

**CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
21 FEBRUARY 2022**

CHILDCARE SUFFICIENCY ASSESSMENT, 2021-22

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to inform Members of the findings of the 2021-22 Childcare Sufficiency Review.

Summary

2. The Department for Education's Early Education and Childcare Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, June 2018 requires local authorities to 'secure sufficient childcare, so far as is reasonably practicable, for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment, for children aged 0-14 or up to 18 for disabled children'. In carrying out this requirement local authorities should 'report annually to elected council members on how they are meeting their duty to secure sufficient childcare and to make this report available and accessible to parents'.
3. The childcare market in Darlington is made up of private day nurseries, preschools, childminders, out of school clubs, nursery schools and nursery units. Before March 2020, Darlington's childcare market was fairly stable and the parental take-up rate of the various entitlements was predictable.
4. From early June 2020 when providers were again able to admit children other than those whose parents were key workers or vulnerable children, the number of pre-school children attending provision rose. By the end of the Summer 2020 term there were 263 pre-school children in attendance. In comparison, by the end of the Summer 2021 term there were 839 pre-school children in attendance in childcare although this figure had reached a high of 1,413 by the end of May 2021. The figure in early December 2021 was 1,117 (unlike Early Years Entitlements place data, the pre-school attendance numbers do not include nursery units attendance data).
5. There are periodic short-term closures within the sector due to the pandemic but these are minimal. By the Autumn 2021 term, 1,696 children were accessing an Early Years Entitlements place: this figure compares with 1,587 children accessing a funded place in Autumn 2019.
6. During this pandemic, support has continued to be provided to the childcare sector via: regular guidance up-dates; virtual network meetings; public health provider briefings, weekly Q & A sessions with public health; an early years strategy group; a group for early years leads in schools; virtual inclusion panels and individualised support around transitions; setting link officers and an Early Years newsletter.

7. Additionally, a childcare sufficiency task group meets regularly which includes colleagues from Economic Growth, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS), Darlington Association on Disability (DAD), Jobcentre Plus, Learning & Skills, Darlington Families' Information Service and Children's Centres. The continued uncertainties created by the pandemic make childcare demand more difficult to predict. A business survey was distributed to local employers to find out if working patterns are changing, as this could affect parental childcare demand.
8. Provider views have been sought regarding the 'health' of the childcare sector. Some providers have indicated that recruitment and retention is an issue. In Autumn 2021 the Learning & Skills Service provided information to the sector about apprenticeship schemes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that work experience and volunteering opportunities have declined, impacting on recruitment. Therefore, a list of providers and schools that would be happy to provide work experience is being established and shared with schools and colleges.
9. In Summer 2021, following consultation with the Darlington Parent/Carer Forum as to the best way to work with parents to better understand any issues regarding access to childcare and any unmet demand, it was agreed that up-dated marketing information, sign-posting parents to sources of information about different types of local, registered, inclusive childcare across the borough could be shared. A meeting took place with Beaumont Hill Academy to gather information about any unmet childcare demand amongst parents. Also, parental consultation is planned in Spring 2022 to gather feedback about Disability Access Fund expenditure.
10. It is clear that economic conditions nationally continue to be fluid. Providers are facing uncertainty with regard to childcare demand, early years entitlements and parent paid income as families' circumstances change. Indicators show that there has been sufficient capacity to meet demand throughout this period, nevertheless, any unmet demand will need to be continually monitored to ensure that parents are able to access training and work in the coming months and years.

Recommendation

11. It is recommended that members note for information the findings of the 2021-22 Childcare Sufficiency Review.

James Stroyan
Group Director of People

Background Papers

The following papers were used in this report:

- (i) DfE Spring 2021, 2021-22 funding guidance
- (ii) 2021-22 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment
- (iii) 2021 Employer Business Survey
- (iv) 2021 Childcare Recruitment and Retention Survey

