntary sector who, in turn, attract a high percentage of additional funding, generated through fees, grants and other contributions. This makes investment in activity to support good pathways to, and maximum take-up of the early years entitlement, vital for efficiencies, as well as being critical to improved outcomes.

## 10. Themes and Recommendations Emerging from the Engagement Sessions

Engagement sessions were structured in this way to support legal compliance throughout the process. The following is a combined summary of the issues and suggestions reported by the sessions, mapped under each of the key areas of the Childcare Act. A full write up of each session can be made available through the Lead Officer for the LA.

### Summary of Local Engagement Sessions

Engagement sessions in the form of focus groups were undertaken with Key Stakeholders (6 attendees) and early years childcare providers (7 attendees) via Microsoft Teams. Groups were facilitated by a representative of the LGA, who was independent of the local authority.

Two attempts were made to run a focus group with parents and carers – one in the evening and one during the day – but unfortunately the groups failed to run due to a lack of participants.

The focus groups took part in discussions on the following questions:

- **Pre-birth to five services:** *how the area delivers all its early years services. This includes joint working to reduce inequalities, improve outcomes and narrow the gap between different groups of children.*
- **Sufficiency and quality of childcare and early education:** *including how children aged two, three and four years can access early education and how services support children with special needs. We also talked about how places for children might or might not support parents to take part in employment and employment-related activities.*
- **Information for families:** *How families find out about what is on offer for them and their children in the local area.*

## **Summary of Discussions:**

### **Pre-birth to five services - what is working well?**

- Early Years Providers are supported, with inclusive practice through networks, support and guidance provided by the Early Years Team.
- The working relationship between the Local Authority and the West Sussex Parent Carer Forum was described as positive and constructive.
- The Good Level of Development for children at EYFS in 2022 was close to the national average, and there is an ambition for this to be improved.
- Some initiatives are in place to help identify and support children experiencing disadvantage to achieve their early learning goals, such as the Virtual School working with Foster Carers to support young children's writing, and the Early Years Team promoting the use of the Early Years Pupil Premium.
- Although Health Visitors do not have capacity to attend community groups weekly, they proactively drop in when they can, and also have good links with Libraries that are used as a venue for some reviews.

### **Pre-birth to five services - what are the challenges?**

- There is a lot of anxiety about very young children and babies missing out on support due to perceived weaknesses in the service offer for under 2s, and it is a concern that families in rural areas in particular may struggle to access support with their child's development.
- Early Years Providers reported that not all families know who their Health Visitor is, some miss out on appointments and not all families of eligible two-year-olds take up their childcare offer – this all heightened the feeling that young children in need of support may become 'invisible'.
- Some key data appeared to be unavailable and partners did not appear to have a clear knowledge of shared priorities that are informed by data.

### **Pre-birth to five services - what could be made better?**

- Include improving outcomes for disadvantaged children in the early years within the early years strategy, in order to maximise support for vulnerable/disadvantaged children and their families.
- Ensure that a shared performance data set/dashboard for early years is available and shared across the partnership, and that all partners understand and own the priorities
- Collectively find ways of reaching families in communities, with support around child development and wellbeing – for example, is there a developing Family Hub model and could this be tapped into and links with early help strengthened?
- Strengthen early intervention for children under 2 years:
  - Is there a Start for Life offer and how could the early years and childcare sector be involved in further developing this?
  - Explore opportunities to link the early years sector with Early Help partners and services – building relationships will be a key starting point. For example, could a Maintained Nursery School be enabled to utilise an empty family centre to provide targeted support?

### **Sufficiency and quality of childcare and early education – what is going well?**

- One Early Years Provider has responded creatively to a lack of suitable employees by lowering her qualification requirement, in order to train staff with equivalent skills into the job – this is having a positive impact.
- The same Early Years Provider has embedded healthy values for staff and children in policy – this has resulted in staff widening the offer for access to outdoor experiences and enabled practitioners to discuss healthy diet more confidently with children and families.

### **Sufficiency and quality of childcare and early education – what are the challenges?**

- There was a strong feeling of low workforce morale linked to inadequate funding levels, the impact of Covid and the rising cost of living (all reflecting the national picture) and this is having a negative impact on staff and managers' mental wellbeing.
- Linked to the point above, recruitment and retention are key challenges across the early years and childcare sector and this was described as a '*crisis*' by one participant with the additional concern that the quality of childcare is being adversely impacted.
- There was a feeling that there is a lack of voice and representation on key groups for the PVI sector as there is no reference group, or clear engagement mechanism, for these providers.
- Joint working between the early years and childcare sector and specialist agencies appears to be mixed; worryingly, some providers shared that they have been unable to admit or support children with SEND on occasions, due to being unable to afford or access training to support his/her needs.

### **Sufficiency and quality of childcare and early education – what could we do?**

- Further strengthen joint working protocols and pathways for children with SEND, including addressing the reported vulnerabilities in provision for children with complex needs due to a perceived lack of support to providers.
- Continue to embed partnership working between schools and PVI settings; for example, through joint planning and workforce development; this will enhance transitions for children through consistent assessment and information sharing, including with parents/carers.
- Support for the morale and mental health of the early years and childcare workforce should be a priority:
  - Capture and channel sector views, so that concerns can be shared and used to influence planning and strategy in a more co-produced way.
  - Identify opportunities to share good practice and strengths across the sector; for example, through a peer-to-peer programme – this could provide a way of boosting morale, providing opportunities to network and ultimately raising quality.
  - Develop multi-agency partnerships further, to ensure that the early years sector is included and valued, and ensure that timely advice, training and support is received from partners, including specialist services.
- Prioritise support for sector sufficiency and sustainability:
  - Support training and recruitment, in order to overcome barriers – for example, could a pathway be developed to support new staff into key practitioner roles?
  - Strengthen links with local training providers to support new entrants into the childcare sector.

- Explore the reported lack of resources and training for providers for SEND children with complex needs and find ways to overcome this – could the Maintained Nurseries provide support/expertise, as well as specialist Health partners?

#### **Information for families: what is going well?**

- Weekly email ‘broadcast bulletins’ go to schools and settings and are a comprehensive source of information. Early years providers also share some key messages with parents and carers via email and newsletters.
- Some families have regular and reliable contact with a known person or key worker to ask for help in finding information.
- Parents utilised social media sites increasingly during the pandemic and these were a good source of information locally.
- Within Maternity Services, there is a push to improve the sharing of information digitally through further development of websites and apps.

#### **Information for families: what are the challenges?**

- All agreed that there is a wealth of information ‘*out there*’ but that it is difficult to find the right information or to know where to start – even professionals find this confusing.
- The complex picture for health was reported as making information sharing particularly challenging.

#### **Information for families: what could we do?**

- Develop a more cohesive digital offer across partners, so that information can be more easily navigated by professionals, and especially by families.

## **11. Recommendations**

In this section of the report we have aimed to pool our collective experience of working with local authorities nationally, gathering the best of best practice and complementing what emerged from the support process locally.

We have addressed the recommendations under key headings, which may help with your local strategy.

### **11.1 Strategic Management and Accountability**

LAs often develop frameworks of accountability for early years, as a response to the latest policy area (for example, Family Hubs). This can lead to a ‘project’ type approach, create artificial service seams and slow down decision making. **Creating an overarching accountability group**, which is based on the legal framework, can help LAs to maintain a coordinated and strategic steer.

Structural, socio-economic causes and drivers should be addressed in a multi-agency way and accountability and reporting should include the most senior leaders, across a range of agencies, to ensure that the breadth of the Act is led by the LA, but collectively actioned by all agencies. Decision-makers, across agencies, carry a responsibility for engaging and

influencing wider partners, such as health services, community/regeneration, employment support, and housing.

Work streams could then be developed to ensure forward movement; e.g., data and performance management, information, service design and positioning, inclusion and workforce development. Work streams could also be formed around the latest policy direction, and, in turn, moved to operational delivery through a project management approach, but would still be held by the overarching framework.

