

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
20 DECEMBER 2021**

CHILDREN'S CENTRE SERVICES REPORT

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To update on the position in relation to services offered for young parents during and post Covid-19 lockdown and restrictions.

Summary

2. The Building Stronger Families Service for Darlington Borough Council is based at McNay Street Children's Centre, and prior to the start of the Covid 19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in March 2020, offered a high level of support by way of targeted delivery through early help assessments and universal groups focusing on parents' mental health, practical skills, and children's development.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that :-
 - (a) Members note the content of the report
 - (b) Visit McNay Street for a walk around of the work taking place

Chris Bell
Assistant Director of Children's Services

Background Papers

None

MAIN REPORT

4. The Building Stronger Families Service for Darlington Borough Council is based at McNay Street Children's Centre, and prior to the start of the Covid 19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in March 2020, offered a high level of support by way of targeted delivery through early help assessments and universal groups focusing on parents' mental health, practical skills, and children's development.
5. Universally, parents to be and new parents could attend a range of groups across the town, including a pre and post birth group for teenage parents, with midwives working with teenage parents on hand to conduct antenatal checks, and several groups aimed at babies up to 12 months and their parents, focussing on parents' well-being; helping them to promote the development of their babies in all areas.
6. Health colleagues attended McNay Street Centre offering a well-baby clinic, where parents could attend to have their baby weighed, ask any questions of the health visitors in attendance, but also have the chance to meet other parents, reducing their risk of isolation.
7. A parental mental health group, called Baby Steps, led by Talking Changes, ran weekly from one of the outreach centres, and this was well attended. The aim of the group was to support parents with babies up to 12 months who might be struggling with low level mental health issues.
8. There were also targeted programmes available for parents who were open to services or were recommended to come along by midwives and health visitors, for parents who were expecting babies and wanted more advice and guidance on bonding, practical skills and caring for their babies, and those who had just had babies and wanted support around their babies rapidly changing needs.
9. Once the working from home directive came from Government, and the centres were closed, all these group closed as well. Work immediately began to try to get as many of these services online, and the Children's Centre Facebook page became somewhere to access advice and guidance, as well as practitioners delivering live and pre-recorded sessions on child development, behaviour management and other related issues.
10. The Baby Steps mental health support group went online, and after consultation with their clients, they have agreed that this is an effective way for them to deliver their services, so will remain there.
11. Health colleagues resumed their well-child clinic after a period of closure; however, this is now just for targeted parents where health visitors invite those on their radar for some extra support.
12. During lockdown, to meet the need of the increasing number of parents suffering with mental health issues in the community, some early help practitioners completed training in mental health awareness, and in counselling (level 2), forming a Mindfulness group where families met outside McNay Street, and then took part in a walk and talk session, with some meditation halfway through to practice some valuable mindfulness skills.

13. Other outreach centres have been utilised to prioritise covid testing and vaccination, impacting on the level of service provided for new parents on site. Also, a couple of schools who usually have space for children's centre activity groups have utilised the space themselves, due to having to adhere to government guidance on social distancing etc. reducing the number of places available to deliver from across the town.
14. Over the summer of 2021 it was agreed by senior leaders that the groups run from the children's centre could start to re-open with Covid 19 safe measures in place. These started from around July, with the bulk re-opening in September 2021.
15. Initial observations of the children attending the groups has identified that some are lacking key developmental skills relating to age and stage milestones; for example, 2 ½ year olds in a group who showed no signs of interacting with each other, had no single words, were not exploring from their parent/carer base, and no curiosity for the other children within the group. The impact, if nothing changes, could be that children go on to lack empathy for others, and struggle to make and maintain relationships. Communication milestones at this stage are key, and parents within the groups bringing the children were lacking in the skills required to help their children develop these skills. This has been factored into future planning, and within a few weeks of attending the groups, the children are clearly starting to make progress.
16. A group for children to promote speech and language, where the health visitor has identified that there is a delay, is up and running. The leads of the group have identified that all the children referred have other additional needs, including sensory processing issues that are impacting on their development. Again, parents are short of the skills required to help promote these skills and struggling to know where to go to help their children with their additional needs and sensory processing issues. The group leads have again observed significant progress made by those children and parents attending, with parents learning how to engage their children in singing and stories. Some of the parents who have children with additional and complex needs have found coping during the pandemic challenging, and stressful. Parents have presented at the groups without the coping mechanisms in place to deal with the emotional challenges of meeting the needs of children with complex needs on a day-to-day basis, and staff have offered emotional support, advice and guidance to help with this.
17. A local school has asked for support to transition a group of six children from home to nursery, starting in January, and this work has begun, with the children showing delays in their development that ideally would be further on for them to start in the nursery setting. Practitioners are delivering work with parents to show them how to promote their children's development to get them nursery ready as much as possible.
18. Finally, a new group has been developed, based at McNay Street Centre, inviting young parents, new parents and those who are targeted and open for services, to attend pre and post birth, to ensure that they have all the learning opportunities, and chance to mix with other parents and babies, reducing social isolation, and hopefully building a long term relationship with the Building Stronger Families Service so that support, should they need it in the future, can be sustained without the need for statutory services becoming involved.

This document was classified as: OFFICIAL

Jo Benson: Extension 6791