S17 Crime and Disorder	The report is about the 2021-22 Childcare Sufficiency Review and will not impinge on the duty on the authority to prevent crime and disorder in the Borough.
Health and Wellbeing	Good quality early education and childcare for children from birth to 14 years old and 18 years old for those young people with a disability, will assist in improving the health and well being of Darlington's 0 to 14/18 population and assists working families.
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	There are no carbon impact or climate change implications in this report.
Diversity	There are no specific proposals within the report that impact on diversity issues. All providers must meet their duties under the Equality Act 2010 when delivering education and childcare.
Wards Affected	All wards are affected.
Groups Affected	All children aged 0 to 14 years/18 years for those young people with a disability will benefit from being able to access high quality, education and childcare in the Borough.
Budget and Policy Framework	This decision does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	This is a key decision as it affects all wards in the Borough.
Urgent Decision	A delay in the information being reported to elected Council Members will delay the report becoming available to parents as required by the Department for Education's Early Education and Childcare Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, June 2018.
Council Plan	Access to high quality, affordable and reliable education and childcare will improve the quality of life and the health and well being of children and young people in the Borough and will also enable their parents to access or maintain training or work opportunities.
Efficiency	There are no specific proposals within the report that impact on efficiency.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	Access to good quality early education and childcare places in the borough improves the life chances of 2 to 4 year olds who are Looked After Children or who have left care and also, provides support to families.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

Pandemic Recovery

12. Following the lockdown in March 2020 childcare providers were only permitted to offer places to children whose parents were key workers or to vulnerable children. From early June 2020 providers were able to admit other children and by the end of the Summer 2020 term there were 263 pre-school children in attendance in childcare settings in the borough. In comparison, by the end of the Summer 2021 term there were 839 pre-school children in attendance in childcare although this figure had reached a high of 1,413 by the end of May 2021. The comparable figure in early December 2021 was 1,117.

Support for Providers

13. Support for the sector has continued over the last year with termly Private and Voluntary Provider and Childminder Network briefings which include regular up-dates from the Education Safeguarding Officer. The Early Years Education Strategy Group has continued to meet termly and is consulted regarding local issues and the Early Years Leads meeting for schools continues to meet termly. Providers have been able to access a weekly on-line drop-in session with Darlington's Public Health Team. Providers now have a dedicated Early Years in box, named Link Officers as their first point of contact and a half termly Early Years newsletter is also produced.
14. Targeted work to support transitions has continued to be undertaken by the Inclusion Team which has facilitated input by a range of professionals, including headteachers and health professionals. In addition, the Early Years Inclusion Panel has continued to take place virtually, awarding funding for children with emerging and significant Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Financial Support for Providers

15. Local authorities were instructed by the DfE to continue to fund childcare providers who were open during the Autumn 2020 term, at pre-pandemic levels. The DfE recognised that the number of children attending childcare may not have returned to pre-pandemic levels by early January 2021. As a result, in March 2021 the DfE published its Spring 2021 term and financial year 2021-22 funding guidance. Local authorities were able to claim top-up funding for funded 2 year old places, Universal Entitlement places for 3 and 4 year olds and 30 Hours Extended Entitlement places for 3 and 4 year olds if the take-up of any of these entitlements, at the time of the January 2021 census, was lower than 85% of the January 2020 census figure and this take-up had increased over the course of the Spring 2021 term. Local authorities were allocated funding based on termly actuals during the Summer and Autumn 2021 terms. It is the DfE's intention that data will be collected from the January 2022 census and processed in the usual pre-pandemic way. In the October 2021 Spending Review £160 million was allocated nationally for the 2022-23 financial year, to facilitate an increase in Early Years Entitlements funding rates.
16. The deadline for final claims to the Businesses Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme was 30 September 2021. The scheme had enabled childcare providers to place employees on

furlough whereby they received up to 80% of their wages. The government made a contribution of up to 60%, while employers covered the remaining 20% along with pension and National Insurance contributions.

17. During Spring 2021 Darlington's childcare sector was also able to apply for Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) funding. The ARG funding aimed to support businesses which had been severely impacted by pandemic restrictions. The availability of this support was advertised via the Council's website and was included in the Education Partnerships communications to providers. Providers with on-going premises costs were eligible for the full ARG grant, backdated to 5 November 2020, at around £930 for every 28 day period. Childminders who were registered with HMRC for business purposes, could access a one-off support grant of £500 and an additional £500 was also awarded to each successful childminder application to help the business through the 'recovery' stage of the Government's roadmap. In total, over £32,000 in support funding was awarded to 18 childminders and 3 group settings in Darlington.

