

Childcare Sufficiency Task and Finish Review Group
26 September 2022
Via Microsoft Teams

Present:

Councillors Crudass, C Hughes, Snedker and Willis.

Officers: Tony Murphy, Assistant Director Education and Inclusion
Helen Ellison, Head of Education Partnerships
Allison Hill Democratic Officer

Purpose of Meeting:

To better understand childcare sufficiency and the general supply within the borough and to discuss the barriers to sufficiency issues.

Points Discussed/Raised at the Meeting:

- There is currently overall sufficiency within the borough.
- Childminders numbers have fallen but it was not clear if this was a fall in demand or people making other choices in terms of employment.
- A fall in childminder numbers has been seen nationally and not just in Darlington.
- The Early Years Education Strategy Group considers the challenges facing the sector and helps to inform the work of officers.
- The Education White Paper did not cover Early Years.
- The cost of childcare is making parents relook at their budgets. The latest increase to the hourly rates for early years entitlement funding was inadequate to meet the cost of statutory provision (15/30 hrs) often resulting in cross subsidisation from the parents and carers paying fees.
- Provision for disabled children is included in the local offer but specific cases were not discussed, however Members noted that places for disabled children must be monitored as part of the sufficiency assessment as a priority.
- The sector, whilst cooperative, is limited to the amount of data it can supply to the Council because of stretched staff and their focus on their primary objectives of care. There is some survey overload so Council officers have to be mindful.
- A potential decrease in future requirements triggered by a declining birth rate will impact on the sector going forward. Schools facing falling numbers may look to expand into nursery provision in the future.
- The upward pressure on wages as employers compete for workers is making childcare jobs less attractive financially.
- Providers feedback is that recruitment and retention is the biggest threat to provision at present, in particular for level 3 trained staff. A dialogue amongst partners must continue.
- Training opportunities available in Colleges and our Learning and Skills offer should be monitored to ensure that appropriate level 3 training opportunities are available.

- Boosting the profile of childcare within schools as a potential career opportunity is to be encouraged.
- Officers were keen to supply data that is helpful to Scrutiny Members, and welcome suggestions.

IT WAS AGREED – An area item identified where Members felt the Council could increase its support was by raising the awareness of job opportunities in the early years sector and recommend that every opportunity to do this be taken in Council events and communications.

Members also agreed to make our local MP's aware of the pressures in the sector caused by rising wages and declining, in real terms, funding for statutory entitlement provision.