Some detailed, measurable quick wins should be addressed; for example, relating to Family Hubs which ensure that early years, and particularly the established Children's Centre agenda, remains a central plank and key stage in its own right.

The key priority for the accountability group, in the first instance, will be to oversee and agree a single strategy based on the legal requirements. It will also be vital for the overarching accountable body to remain strategic and differentiate between operational activity, delegating functions, accordingly.

Greater connection to the council's corporate plan could be made. Embedding the key aims of an early years strategy, as a priority, could support the overall council's direction of travel. Childcare sufficiency, in particular, will be critical to economic, social and educational recovery from Covid and in addressing inequalities, as childcare barriers are often felt most acutely by women.

### **11.1.2 Writing an Early Years and Childcare Strategy**

The purpose of this report is to support the writing of a strategy locally. The key headings used in this report could be transferred to a strategy for example:

- Introduction and Acknowledgements
- Summary of Recommendations
- Methodology
- What Are We Collectively Trying to Achieve?
- The National Context and Our Legal Framework
- Wider Impact and Local Context, Council Corporate Plan, and Children and Young People Plan Priorities
- Our Starting Point, Supply and Demand
- Performance Management
- Risks, Themes, Ideas and Recommendations

There should be a process of negotiation to ensure early years and childcare strategy priorities are firmly embedded within wider strategic plans for the council, and within children's services, (and vice versa).

Once an overarching accountability board is formed, reporting should be mapped to the Lead Member, Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services, or equivalent, and maintained on a regular basis.

### **11.1.3 Data Collection to Create a Population Needs Analysis, Performance Management and Enhance Data Sharing Arrangements**

The LA should continue to develop the data set with key stakeholders, to support the continual assessment of need and monitoring of performance. More detail could be gathered on population sets (and the needs within core groups and areas), in order to match the current supply of services, alongside our aims, against the size and needs of our population locally.

The LA could also develop conversations around data systems and data sharing to ensure that seamless services are delivered.

The LA should continue to facilitate data and performance management meetings, bringing together key leads locally, who can continue to develop the data set and ensure that relevant information is used to inform strategic leaders and support service accountability. The LA should use the data to ensure a needs-led approach to meeting the duties and functions required under the childcare act. Service design based on what is needed, as opposed to resources available, could also enable the development of services in the community sector (i.e., the LA and partners do not necessarily need to deliver everything and can build on a community development approach and supporting peer support).

### **11.1.4 Raising and Maintaining the Profile of Early Years and Childcare Services**

The profile of early years should be raised and maintained to support greater value across services, agencies and communities. A series of activities could be agreed across agencies and departments involved in the agenda, for example:

- Regularly updating the Lead Member
- Celebrating good practice and case studies evidence and change, through social media and local communications
- Identifying champions who will hold a specific remit for publicity and communication
- Piggybacking other local communications to promote across the range of agencies and services
- Communicating the strategy, accountability framework and service priorities far and wide, and creating a cycle of updates within related senior management meetings
- Reviewing and updating schools for a membership, if required, and ensuring induction opportunities are available
- Creating a reward system; for example, 'provider of the month'
- Engaging senior leaders – for example, the Chief Executive – and local members in publicity
- Ensuring that a communications plan is developed for all events; for example, conferences, network, meetings, openings, etc.

Several early years providers noted that, because the early years services as a whole can sometimes be seen as less professional or important than other children's service areas, Early Years and Childcare providers felt less valued than other early years professionals (for example, health visitors). Specific activity to promote the achievements and profile of early

years providers could support recruitment and retention, as well as improving relationships across the sector as a whole and beyond.

Nationally, press and social media coverage of early years services frequently focuses on the climate as unsustainable, or as a sector in crisis. Several providers noted that, whilst it is important to ensure that the very real challenges faced are flagged nationally, it is not always helpful to improving the profile of the sector amongst families, or those who could potentially be working in or developing services.

#### **11.1.5 Opportunities for Pooled Budgets, to Reduce the Number of Service Areas and Support Seamless Delivery**

Across all areas, it was noted that there are a large number of different services, which families could be working with at any one time. National agendas, which have been fragmented from the top, create fragmentation and siloed working at the point of delivery.

The Childcare Act (Early Years, outcomes duties) both requires and facilitates opportunities for joint working across key services, in order to support more integrated working.

Consideration could be given to mapping existing services, identifying share times and objectives of service delivery, and exploring the potential for pooling budgets. Shared resources might impact positively on service delivery, and should also be considered in terms of systems for potentially improving information sharing between services and with families.

#### **11.1.6 Service Design and Delivery, a Single Pre-Birth to Five Service**

Whilst, to an extent, good joint working negates the need for a single service, structures – and particularly the overarching aim of where services sit – can dictate the direction of travel and focus.

Aligning line management (and commissioning) arrangements to ensure an overarching shared aim could enhance overall direction towards the Childcare Act Aims. The Sufficiency elements would also ensure that market management levers are applied to childcare for over 5s (as per the Act) to ensure support for parents to work (economic recovery, reducing poverty and supporting child outcomes).

Shared aims, joint measures and a supporting framework could enhance the excellent positive relationships in place already, along with ensuring a set of seamless services (as felt by families).

New roles and new structures could be supported by good induction to share and enable a whole team direction of travel.

Understanding our matrix management approach and clarifying where roles and responsibilities lie will be key to ensuring that the right services are happening at the right time and in the right way.

A clear structure and performance management framework could enable staff to feel united around a shared aim and further enhance the excellent collaborative working in place. It could also illustrate to them how progression routes could be accessed.

An even stronger connection to strategic council-wide priorities could elevate wider awareness of greater potential impact. An awareness of impact can act as an incentive for the staff and collective services.

To realise the potential, the framework of performance management could link from the highest-level aims through to service plans, commissioning frameworks and individual performance management. This would support staff to recognise the impact they have on wider agendas.

### **11.1.7 Acknowledging and Supporting the Key Role of a Strategic Lead for Early Years in Childcare Development Locally**

Often, the position of Early Years Strategic Leadership becomes diluted where resources are stretched, and in some cases can create a conflict of interest. This is particularly evident when a role involves managing both specialist and universal services, and the direct delivery of services along with market management. There can also be an inability to realise efficiencies and savings, where the strategic remit is diluted by operational management responsibilities.

As discussed previously, securing strategic leadership needs to consider how there is a single or collective view of different service leads on how to enable focus and realisation of effective and efficient ways of working, which could benefit the overall children's strategy locally, as well as impact positively on regeneration.

Actively seeking and supporting peer supervision from outside of the local authority for professional development; for example, encouraging connections with other strategic leads from other LA areas can strengthen impact locally.

Supporting dedicated time for professional development, through organisations such as the LGA, who provide research reports, case studies and activities to support an evidence-based steer locally.

## **11.2 Pro-actively Managing Integrated Early Childhood Services**

This section aims to specifically relate recommendations to the first section of the Childcare Act (the early years outcomes duties). Section 11.3, relates to the sufficiency duties and 11.4 to the information duties. There will be overlap between all three and the subsequent recommendations as well

### **11.2.1 Actively Supporting Positive Joint Working Across Agencies and Departments**

Planned and coordinated joint working, from pre-birth to five, is essential to avoid fragmentation and disengagement, to support the best use of resources, and to create a single service 'feel' for families.