Provider Training

18. Settings have been supported by the Early Years Team through regular virtual briefings for all group settings and evening sessions for childminders. Weekly virtual drop-in sessions with Public Health have been offered with the option of sending a question via the Early Years Team if providers are unable to attend.
19. Training for the Early Years Foundation Stage reforms has been delivered for all sectors of the childcare market. To support the implementation of the reforms County Durham and Darlington Oral Health services delivered training for group settings and childminders in partnership with the Early Years Team. A nationally recognised Early Years consultant has been commissioned to support the local early years sector in understanding and implementing the reforms; this has taken the form of virtual training and online surgeries. This training programme is scheduled into 2022. Good practice meetings took place in late Autumn 2021 which provided an opportunity for private settings and schools to come together and share good practice virtually. Up to the Summer 21 term a regular round up of information was sent to providers via a weekly e-mail and a termly newsletter has now been introduced.
20. In May 2021 a Healthy Early Years (HEY) task group was established with the aim of supporting settings to engage and educate parents towards a 'nourish to thrive' outlook. The group is composed of leaders from early years settings and schools, local authority Childcare Development Officers and representatives from Environmental Health and Workforce Development. The group's work has included:
 - (a) The promotion of Healthy Eating Week in June '21,
 - (b) A HEY newsletter for settings and childminders,
 - (c) HEY messaging through the Oral Health Training for childminders and settings,
 - (d) Cascading information and resources through the Private and Voluntary and Childminder briefings in May and October '21,

- (e) The creation of videos to promote healthy eating for the DBC website,
- (f) The development of a Healthy Eating policy for use by settings and childminders, and
- (g) The development and trial of the Healthy Early Years Catering Award which is to be promoted through briefings and link officer work in the coming months.

21. In September 2021 each setting and childminder was assigned a member of the Early Years Team as a link officer. Link officers arrange termly visits/contacts with their settings.

Early Years Entitlements take-up

22. In Autumn 2020 the DfE re-started the collection of national data for the national funded 2 year olds termly take-up score cards. In the Autumn 2020 term 55% of Darlington's eligible 2 year olds were accessing a funded 2 year old place. By Spring 2021 this take-up figure had increased to 73%, compared with 79% in Spring 2020 and was at 83% in Summer 2021. During the Summer 2021 term, 'Golden Tickets' were issued by the local authority to further increase take-up. Tickets were sent to eligible families on the Department for Work and Pensions list who were not already accessing a funded place; the tickets enabled parents to bypass the eligibility checker process and go directly to a childcare provider. During the Summer 2021 term, an additional 19 children accessed a funded 2 year old place through Golden Tickets. The availability of funded places was also advertised via health visitors, Children's Centres, Jobcentre Plus, Learning & Skills and the Council's Housing newsletter and Facebook pages. In addition, an Early Years Entitlements funding webinar was produced by the team for professionals and this was distributed to health visitors and interested stakeholders via the Childcare Sufficiency Group. The Council's childcare leaflets have been refreshed and social media tags have been produced by the Communications Team to further market the entitlements. Finally, a more conversational Early Years Entitlements funding webinar for parents/carers is in production and officers are attending social care/early help team meetings to provide policy up-dates regarding early years funded places and to ensure that any new staff are aware of the entitlements eligibility criteria and know who to contact if they have queries.
23. Looking at actual take up, the number of children accessing funded places is back to pre-pandemic rates. For example, the Autumn 2019 term headcount showed there were 321 funded 2-year-olds, 687 3- and 4-year-olds accessing Universal Entitlement and 579 3 and 4- year-olds accessing the Extended Entitlement: a total of 1,587 funded children. The same data for the Autumn 2020 term gave a total of 1,089 funded children. By the Autumn 2021 term, the data showed 354 funded 2-year-olds, 763 3- and 4-year-olds accessing Universal Entitlement and 579 3- and 4- year-olds accessing the Extended Entitlement: a total of 1,696 funded children. Please see **Table 1**.
24. Table 1 shows that the difference between the number of 2 to 4 year olds accessing a Local Authority funded place between Autumn 2019 and Autumn 2021 was 109 additional children, as opposed to 498 less children when comparing Autumn 2020 with Autumn 2019. When looking at the private and voluntary sector providers, there was a decrease of 387 funded children between Autumn 2019 and Autumn 2020 but by Autumn 2021, this decrease had reduced to 72 funded children. Take-up has increased in pre-schools and marginally with childminders. However, there has been a decrease of 88 children in private day nurseries and 21 children in out of school clubs. When comparing Autumn

2019 data to that of Autumn 2021, with regard to nursery schools and units, there has been an increase of 43 funded 2-year-olds, an increase of 90 funded 3- and 4-year-olds accessing the Universal Entitlement and an additional 48 children accessing the 30 hours Extended Entitlement. Whilst the total number of funded children and the number of funded children in the school sector has increased, when compared to Autumn 2019 data, the private and voluntary sector is at 93% take-up compared to Autumn 2019.

Table 1 – Autumn 2019, Autumn 2020 and Autumn 2021 funded entitlements take-up

	Autumn 2019				Autumn 2020				Autumn 2021			
	Funded Places for 2 Year-Olds	15 Hours for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	30 Hours Childcare for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	Termly Totals	Funded Places for 2-Year-Olds	15 Hours for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	30 Hours Childcare for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	Termly Totals	Funded Places for 2-Year-Olds	15 Hours for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	30 Hours Childcare for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	Termly Totals
Private Day Nurseries	232	189	324	745	123	127	208	458	215	164	278	657
Pre-Schools	27	49	66	142	18	23	50	91	32	60	85	177
Out of School Clubs	-	-	32	32	-	-	0	0	-	-	11	11
Child minders	11	4	28	43	5	7	14	26	13	4	28	45
Private & Voluntary Sector Totals	270	242	450	962	146	157	272	575	260	228	402	890
Nursery Schools	21	80	32	133	27	45	25	97	46	94	44	184
Nursery Units	30	365	97	492	59	244	114	417	48	441	133	622
School Totals	51	445	129	625	86	289	139	514	94	535	177	806
Childcare Market Totals	321	687	579	1,587	232	446	411	1,089	354	763	579	1,696

Unmet Childcare Demand in 2021

25. In May 2021 a time limited task group, consisting of staff from Education Partnerships, the Families' Information Service and the Performance Team, was set up to review the Childcare Sufficiency data collection processes. Following consultation with the sector via the Early Years Education Strategy Group, the Private and Voluntary sector providers, nursery schools and primary schools were asked to provide setting level data regarding non-local authority funded early education and childcare places, for example, baby places, parent 'paid for' 2 to 4 year old places and wrap-around places for 5 to 14 year olds or up to 18 year olds for young people with disabilities. Of the 25 Autumn returns, when asked where they were experiencing pressure for places, 13 providers stated they were experiencing high demand in some areas. 3 providers mentioned funded 2 year olds places, 5 providers mentioned care for 4 to 8 year olds, 4 providers stated places for under 2 year olds and 1 setting said funded places for 3 year olds were in high demand. Generally, there is little unmet demand reported on the fortnightly attendance returns.

There do appear to be 'pockets' where there is pressure for specific types of places but providers seem to be managing this. This situation and the ability of providers to flex to meet changing demand will need to be monitored. There were 19 returns from the nursery schools and primary schools and 6 schools said they were experiencing high demand in some areas. 6 schools stated there was pressure for wrap-around care, 2 schools mentioned funded places for 2 year olds and 4 schools mentioned 30 Hours places. 16 schools offer breakfast clubs, 10 offer after school clubs and 4 offer regular, reliable holiday clubs. The majority of schools run these clubs themselves, apart from 3 schools where private provision run on site care. The take-up of wrap-around care is good, especially with regard to breakfast clubs. 3 schools reported that there was insufficient demand for holiday clubs in their area to make such clubs financially sustainable. No secondary schools reported concerns about a lack of childcare or were experiencing unmet requests from parents.