There are well-recognised challenges in joint working across the many agencies involved in supporting children and families. Technology, capacity, cultural barriers, geography and competing priorities are frequently mentioned. In the report *Beyond Boundaries* (July 2022 ISOS Partnership, produced for the London Councils), a number of enablers are mentioned:

#### **Purpose and priorities:**

- Sustained, long-term senior leadership commitment to working beyond boundaries to deliver the best possible early years outcomes
- A common agenda, collective analysis and shared approach across all partners in the local authority, health service and the private, voluntary and community sector
- Joint monitoring, governance and problem-solving forums to pursue goals and objectives on early years integration
- Communicating the strategy and the rationale of early years integration to everyone in the system. When changes are being made, listening, and being able and willing adapt

#### **People and place:**

- Strong mutual understandings of roles, responsibilities, priorities and pressures across the early childhood workforce
- A core of working practices that bring a wide range of staff together on a day-to-day basis to build relationships and respond to needs
- Aligned locality-based organisation that is 'of' and responsive to the community
- Presenting as a single, cohesive early years service to families, with consistent messaging about the offer and clear entry points – no wrong door

#### **Partnership and process:**

- Effective information-sharing with partners – taking a purposeful, clear and positive approach
- Establishing shared goals and constructive, open dialogue with delivery partners – including commissioned partners and those not directly commissioned
- Valuing families and the community as partners in shaping and delivering integrated early years support
- “Do, review, reform” – embedding a cycle of continuous improvement as a joint endeavour

Multi-agency and multi-disciplinary working should be deliberate and planned, for example, in practical terms:

- Designing a framework for accountability, clearly outlining where responsibilities and decision-making rest (for example, the difference between line-management, supervision and area based leadership, where it may be across two service areas)

- Understanding and mapping the pathways and touch points, where services can join to support both families and professionals to be able to see the child's journey and observe who else they are working with
- Making structured time to share information about, and with, children and families
- Making structured time to share information about, and with, the different roles which play a part in the child's journey (i.e., for professionals)
- Using IT effectively to reduce the number of meetings a family could take part in
- Using the key worker role to ensure coordination
- An induction requirement for anyone working with family from pre-birth to five could include spending time with other services to understand related roles and support better signposting. This should be extended to include the childcare sector, to support a range of professionals to more confidently and positively support take-up.

### **11.2.2 Creating the Pathways and Balancing Universal and Specialist Approaches**

Midwifery and Health Visiting services create unique touch points with families as well as providing direct services. These critical relationships can pave the way for how families engage with services and how they seek and secure advice and support themselves. A common theme throughout the support sessions was that multi-agency working takes proactive management to build relationships and create a seamless service from a service user perspective. The LA should also consider the messages that are given at each stage of service delivery, and what each service leads to next (i.e., does it encourage a self-help model or dependence through an assessment and intervention approach?).

Ensuring that universal services are able to seamlessly work with more specialist services should be reflected in all areas. Ensuring Library services are fully engaged in service mapping and design could help further enhance their considerable expertise, resources and impact. There could be opportunities to be realised from shared learning across the different services which actively aim to support speech and language development. Pooling expertise and planning deliberate strategies, whilst using an agreed framework and measurements, could ensure that the right approach both reaches a universal audience and meets emerging needs, and acts as a preventative service.

Linking the specialist expertise of key services to a universal offer could help move to preventative working, for example language development support provided online, which is shared by health visitors (and able to be accessed by families searching for it themselves).

### **11.2.3 Role Development - Moving from Operational to Strategic to Maximise Impact**

Some staff (including those in new roles) could move away from the operational in order to have greater impact. Without a clear direction, induction and measures in place, there is a risk that staff will fall into familiar (reactive and operational) roles.

This was recognised by a variety of services including the Childcare Sector.

For example, one proactive piece of work could be to facilitate a half-day induction to the market management role of the LA for those involved with sufficiency agenda (effectively all

those who work with the early years and childcare sector). This could support understanding about the different and interdependent functions of information for families, quality improvement, place development and support for early years providers, and ensure maximum use of pooled resources and functions.

#### **11.2.4 Exploring and Utilising a Whole New Toolkit for Working**

Many Local Authorities are in the process of reviewing service delivery across a range of areas, in order to take account of and use the best methods (tools) to affect the most positive outcomes. COVID-19, and specifically lockdown, pushed to the fore a range of new ways of working, which typically were not routinely used before. Some Local Authorities have seen an improvement in outcomes as a result of change. For example, in Poole, breastfeeding rates increased as a result of support moving online to social media.

Our new toolkit is now far more extensive and can support positive change where used effectively (for example using the best tool for the intended outcome, for the individual family circumstance). Face-to-face meetings and activity will always be preferable for some situations. However our alternatives are now vast; for example, telephone, social media, video calls, meetings, training webinars, pod casts etc.

#### **11.2.5 A Community Development Approach to Service Development and Maximising Opportunities for Peer Support**

Throughout this work, and with all LA areas, one key theme emerged repeatedly. Both parents and those working in early years frequently commented on how useful it was to meet with those in the same position as themselves. When questioned further some of the benefits included:

- Connections which created friendships and positive, supportive relationships which in some cases lasted for years
- Reduced social isolation at a time of great change
- Improved confidence from knowing you are not alone in your experiences
- Increased knowledge, information and advice

Parent-to-parent peer support can be enormously beneficial to families and can promote positive parenting. It can also potentially alleviate some pressure on Local Authority resources.

In one LA, health visitors offered to coordinate the setting up of a small WhatsApp group of new parents as they came into contact with the service. The groups are established with permissions and enable a contact with another parent in the same boat. Often these groups turn into meet-ups, which in turn can create friendships, which grow sustainable supportive relationships, and in turn support confident parenting.

Parent-led support groups (either face-to-face or online) can take very little resource to set up, but make a lasting difference to families; for example, parents and carers of children with SEND. This group of families, in particular, can be extremely isolated, as their experiences are

by nature felt by fewer families. COVID-19 has also magnified the difficulties of isolation, and some families now simply lack the confidence to engage in activities they haven't engaged in before.

### **11.2.6 Workforce Development**

An overriding theme in all areas and all sectors was the difficulties around recruitment and retention of staff; most worryingly, the impact of this on universal service delivery, which, in turn, places more pressure on specialist support later on. Health visiting services, along with the early years provider workforce, were of particular concern and, in some areas, the latter was beginning to impact on the sufficiency of places and take-up of the early years entitlements, particularly by children with SEND.

Whilst many of the issues faced by the overall workforce require national attention, several strategies that local authorities can take were shared through this process.

- Developing a specific early years workforce plan as part of overarching Children Service planning
- Developing relationships with local colleges, careers services and Job Centre Plus and jointly hosting recruitment fairs and events to promote working in the sector and pathways through it
- Developing resource packs and training for providers and local teams, and support pathways between and through each sector working in the early years
- Specifically, consider strategies to recruit men and other underrepresented groups into the sectors
- Using publicity and marketing, as part of an ongoing communications plan, to promote rows across the sectors, from apprentices through to management positions
- Utilising local networks and mentoring/buddy systems to support those new to leadership.
- Aiming to counter or utilise negative publicity, which comes out nationally. For example, could one crisis in a different part of the care sector, provide opportunities in the early years sector?

### **11.3 Childcare Sufficiency and Securing High Quality Early Education and Childcare Places**

Nationally, it is recognised that the sector faces significant resource pressures, as funding, the cost of living and recruitment and retention difficulties continue to grow. Across all areas, this picture was emphasized and, in the vast majority, there were reports of closures and staff shortages now impacting on sufficiency levels. It should be noted that the group of families most likely to feel this impact are those with young children with SEND, who are often our least advantaged families.

Some settings also feel they need to replace and provide services which may previously have been delivered by Children's Centres (for example, family support and speech and language support). Other settings reported that, where families could afford to pay for specialist support, they were doing so, as opposed to waiting for free local services. This could illustrate a further divide between the most and least advantaged families.

Similarly to some council staff, some practitioners were keen to move (back) to strategic roles, which could have positive impact across the whole setting, as opposed to operational functions (for example, staff are faced with lots of assessments, as opposed to being able to impact on the overall quality for all children).

There are good peer networks in place, which could be built on and strengthened, in terms of start up and ongoing support. Social media and online support could be utilised here, along with the promotion of provider-led support.

Business support, linked to the regular provision of sufficiency information, could be strengthened and become a 'norm' of the local networks and routine conversations. For example, regular updates about birth rates, 2YOs, employment etc., and defined models to meet need, along with marketing support to tap into demand, will be key.

Whilst resourcing for pump-priming new provision is unlikely, an audit of local space provision, local business support, regular sharing of data and potential partners locally (for example, schools) could be offered.

Managing business sustainability is extremely complicated for the sector and should be pro-actively supported. Some settings could be juggling up to 20 different funding streams, and COVID-19 has added further complexities around staffing levels, welfare and practice. Quality childcare is dependent on quality staff, which is dependent on good and steady income.

Monitoring and predicting demand will be key. Economic decline and resulting unemployment could result in a growth in the number of eligible two-year-olds and the need for re-modelling local childcare delivery to meet the needs of both working and non-working families. Regular market monitoring and, most importantly, feeding that information back to the childcare sector, so they can respond with the appropriate business planning, will be critical.

Childcare for children with disabilities should be carefully monitored and pro-actively managed. A specific sufficiency assessment of childcare for children with SEND across the age range will be vital in measuring and driving change (see section below).

There may also be opportunities to combine services and funding streams; for example, are the same families of children with SEND accessing the same providers of Short Breaks, the Holiday Activities and Food programme, and childcare to enable work?

A focus on both the supply and take up of two-year-old places should also remain a priority, as a critical plank in our preventative working. Close attention should also be paid to the services that make up the pathways to a two-year-old place (ensuring a positive introduction to childcare is made at the earliest opportunity).

Our information for families should play a critical role in continually improving the quality of provision locally. Parental demand (parents asking for high-quality provision) is the most

effective lever for change, as has been seen with the rollout of new entitlements such as 30 hours free childcare.

Quality improvement will be supported through training and development opportunities. Resources now require a shift, however, towards an information and coaching role within the LA, as well as celebrating successes and case studies and promoting sector lead support.

#### **11.4 The Information Duties**

Typically, in LAs where online information is clear, concise and easy to find, the number of calls to the Local Authority for advice and support were fewer. Where information was fragmented and service-focused, the number of calls was higher and were made later.

A clear Early Years Strategy with inclusion at its heart should include the provision of information for families, which will also support professionals too. Information services should:

- Consider the strategy's information needs, in terms of the aims of the services, who the audiences are, what behaviour change we are aiming to achieve (e.g., take-up of service or influencing parenting), what motivates change for key groups and, therefore, what might the best message and method be?
- Improve the profile of Early Years at all opportunities, to support greater value across services, agencies and communities and also attract entry to the workforce
- Promote universal and self-serve options for families, as well as targeted support. Building from the universal contact points, such as midwifery, health visiting and the early years entitlements, creates a huge opportunity to redirect resources towards a self-serve culture.
- Include links to peer support (parents and providers) as normalised universal services
- Build on the developing pathways (or road maps) to support the management of expectations and confidence, for families to understand 'what next?'
- Use marketing and promotion to target key groups with key messages (for example, awareness of early intervention services and the two-year-old entitlement, the promotion of DAF and the Inclusion Fund to providers and parents alike).
- Support positive engagement with families by creating a celebratory '*can do*' culture, as opposed to a culture of assessment and intervention.
- Showcase positive parenting and normalise asking for help, and self-help options.
- Consider where and to whom information is delivered (for example, is there a stigma attached to some service offers?).
- Ensure materials are translated and relevant to all groups in the LA
- Ensure accessibility by using a range of messages and media

Ultimately, our information strategy should take the key aims of our service areas and motivate change to achieve them. Our information is effectively our marketing for our overall and individual business plans. What are we trying to achieve? Who is our audience? What motivates them to change? What is the best medium or message for us to reach them?

## **11.5 Early Years Inclusion**

The council and partners have taken positive, pro-active steps to promote an inclusive approach to all provision. Throughout the process, staff reported a commitment to getting services right for **all** children.

Understanding what we are including children and families in, links us back to our overarching aims based on the Childcare Act. If we accept that the aims of the Act, and therefore our local strategy, are to improve outcomes and narrow the gap, inclusion through the consideration of our diverse communities and the different needs and abilities of children will be key. Our services will aim to ensure integrated services from pre-birth to five, the sufficiency of early years and childcare provision, supporting children and families in terms of employment and related activities, and good information to ensure accessibility to services and support in its own right. And, as for all children, pathways into the Early Education entitlements (and broader, childcare offers) will be key.

There are specific challenges for this group of children, their families and those providing services. Increasing levels of need and demand, the impact off Covid (and, in particular, the isolation of lockdowns) and reduced service budgets alongside increased costs, create a perfect storm for widening the gap nationally at this time.

A key priority will need to be focused on further enhancing inclusive universal services (and take-up), and ensuring that resources target specialist support in line with need.

### **11.5.1 Data Driven Early Years Inclusion**

The starting point for this work should be a comprehensive needs assessment, as part of the ongoing Childcare Sufficiency Assessment, which should be based on data, trends and the views of families, mapped against current and potential supply (and resource). West Sussex have been supported by Dingley's Promise with guidance and resources to specifically measure the sufficiency of early years places for children with SEND. This free support from the EYSEND partnership (DfE funded), includes a focus on supporting transitions into school for this group too.

Appendix 3 provides suggested ideas for creating a baseline and measuring impact from work the charity, Dingley's Promise, has been leading through its funded work with over 30 local authorities. Measuring demand could, for example include:

- Your total population of children in the EYs
- Live emerging and additional needs
- Tracking back to triangulate and understand the journey and impact
- Breaking down into those who accessed specialist and mainstream
- Parent/carer consultation
- Complaints, whistleblowing, intelligence from partners
- Understanding needs and impact – EYPP, 2YO data, deferred entry to school, part time entry, socio demographic data, etc.

An analysis of supply could include:

- Places available for the whole population (Ofsted downloads)
- Specialist places?
- Questionnaires - inclusive places or places business planned for?
- If you can't ask, can someone else ask for you?
- Intelligence from on-going conversations

### **11.5.2 Further Enhancing the Universally Inclusive Early Education and Childcare Offers**

In terms of an inclusive, universal childcare sector, conversations focused on the high levels of needs being presented and on the lack of the resources required to support. In some cases, this had led to children and families being turned away from or having restricted access to the legal entitlements to early education and childcare to support employment. A number of considerations should be noted:

- Whilst the local authority holds duties to ensure sufficient provision for children with SEND, providers are also legally required not to discriminate against specific groups.
- The culture of reactive working seemed evident. For example, providers were looking at whether or not they could support a child as they were approached, rather than proactively business planning for a percentage of children who will always require additional support locally.
- There was a lack of awareness amongst providers and parents of the availability of tax-free childcare at the higher rate to support children with SEND.
- The cost of supporting children with SEND was not spread across the whole setting, in terms of planned income and expenditure. There was a reliance on securing external funding for this group as needs were identified, usually from the local authority.

These findings were common across all areas and, whilst resource struggles are very real, there are clearly actions which could support the current situation. Awareness raising amongst families and providers around the equalities act, steps providers can take, in terms of business planning for inclusive places across the whole setting, awareness of different business models, and awareness of funding streams, such as tax-free childcare, for example.

### **11.5.3 Managing Expectations and Utilising Information**

As with many areas, there is a need to manage parent expectations throughout the pathway of services. Parents will naturally want what is best for their children and, where good specialist provision is available and has a good reputation, other options will not always be valued as highly. It is vital to ensure that families know the purpose and aim of services they are engaged with. For example, is it to provide an ongoing service, or to support the child and family to make the next step into a different service (for example, mainstream, support)?

There is a good level of information available about the local offer, once you know what the term '*local offer*' means. Online information services are critical as a first port of call for families and can create the culture of working with services locally. Online support is our

universal service and needs to be accessible and reflect the search terms that families, as opposed to service providers, use.