26. Across Darlington, there is a mixed supply of holiday and out of school provision. As well as full day care services and childminders who offer this service, there are a small number of standalone organisations, including Darlington Association on Disability's holiday playschemes, DASH, who cater solely for children with special educational needs and disabilities.
27. Attendance during the Summer 2021 holidays was surveyed, out of 54 registered childminders who are active during the holidays, 39 returned the survey and out of 14 group settings who operate in the holidays, 8 returned. Across the sector, occupancy was as follows: 202 4-8 year olds; 20 9-11 year olds; 5 12-14 year olds; and 2 15-18 year olds with a disability. A total of 229 children and young people accessing holiday childcare. Unmet demand was recorded by 2 childminders and this affected 3 children; these enquiries were fed back to the Families' Information Service. One provider indicated they were very busy during the first and last week of the holidays and another provider explained that during August 2021, they had closed on Mondays and Fridays due to a lack of bookings. Attendance during the Autumn 2021 half term was also surveyed. Returns were low at 15 childminders and 4 group settings. Across the sector, occupancy was as follows: 69 4-8 year olds; 19 9-11 year olds; 0 12-14 year olds; and 0 15-18 year olds with a disability. A total of 88 children and young people accessing holiday childcare. 3 childminders reported closing during this holiday as they had had no requests for holiday care and 1 group setting explained that they had received a request for 2 days of care for 2 children but they were unable to open on those days, as they would not have covered their running costs. Demand for holiday care will continue to be monitored as we emerge from the pandemic.
28. The Local Authority has established a childcare sufficiency task group which meets regularly and monitors childcare demand and supply, as well as the health of the local childcare sector. The group includes representation from Education Partnerships, the Darlington Families' Information Service, SENDIASS (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Service), Darlington Association on Disability, Jobcentre Plus, Children's Centres, Economic Growth and Learning & Skills. The group cross references with the Early Years Education Strategy Group.

Provider profile

Table 2 - The number of settings in Darlington pre-March 2020, November 2020 and November 2021

	Pre-March 2020	November 2020	November 2021
Nursery schools	2	2	2
Nursery units	17	17	17
Private & Voluntary	34	31	31
Childminders	80	71	63

29. Table 2 shows that between March and November 2020 three nurseries in Darlington permanently closed. In each case all children were successfully accommodated in other childcare settings. Two of these nurseries were owned by providers who had more than one setting and had places available at their other sites located in Darlington. During the last year 8 childminders have de-registered.

Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

30. In early Summer 2021, following consultation with the Darlington Parent/Carer Forum as to the best way to work with parents to better understand any issues regarding access to childcare and any unmet demand, it was agreed that up-dated marketing information, sign-posting parents to sources of information about different types of local, registered, inclusive childcare across the borough could be shared. We will continue to work with the Parent Carer Forum to ensure that information and advice about access to inclusive childcare is easily available.
31. In the Autumn 2021 term, local authority officers met with senior leaders from Beaumont Hill Academy. The purpose of the meeting was to gather feedback regarding any unmet demand for before, after school and holiday care which the school felt its parents may have and to find out if there were any particular issues around access to childcare. The school reported that enrichment opportunities are provided for children and young people and training for parents which takes place after school has childcare provided. The school also has a breakfast club. The school added that the majority of children use school transport and therefore many children are away from the home from 8am until 4pm which supports parents to work and train. The school said that although they were not aware of parents who have issues with taking up employment due to lack of childcare, they would be consulting with parents via their parental survey and would feedback any comments relating to childcare demand. Additionally, the Beaumont Hill Academy runs themed coffee mornings for parents/carers and the local authority has been invited to attend one of these sessions, to discuss inclusive childcare. Officers were informed that holiday childcare for Beaumont Hill pupils is usually accessed through the DASH playschemes as school staff often work with Darlington Association on Disability during the holidays and this provides continuity of care for these children.
32. A further consultation with parents/carers of children aged 0-7 years with disabilities is planned for the Spring 2022 term. The local authority is keen to gather parental views on the expenditure of Disability Access Funding which is provided to enable access for 3 and 4 year olds with disabilities to their free Universal Entitlement Early Years Education place.