Language, terminology and culture should reflect our highest expectations for children and families. Many processes (nationally) drive an assessment model to identify and support needs, as opposed to celebrating success and potential. By nature, some funding sets criteria to identify needs and allocate resources. Paradoxically, this can exclude children and/or leave them isolated even within mainstream provision, as well as adding to the burdens on families of children with SEND.

### **11.6 Encouraging Self-Help and Celebration to Support a 'Thrive' as Opposed to 'Survive' Culture**

The council could encourage further a culture of positivity, raised expectations and self-help across all services for families through:

- Exploring how initial conversations are framed (from diagnosis, are families supported to celebrate difference or seek extra resource?)
- Considering the integration with health services (midwifery) and realising the potential positive impact of the health visitor role
- Ensuring a feedback loop for the continual improvement of information services. Fully utilising social media and celebrating case studies to raise expectations and create new norms (for both families and professionals)
- Actively planning and managing multi-agency working and the use of IT to limit the number of meetings families are required to attend (families tell their story repeatedly which can break down trust)
- Peer support between families could be further extended and developed through voluntary sector development at low cost
- Promoting mainstream provision as the best option (for most children) to support a shift in parent expectations and move demand away from specialist places
- Supporting a genuinely inclusive and welcoming mainstream sector through awareness raising, training, sector-led peer support, peer networks and using good information to parents to increase demand for inclusive services
- Supporting and publicising universal provision to continually strive to be inclusive (regular training, sharing good practice, publicising success stories, and supporting families to know good is the norm)
- Ensuring clarity of all service aims and communicating a road map of where families may start and end up (the pathway of services for that child)
- Promoting and supporting take-up of DLA and ensuring it and EHCPs are introduced as early as possible. This will lever in related resources and improve transitions to school, as well as supporting an inclusive childcare sector and improving outcomes for children.
- Considering the employment needs of families of children with SEND throughout. Families of children with SEND could make a legal challenge against the council if they are not able to access their full entitlements, including 30 hours of free childcare. Many of these families would benefit, in terms of household income (lifting them out

of poverty) and their mental health (working can give purpose and direction outside of a 24/7 caring role).

The facilitation of peer support has been identified across all service areas for both those providing services and for families. For families of children with SEND, however, the support of other families can provide a lifeline. Facilitated peer support, whether through social media or face-to-face activities in some areas, leads to service development and delivery by families too, empowering families to own services, creating a collective voice and reducing pressure on publicly funded services.

### **11.7 Celebrating Diversity and Tackling Discrimination**

We know that minority ethnic families face additional challenges when they seek early years services, including early help or family support. Inequalities are reported widely.

*High-quality family support, delivered in the right way at the right time, can make a real difference for children and their families. It can mitigate risk factors and increase the protective factors in children's lives, giving them the best chance to realise their potential.*

*There are, however, stark and persistent inequalities in outcomes for children from minority ethnic groups. For example, by the age of 4–5, Gypsy/Roma and Irish Traveller children are the least likely of all ethnic groups to reach developmental targets in relation to communication and language, and physical, social and emotional development. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and 'Other' Asian children, Black Caribbean, Black African and Other Black children, Other White children, Mixed White/Black Caribbean children, and children from Other ethnic backgrounds were also less likely than average to be school-ready. Conversely, White British, White Irish, Mixed Other, Mixed White/Asian, Chinese and Indian children were all more likely than average to be school-ready.<sup>1</sup>*

*Improving the way family support services work for minority ethnic families.* June 2022,  
Stephanie Waddell, Miriam Sorgenfrei, Grace Freeman, Montel Gordon,  
Milly Steele and Hannah Wilson.

1. Department for Education (2020). Development goals for 4 to 5 year olds. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/early-years/attainment-of-development-goals-by-children-aged-4-to-5-years/latest>

A number of proactive approaches are in place and could be built on to ensure a shared approach is embedded in the strategy.

- Understanding the local population and the needs of key groups should form part of the overarching needs analysis and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of impact.
- Reach and engagement activity across all services should take account of the population needs analysis and identification of key disadvantage groups.
- All services working with children and families must embed effective approaches to eradicate racist and discriminatory practices. A clear process for identifying, reporting and acting on any such practices should be shared.

- Community-based, grassroots organisations should support understanding, engagement and capacity building, as well as the evaluation of services locally.
- Workforce planning should not just reflect the needs of local communities, but include a focus on building the skills needed to encourage trusting relationships with minority ethnic families.

### **11.8 Managing Effective Transitions**

Within the early years services and the wider children service arena, it is important to consider how it feels to a child and family to transition from one area to the next. Families report, several '*cliff edges*', where service delivery and approaches change dramatically. For example, moving from university specialist support, starting early years or childcare provision, moving into school (along with negotiating childcare for school-age children) are key milestones to note.

General principles for managing good transitions can be integrated with the wider children service planning.

- Keeping the child's experience central throughout
- Ensuring parents and carers are informed and supported to lead transitions processes
- Facilitating and supporting joint working between services where transitions will be frequent
- Identifying good practice and sharing to create new norms
- Linking to wider, integrated service and information service plans
- Ensuring that the monitoring and evaluation of transitions is included in wider service planning

### **11.9 Participation and Engagement of Children and Families Throughout**

A common theme across all areas was the difficulty to engage parents and carers in conversations about service delivery in the early years. Positive conversations were held with those who did take part, about actions LAs could take moving forwards;

- Developing an agreed strategy across early years service sectors, specifically for engagement, clearly defining the differences between consultation, coproduction and encouraging delivery of services and peer support throughout.
- Considering how the views of children are fed into the overall strategy and plan
- Linking any engagement activity to the needs of families locally, to ensure an incentivized approach. For example, could engagement be a byproduct of the development of peer networks?
- Considering different approaches for different activities; what is it we want to engage with families about and why? What could their motivation be for the engagement, and what is the best method to achieve that? Considering the different options; for example, focus groups, quick and simple, surveys, online conversation through social media, and ongoing conversations with staff, structured around key themes and questions.

- Can the existing activities be piggybacked? For example, a parent support group which offered time to network at the end was noted as particularly beneficial for parents in one area. Facilitated networking could develop peer support between parents, as well as acting as a key engagement point.
- Utilising existing networks and groups locally, but ensuring 'outside the box' thinking, so as not to overwhelm the same families over and over.

### **11.10 And Finally, Building on Strengths and Growing Resilience Throughout**

There is a great deal of positive commitment to achieving the best outcomes for children and families in the area. Members of staff are aware of resource pressures and are constantly adapting to change. There is also a huge amount of experience, knowledge and skill, across a range of services, and a will to share learning internally and externally.

These strengths should be capitalised on, through both practical change (as suggested in this report) and by promoting the positive culture of working which is evident. There is clearly a commitment to working with families in a way that celebrates what they and their children *can* achieve, as opposed to assessing what they cannot. This culture of working ultimately has the potential to filter through to families too, helping them to help themselves and each other for the benefit of children.