Provider feedback

33. Anecdotal feedback from some providers during the Summer was that they were experiencing recruitment and retention issues, such as, a lack of suitably qualified and experienced job applicants and experienced staff who are leaving the childcare profession to work in other areas of the economy, such as the retail sector. A Childcare Recruitment and Retention survey of local providers was therefore undertaken in October 2021. Of the 31 private and voluntary sector providers who were invited to respond, 17 providers completed the survey, this total consisted of 9 private day nurseries, 7 pre-schools and 1 out of school business representing 3 clubs.
34. When asked what three difficulties childcare providers faced with the recruitment and retention of staff: 65% said 'applicants without the relevant qualifications applying'; 47% said 'the quality of applicants at interview is poor'; 41% said 'applicants without the relevant experience applying'; 41% stated they had not experienced issues with recruitment and retention; 24% stated 'staff leaving for another job in a different sector'; 18% said 'staff leaving for another job within the childcare sector'; 6% stated 'no applicants applying'; and 6% said 'applicants interview skills are poor'. Providers were asked if the pandemic, in particular, has had an effect on the recruitment and retention of staff: 18% said yes but 82% said no.
35. When asked whether providers currently had any staff vacancies, 18% stated yes but 82% said no. Of those businesses which had vacancies: 2 were for apprenticeships; 1 was a Level 2 practitioner; 8 were for Level 3 practitioners; and 1 was for an auxiliary member of staff. Of those providers who stated they had issues with recruitment; 41% found it difficult to recruit at Level 3; 24% found apprentices difficult to recruit; and 18% found Level 6 practitioner vacancies difficult to fill. When asked for the three main reasons for these difficulties: 65% of responses stated 'salary is too low', 63% said 'level of responsibilities are too high compared with other jobs of a similar salary', 41% said 'hours which can be offered are insufficient' and 35% stated 'hours which can be offered are irregular'. Other comments which were submitted included:

'Can get better wages elsewhere.'

'Applicants do not realise the amount of work required within the nursery environment and find it hard to remain focussed and retain the passion for the job they think they wanted to do.'

'Too many people leaving the sector.'

'No guaranteed hours.'

36. Providers were asked what they thought the impact of the pandemic would be on staff recruitment and retention in the childcare market. Comments included:

'Staff have worked above and beyond and had so many restrictions placed upon their daily routines. The staff have coped well to keep the children in the setting safe, but it is such a low paid job. Staff have to train and have qualifications to work in a nursery yet they can

get paid more to work in retail/hospitality, it seems to be putting people off the industry or making them want to leave.'

'Psychologically and mentally it will have an impact, low wages do not help in retaining staff, staff could work in a supermarket for better pay rates...the hourly funding rates are low.'

'When there are plenty of higher paid jobs with less qualifications needed young people will not be tempted to work in Early Years, particularly when some employers are giving new starters extra benefits to start working with them.'

37. The childcare sector was asked whether the number of applicants applying for posts has changed compared to 2 years ago: 53% of respondents said it had remained the same; 29% said it had decreased; and 18% said it had increased. When asked whether the overall quality of job applicants has changed: 59% stated it has remained the same; 35% said it is worse; and 6% said it is better. Providers were asked to describe the general wellbeing of the childcare sector compared to 2 years ago: 53% said it was worse; 41% said it was about the same; and 6% said it was much better.
38. The relatively low survey return rate makes it difficult to make generalisations regarding local recruitment and retention issues. It appears that some providers are experiencing difficulties recruiting at certain levels, for example, for Level 3 practitioners. Survey feedback suggests that issues have not necessarily been caused but exacerbated by the pandemic. However, they can have an effect on a provider's ability to operate at full capacity and may go on to affect childcare sufficiency in the borough. Additionally, anecdotal evidence from provider groups is that the pandemic has impacted on work experience and volunteering opportunities, for example, sometimes parents volunteer to work in a setting and then find that they enjoy it and decide to go into childcare. This lack of opportunity may have impacted on recruitment, so to address this, the Education Partnerships Team is establishing a list of providers and schools that would be happy to provide work experience and this will be shared with secondary schools and colleges.
39. In the Autumn term 2021, staff from the Learning & Skills Team attended the Private and Voluntary Providers' Network meeting. Settings were given useful information about the apprenticeships scheme for the childcare sector and this meeting also provided childcare managers with an opportunity to feedback their various experiences regarding recruitment and retention of staff. Darlington College will attend the next Network meeting.

Local Employer feedback

40. Previous employer surveys have investigated the use of family friendly employment practices and explored the extent to which childcare supply meets the needs of businesses. They have reported that the number of businesses frequently experiencing problems due to childcare issues is relatively low; however, many found childcare was an occasional problem. Anecdotal evidence from the Childcare Sufficiency Task Group is that some businesses have recognised this and have introduced working patterns that fit in with school hours to encourage more women in particular to apply for roles and to open up recruitment to those who are unable to work full-time hours due to a lack of available childcare.