## APPENDICES

*Appendix 1: Legislation, policy and research impacting on early years and childcare strategies*

*Appendix 2: Road Map of Services*

*Appendix 3: Ideas for Measuring Childcare Sufficiency for Children with SEND in the Early Years*

APPENDIX 1: Legislation, policy and research impacting on early years and childcare strategies

Legislation (each link takes you to the relevant legislation which is updated daily)	Summary points	Practice Guidance & Reviews
<p><a href="#">The Children Act 1989</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflected 1989 United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child</li> <li>• Welfare of children is paramount</li> <li>• Introduced section 47 enquiries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working Together to Safeguard Children (last major update December 2018 with a recent additional guidance December 2020)  <a href="https://thecpsu.org.uk/news/2020-12-amendments-to-working-together-guidance-2018-dec-2020/">https://thecpsu.org.uk/news/2020-12-amendments-to-working-together-guidance-2018-dec-2020/</a>)</li> </ul> <p><b>2020 Key Point Up-dates</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teenage relationship abuse has been added as an area of risk</li> <li>• The importance of mental health concerns for children has been emphasised throughout the revised document.</li> <li>• Mental health has been added to physical health (p.7 &amp; p.14) and the significance of mental health concerns about a child has been linked to abuse, neglect or exploitation</li> <li>• The impact of domestic abuse, including controlling or coercive behaviour, has been integrated throughout the revised guidance</li> <li>• Criminal exploitation has been added to the areas of risk, which practitioners should be developing their skills and knowledge to address</li> </ul> <p>Keeping Children Safe in Education (2020) – updated January 2021 to include Covid guidance and Brexit guidance  <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2">https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2</a></p>

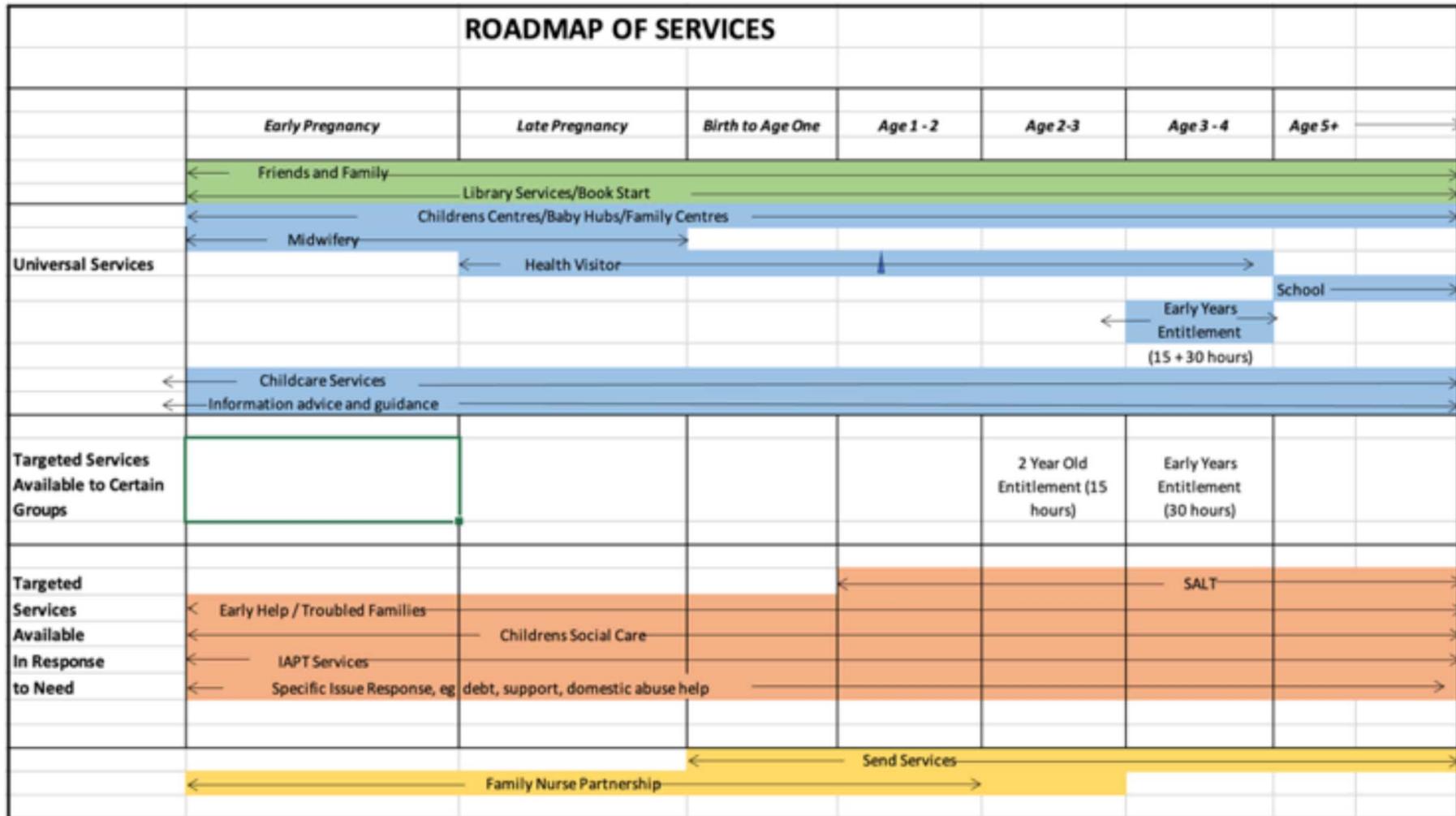
<p><a href="#">The Children Act 2004</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Placed responsibility on safeguarding partners to plan together to safeguard children.</li> <li>Introduced Early Help</li> <li>Introduced Common Assessment Framework</li> </ul>	<p>Children Act 2004 – last updated in July 2018 to reflect changes brought about by the Children and Social Work Act 2017.</p> <p><a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care">https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care</a></p> <p><a href="https://www.eif.org.uk/report/covid-19-and-early-intervention-understanding-the-impact-preparing-for-recovery">https://www.eif.org.uk/report/covid-19-and-early-intervention-understanding-the-impact-preparing-for-recovery</a></p>
<p><a href="#">The Childcare Act 2006</a></p> <p>This was amended by the Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, and then by the Families and Children Act 2014 (see below)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duty on local authorities to ensure sufficient childcare.</li> <li>Local authorities required to provide information to parents and families</li> <li>Agencies are required to work together with integrated services.</li> <li>Introduced the Early Years Foundation Stage</li> <li>Reformed regulation of childcare (OFSTED changes)</li> </ul> <p>The 2009 Act (amidst a raft of legislation around apprenticeships and learning) set out targets around Children’s Safeguarding Boards and Children’s Centres</p> <p>Later supported by regulations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local authority duty to secure Early Years provision free of charge (2012)</li> <li>Various regulations around amendments to the EYFS</li> </ul>	<p>Marmot Review (2010) – focussing on reducing health inequalities.</p> <p><a href="https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review">https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review</a></p> <p>Graham Allen review (2011) – the need for early intervention</p> <p><a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-intervention-the-next-steps--2">https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-intervention-the-next-steps--2</a></p> <p>Several reviews of the Early Years and Foundation Stage statutory framework including introduction of welfare requirements</p> <p>Sarah Tickell’s Early Years Foundation Stage Review framework</p> <p><a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-early-years-foundations-for-life-health-and-learning-an-independent-report-on-the-early-years-foundation-stage-to-her-majestys-government">https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-early-years-foundations-for-life-health-and-learning-an-independent-report-on-the-early-years-foundation-stage-to-her-majestys-government</a></p>