41. During the period August to September 2021, a survey was issued to the local employment market to ascertain whether local employers have had to change their working patterns or arrangements as a result of the pandemic and whether employers felt these changes would become permanent. This is pertinent for childcare sufficiency because a change in a household's working arrangements, such as an increase in home working, may affect childcare demand.
42. The survey was widely advertised via the Economic Growth Team and their communication channels including on Facebook, Twitter and the Council's monthly business newsletter. The link was posted on the Council staff briefing and was also disseminated via a Tees Valley Combined Authority list of over 600 Darlington businesses e-mail addresses. Unfortunately, the return rate was low at 21 responses. The main sector responses were, 21% from the Retail Sector, 15% from Manufacturing, 15% were from the Hospitality Sector, 10% were from Business and Professional Services and 10% from Education/Childcare. 48% of completions were from micro businesses (1-9 employees), 29% were small businesses (10-49 employees), 19% were medium sized businesses (50-249 employees) and 4% were large businesses (over 250 employees). 71% of respondent businesses did not operate shift working but of the 29% that did, 19% ran shift patterns that change on a weekly basis. The majority of businesses gave a month's notice of a change in shift patterns. 67% of respondents said that since April 2020, they had not had to make a permanent change to their business working patterns, 33% said that they had. Some of the explanations for a permanent change were:

'Some customers have wanted extra cleaning due to covid so extra shifts have been added.'

'We now work a 3:2 office-home hybrid in the office and an extended four day week in the training centre.'

'We have had to extend hours and open extra days to accommodate demand after lockdowns.'

43. 50% of respondents did not have staff who worked from home. Of the 50% who did have staff working from home, 5% were self-employed, 28% had seen an increase in staff home working since April 2020 and 17% had the same number of home working staff as before April 2020. When asked whether they felt they would see a permanent change in the size of their workforce within the next year, 75% said they thought the workforce size would remain the same and 25% said they expected a permanent increase in the size of the workforce. When asked within the next year whether a permanent change in business working patterns was expected, 88% of respondents said no and 12% said yes and explanations for this response included:

'Will keep the hybrid working and home flexibility.'

'People have got used to flexi hours. I will either have to change shift patterns or add childcare into the contract to cover costs.'

44. 71% of respondents stated that they employ staff who use registered childcare and 29% said their staff did not use childcare. When asked whether a lack of childcare is an issue when recruiting or retaining staff, 86% of respondents said no. When asked whether

businesses thought a lack of childcare had prevented prospective staff from taking jobs with them or not staying with their business when they become parents, 79% of respondents said no.

Additional information

45. Table 3 shows that in recent years the number of birth registrations in Darlington has declined. This may have market implications for providers.

Table 3 - The number of births registered in Darlington

Year of Birth (Sep-Aug)	Number of Births
2009/10	1,359
2010/11	1,324
2011/12	1,336
2012/13	1,284
2013/14	1,220
2014/15	1,231
2015/16	1,187
2016/17	1,107
2017/18	1,138
2018/19	1,048
2019/20	1,026

Source: Office for National Statistics Birth Registrations

Outcome of Consultation

46. The LA intends to continue to monitor and evaluate the local market position, paying particular attention to staff recruitment and retention issues and childcare business sustainability.

Conclusion

47. Indicators have shown that there has been sufficient capacity to meet demand throughout the pandemic. An extensive consultation with parents in Autumn 2020 in which there were more than 600 responses demonstrated the need for local childcare to be affordable and flexible, to be available to meet existing or new working patterns and where required, the need for accessible, affordable, inclusive holiday childcare.
48. Both the pandemic and recruitment and retention issues may ultimately impact some sectors of the childcare market and this will need to be monitored. Also, between 2010 and 2020 there has been a reduction of 333 birth registrations or 24.5% in the borough. This may have market implications for providers. The Local Authority is engaging with providers to ensure sufficiency of places and to work with the sector to assist with sustainability.

How will this work in Darlington?

49. 2021 Childcare Sufficiency findings will be presented to the childcare market and to schools in Spring 2022, to enable them to develop services to meet any changing childcare demand.

50. The priorities for the Local Authority continue to be to:
 - (a) Provide parents with up-to-date information about financial assistance towards childcare costs, including any available tax credits,

 - (b) Work with settings and other interested stakeholders to continually improve the quality of care and make settings/activities more inclusive,

 - (c) Assist childcare providers/activities to be as sustainable as possible during the pandemic.