	<p>Regulations made under this Act both around Early Years Entitlement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) Regulations 2014 (S.I. 2014/2147)</li> <li>• The Local Authority (Duty to Secure Early Years Provision Free of Charge) (Amendment) Regulations 2018 (S.I. 2018/146).</li> </ul>	<p>Unknown Children Destined for Disadvantage – Ofsted-2016  <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/helping-disadvantaged-young-children-ofsted-thematic-report">https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/helping-disadvantaged-young-children-ofsted-thematic-report</a>  The first 1001 days manifesto  <a href="https://www.wavetrust.org/1001-critical-days-the-importance-of-the-conception-to-age-two-period">https://www.wavetrust.org/1001-critical-days-the-importance-of-the-conception-to-age-two-period</a>    <a href="https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-framework/changes-to-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-framework">https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-framework/changes-to-the-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-framework</a></p>
<p><a href="#">Equalities Act 2010</a> (this superseded the Disability Discrimination Act 1995)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society.</li> <li>• Replaced previous anti-discrimination laws with a single Act, making the law easier to understand and strengthening protection in some situations.</li> <li>• Introduced protected characteristics</li> </ul>	<p>Disabled Children and the Equality Act for Early Years (Council for Disabled Children) 2010  <a href="https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/help-resources/resources/disabled-children-and-equality-act-2010-early-">https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/help-resources/resources/disabled-children-and-equality-act-2010-early-</a> .</p>
<p><a href="#">Child Poverty Act (2010)</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Placed a duty on Local Authorities to prepare a ‘Local Child Poverty Needs Assessment’ setting out the needs of children living in poverty in the area</li> <li>• Local Authorities have a duty to prepare a child poverty strategy to set out the measures they propose to take to reduce and mitigate the effects of child poverty.</li> </ul>	<p>Government’s Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2010) next steps report (2013).</p> <p>Frank Field Poverty Review (2010)</p> <p>Policy Paper 2010 to 2015 government policy: poverty and social justice updated 2015.</p>
<p><a href="#">The Children and Families Act 2014.</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduced a 26-week time limit for courts to decide whether or not a child should be taken into care.</li> </ul>	<p>Special educational needs and disability code of practice January 2015.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduced the Education, Health and Care Plan to support children and their families from birth to 25 years.</li> <li>• Made it a requirement of all state-funded schools to provide free school lunches for all pupils in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.</li> <li>• Made amendments to the law to protect children in cars from the dangers of second-hand smoke.</li> </ul>	
<a href="#">The Childcare Act 2016</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended the entitlement to 30 hours free childcare, over 38 weeks of the year, for three and four-year-olds in families where all parents are working.</li> </ul>	<a href="#">Early education and childcare statutory guidance - Gov.uk</a>  Summary of the key provisions in the Childcare Act 2006 (latest version 2018)
<a href="#">Children and Social Work Act 2017</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increases Local Authority Support for Looked After Children and clarifies roles of partners in safeguarding boards and the remit of serious case reviews.</li> <li>• Defined a 'Safeguarding Partner' as being the local authority, whose responsibility it is to agree on how they will co-ordinate their safeguarding services, to act as a strategic leadership group in supporting and engaging others, and to implement local and national learning from serious child safeguarding incidents.</li> <li>• Local authorities will be required to promote educational attainment of children who have been adopted or are in other long-term arrangements.</li> </ul>	Helpful overview from Children England <a href="https://www.childrenengland.org.uk/children-and-social-work-act-2017">https://www.childrenengland.org.uk/children-and-social-work-act-2017</a>

# Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project

## Appendix 2: Road Map of Services



# Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project

## APPENDIX 3:

### Ideas for Measuring Childcare Sufficiency for Children with SEND in the Early Years

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# Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project

## Introduction and Background

[Dingley's Promise](#) is a charity and specialist nursery provider, whose aims are to transform the Early Years for children with SEND. We have been involved in influencing change nationally for a number of years now and in 2001 we secured funding from Comic Relief to improve the sufficiency of early years places for children with SEND. This paper presents ideas developed with ten of our partner Local Authorities.

The aims of the Comic Relief project are to improve the sufficiency of childcare places for young children in the Early Years with SEND. This paper is based on conversations with ten local authorities (LAs) who are part of that project in year one. It includes our own experiences as both a specialist provider of Early Years places for children with SEND, and in working nationally with a range of local authorities and providers. It aims to support the measurement of the Comic Relief project, as well as legal compliance for LAs taking part and beyond.

The Comic Relief project has been designed to support the duties and requirements of the Childcare Act for LAs to secure sufficient childcare. [The Childcare Act](#) sections 6, 7, 8 and 9 require LAs to secure childcare for working parents and the early education entitlements, whilst also outlining the LA powers to do so. The duties specify that provision for children with SEND should be secured for children up to the age of 18. Whilst the requirements for producing and publishing childcare sufficiency assessment were repealed through the Children and Families Act, it is arguably impossible to argue that an LA has taken 'reasonable steps' to secure childcare if they have first not assessed the market.

For more information and a business case for assessing sufficiency for children with SEND please refer to appendix 1.

## What are We Trying to Assess and Why?

The Childcare Act requires us to ensure the sufficiency of places, as a critical part of both improving child outcomes and reducing inequalities. This involves us considering the childcare needs of families, both in terms of the Early Education entitlements, and also Childcare which enables families to work and undertake work related activity.

# Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project

## Current Practice in Assessing the Market Specifically for Children with SEND

The purpose of a sufficiency assessment is to identify actions required to ensure sufficiency, for example, priority groups, areas and types of childcare. These priorities should then typically be evidenced in an action plan for development, to evidence that the LA is taking “reasonable” steps to ensure sufficiency.

Typically, sufficiency assessment will include analysis of the following information (including but not exclusively);

- Socio-demographic data (usually to locality level)
- Employment and workforce trends
- Analysis of supply and demand, present and predicted, using;
  - Questionnaires and feedback from providers
  - Questionnaires and feedback from families
  - Local intelligence; for example, feedback from the Family Information Service (or equivalent), Job Centre Plus, etc.

Most areas will acknowledge that they have insufficient places for young children with SEND. This is despite there being no specific assessment for this group; yet, more often than not, the group emerge as having unmet needs once a whole sufficiency assessment is completed.

Whilst it is important that the sufficiency assessment process is not biased towards any group, (and instead ensures that needs emerge legitimately) children with SEND are a specified group in the legislation, and some specific activity will be key to ensure an accurate assessment of supply and demand for this group.

There are of course complexities, in relation to assessing the sufficiency of places for children with SEND. Separating perceived needs (demand) from actual needs is extremely difficult, as is assessing perceived and actual supply. However, in order to be legally compliant and meet the overall aims of the Act by improving outcomes and reducing inequalities, it is essential to dig deep into the needs of this group, in particular, as named in the Act.

# Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project

## Suggestions for Measuring Sufficiency

Our collective discussions with LAs have resulted in some suggested steps LAs can take to specifically assess provision for children with SEND. The measures require interpretation and analysis locally, as well as a layering of intelligence to formulate assumptions and substantiate findings.

Understanding demand for our population of children with SEND involves looking at current and historic information, as well as intelligence which will help factor in some assumptions. Our suggested measures enable a sense check to support more accurate analysis, as we know children's needs may not present until they are in school, and many children are not known to any services until that point.

Assessing the supply of places is complicated, as our providers are required to operate inclusive practice yet, in reality, we know this is not the case for a variety of legitimate reasons. We could argue, for example, that a simple comparison of take up rates between children with SEND and the overall population gives us our answer. Where there is lower take up, we could argue there is insufficiency. Many LAs, however, suggested a more nuanced approach, taking account of parental preference and trends.

Our suggestions below form the basis for discussion and development at a local level and we welcome feedback at any point, for strengthening local data sets and our own measures of success.

Description	Potential methodology (collated LA wide but also broken down by locality where possible)
<b>Demand</b>	
Total number of children with SEND, by needs	Tracking children with an EHCP in school (over an average of 3 years) to quantify the number of children who would have had additional needs, had they been identified in the Early Years. This data could be broken down by type of needs and by looking at children accessing specialist support and mainstream.  Referral rates for assessments and requests for additional support in the most recent year could also be added to compare historic with more recent data.

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Percentage of children with additional needs in relation to the total population	Birth rates divided by the above data
Adding some assumptions to form an informed position about demand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent/carer feedback collected through a range of means; e.g., whistleblowing procedure, local forums and specific consultation</li> <li>• Intelligence collected from FIS, support services, providers, JCP</li> <li>• Indicators of poverty, socio demographic data and employment profiles</li> </ul>
Take up of places by children with SEND, in comparison to the overall population	<p>Again, looking back at the take up of all the entitlements over a three-year period, by place and hours accessed, age groups and provider type, as well as showing split placements (movement between settings)</p> <p>To further understand demand, LAs should also track the numbers of these children accessing EYPP, and two-year-old entitlement uptake according to income status</p> <p>For impact data, L.A.'s may also wish to collate information about deferred entry to school, and part time provision</p>
<b>Supply</b>	
Places available in specialist Early Years provision	<p>Places reported as available by OFSTED (the Ofsted down load)</p> <p>Places reported by known specialist Early Years providers (local intelligence, FIS, Questionnaire and conversations) including childminders.</p>
Places available in the mainstream early years sector	<p>Returns (e.g., questionnaires) from the sector – places offered, places providers would like to offer, places planned for financially as part of business planning. LAs could consider a confidential Survey Monkey to collate non-identifiable information (i.e., confidential surveys will not carry the threat of intervention from non-compliance with LA and legal requirements)<sup>3</sup></p>

<sup>3</sup> Any questions asked should be carefully framed to consider the context and potential impact. For example, asking about the number of accessible places in a setting, must not imply that providers can turn children away on the basis of having additional needs.

## Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project

Assumptions to consider in supporting an informed position about supply	Experiences of families, feedback providers, JCP, local support staff, take up of DAF, Inclusion Fund and EYPP.
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In summary, we are aiming for a sufficiency assessment, as an analysis of supply and demand, to determine if we have sufficient places by area, need, type and age group. LAs should keep in mind the overall aims of supporting child outcomes, reducing inequalities and enabling parents to work when assessing the market and action planning for sufficiency.

### **What Do We do With the Information We Gather (the 'So What'? Question)**

The purpose of the sufficiency assessment is to enable an action plan to be published locally which details steps LAs will take to ensure sufficient provision as far as is reasonably practicable. The range of information gathered will inform a detailed plan, potentially covering the following areas for market development for example:

- Critical business information to be shared with the sector, which will enable them to respond to changes in supply and demand locally
- Information to be shared with families, to enable demand-led change in the sector
- LA approaches to the development, commissioning and direct delivery of provision (direct delivery as a last resort)
- Workforce development activity to support the recruitment and retention of staff in the sector
- Business support activity to facilitate sustainability through information sharing, training, and peer support

From our Dingley's Promise perspective, we are keen to support measurement of the success of our Comic Relief program. We recommend that LAs working with us make an assessment of sufficiency for children with SEND on an annual basis, to measure the impact of activity throughout the program, as well as supporting legal compliance and national messaging.

From a wider Government perspective, this work will inform the data dashboards that are suggested in the Green Paper and, consequently, we feel that this is the right time to be looking at developing clear guidelines around how we track sufficiency for children with SEND in the Early Years, as it is likely to become part of local authority duties in the future.

# Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project

## Appendix 1. The Business Case for Assessing Sufficiency for Children with SEND

### Why Specifically Assess the Sufficiency of Childcare for Children with SEND?

Our rationale for taking action to specifically assess childcare sufficiency for children with SEND is clear. LAs are required in legislation to ensure sufficient provision for families and, without measuring our baseline, we cannot evidence we have taken 'reasonable' steps to do so.

On speaking to many LAs, and searching the internet for a range of Childcare Sufficiency Assessments, it is apparent that, whilst many LAs report insufficient places and others outline what they do to support children with SEND, we could not find any which had a clear methodology for assessing supply and demand specifically for this group. Some LAs we spoke to reported they had sufficient provision, yet, on further questioning, could not evidence how they came to that conclusion.

The government's green paper [SEND Review: right support, right place, right time](#) further commits us all to identifying need at the earliest opportunity in high quality early years provision, and will bring a series of new requirements on LAs, which include ensuring families are aware of and part of planning provision. These actions will inevitably require us to understand the supply and demand for provision locally, in order to plan for effective places.

### Legal Compliance

Challenges have been made against LAs, over a number of years, in relation to children not having access to their Early Education entitlements. These have been on the basis of both insufficient places being available, and families not having information about their entitlements. The ten LAs supporting this paper reported incidents of families of children with SEND being turned away from provision. They also reported that, where families are consulted about their experiences of trying to take up their entitlements, they were often told there were not places for them, only after the child's needs were described. This is also reflected in our experience at Dingley's Promise and with the wider group of councils we work with nationally.

## **Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project**

Worryingly, there appears to be a general acceptance by families of children with SEND that they are somehow less entitled to their Early education and Childcare provision than other families. We have heard through our own consultations of parents who gave up employment as a result.

### **Costs to the Local Authority, Childcare Sector and Wider Economy**

The costs of a legal challenge alone can detract from funds which could be supporting children. In addition, for every place not taken up, a loss of direct income to the Local Authority can be felt, as funding from central government is based on take-up locally. An element of this funding is also retained for central functions in the Local Authority, such as admin and management, including the measuring of sufficiency, of course.

Taking this further, we can see that any subsequent loss of potential income to the Early Years and Childcare Sector will impact negatively on both the quality and sufficiency of places locally. The Childcare Sector is, of course, also a large employer in its own right.

Without a high quality and sustainable Childcare Sector, our local economy as a whole will also be impacted on, as a percentage of our workforce at any one time will require childcare, in order to be able to work.

Children who are not supported in the Early Years are far more likely to require specialist support when they are identified; frequently as late as at school age. Again, this adds to costs that, in many cases, could be reduced or even avoided if needs and pathways are supported earlier.

### **Safeguarding and Supporting our Most Vulnerable Children**

Our discussions with LAs showed that, where they had taken a data-driven approach to understanding demand, it is often our least advantaged children who access the least amount of Early Education. In Swindon, for example, they tracked children in school with an EHCP and discovered that just 46% of children with SEND accessed their full entitlement, compared with 84% of children without SEND. 10% of this group accessed no Early Years entitlements, which effectively meant they started school with little or no support beforehand.

## **Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project**

Alarming, almost 80% of the group were also eligible for EYPP; suggesting they are families on very low incomes. This group typically went on to access school on a part time basis or had entry deferred; so it seems our services may be failing our most vulnerable children, as well as, in fact, creating a barrier to employment, as opposed to enabling them to work in their design.

We know child outcomes are improved by take-up of the entitlement, and families using provision are more likely to be supported by related services. Fifteen hours a week (as a minimum) of high-quality intervention, delivered predominantly by the private, voluntary and independent sector, is a highly effective safeguard for our most vulnerable children. There are not many social workers who could afford to spend 15 hours a week with our most vulnerable children, for example.

### **Why Now More Than Ever?**

A number of factors have generated significant concerns amongst leaders in LAs, partner organisations and the sector. The impact of COVID on children with SEND has been magnified compared with the wider population. Cohorts of children not known to any services have increased and there are reported increases in requests for assessments and support nationally. It should also be noted that there were already growing concerns about increases in children presenting with SEND prior to COVID.

A high proportion of the Early Years and Childcare Sector report being under significant financial pressure, for some time; with concerns around sustainability, recruitment and retention being prevalent for a number of years. These pressures are reported by LAs to have a disproportionately negative effect on the ability of the sector to meet the needs of children with additional needs. Any additional pressures on resources, (time and costs), perceived or actual, are highly likely to result in children being turned away, as the pressure to fill places as economically as possible is vital to setting sustainability.

COVID resulted in the sector working harder than ever, with very little support or acknowledgement. As a critical service and support for both key workers and vulnerable children, the sector remained open throughout, with many additional requirements resulting in escalating costs and, at the same time, in many cases a reduced income.

## **Dingley's Comic Relief Early Years Inclusion Project**

The move to the new EYFS, with its focus on reducing tracking of children, is good news in general, but could also be seen as a barrier to wider inclusive practice. The difference between working with a child with SEND, where there is need to provide evidence to local authorities of their needs to access funding, compared to working with other children, who now have much reduced paperwork and tracking, is stark. For settings already struggling to support children with SEND effectively, this is another reason why settings may decide not to admit a child with SEND.

Recent announcements to relax ratio requirements are being seen as a further and direct risk to the ability of settings to support children who may need additional support.

This paper therefore aims not only to support LAs in justifying the business case for investing in assessing and planning for the sufficiency of places; it will also support Dingley's Promise with a conversation nationally to promote change and investment.