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**To: The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)**

**Date: 9<sup>th</sup> December 2021**

**Subject: School Readiness – impact of Covid-19**

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### **1 Purpose of the Note**

- 1.1 The purpose of the note is to consider the impact Covid has had on school readiness and what services are doing to support and improve school readiness.

### **2 Recommendations**

- 2.1 The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) are recommended to:
- 1) Note the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on school readiness and the continued work to support children and young people in the city
  - 2) Identify any areas the Board may want to consider in more detail

### **3 Background and Information**

- 3.1 In England a child's progress is reviewed between the age of 2 and 3 by an early years practitioner or health visitor and again by their class teacher at the end of the school year in which they turn 5 (reception). The teacher uses their judgement to assess a child's attainment against the national checklist of 'Good Level of Development (GLD)' [Framework for the early years foundation stage](#). This is the key national indicator of whether a child is 'ready for school'. The levels attained by children at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) are categorised as: Emerging = 1, Expected = 2 and Exceeding = 3. It is important to note that this is a measure of attainment, not progress.
- 3.2 It is not possible to claim a full understanding of the impact Covid has had on school readiness. This is partly because the government temporarily disapplied and modified certain elements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework. Consequently, no profile data is available for July 2020 or 2021. In addition, children born immediately before or during the academic have not yet started school, so any impact on their expected level of development is not known.

- 3.3 It is recognised that high quality early years education combined with a supportive home learning environment are known precursors to later educational success. It is accepted that children will have had varying pre-school experience. For those attending early years settings, access may have been disrupted and it is probable that the level of uptake of early years provision has been detrimentally impacted by a Covid concerns and parental demand because more parents have been at home.

#### **4 Local Position**

- 4.1 Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, school readiness was an area of focus in Coventry. The data taken from 2019 indicated that overall, 69% of Coventry children were 'school ready' compared to a national average of 71%. However, the breakdown for children identified as disadvantaged fell to 55% compared to a national average of 56.6%.
- 4.2 A study by five universities, including Oxford University, investigating the impact of Covid-19 on family life and early childhood development during the first lock down in 2020 found:
- Whilst 90% of families reported an increase in enriching activities during lockdown, these increases were not spread equally across families
  - During lockdown disadvantaged parents were less likely to engage in enriching activities e.g. reading, playing, singing, one-to-one conversations, cooking, arts and crafts, exercise, and gardening.
  - Disadvantaged families spent less time doing activities that require outdoor space and access to books
  - 75% of parents reported that during lockdown their children spent more time than usual watching TV or playing with a tablet, but children from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to have high daily screen use.
- 4.3 In addition, a recent Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) funded study, survey worked with teachers in schools where children started reception in September 2020.
- 76% said that children starting school needed more support with communication than in previous years.
  - Teachers pinpointed the three areas of development that children were struggling with:
    - 96% of schools said they were concerned about pupils' speech and language development
    - 91% of schools said they were concerned about pupils' personal, social and emotional development
    - 89% of schools said they were concerned about pupils' literacy skills
- 4.4 Nationally, we know that the key factors that have influenced these findings are:
- Temporary and permanent closures, including significantly reduced demand for early years places during lockdown 1 and beyond

- Attributed impact on social, emotional and behavioural development and mental health, physical development and school readiness
- Potential worsened negative impact for disadvantaged and SEN children

## **5 Local Provider Feedback**

5.1 Feedback from Coventry Schools and Early Years Providers in Coventry supports these findings. This is included below:

Concerns - children entering the EYFS exhibit poorer social skills:

- They are often more comfortable in learning on their own or with a very small number of other children.
- Unable to share
- Some children are overwhelmed by a busy classroom, preferring quieter, more solitary activities
- More children seeking adult attention and some evidence of building unhealthy attachments with adults
- Language delay and confidence in communication
- Children enjoying sharing books with adults
- Gross and fine motor skills are less well developed, and balance and co-ordination are below levels expected
- Overall tiredness within the day and across the week – whilst this has always been a factor it is now more pronounced
- Unable to sustain concentration
- Significantly higher number of children presenting with special educational needs (SEND)
- (Nursery) – more children not yet toileting independently and reliant on 'pull-ups' than ordinarily expected

5.2 On a more positive note some schools have also reported that children have settled well into daily routines and are starting to make gains in their learning through good progress.

5.3 There are not funded place uptake figures for Summer 20, but in Autumn 20 our uptake of 2 year old funded places was 61% compared to 76% in Autumn 19. Our uptake of 3 and 4 year old funded places was 90% in Autumn 20 compared to 92% in Autumn 19. Throughout the pandemic we have ensured that there are a sufficient number of high quality childcare places for keyworker and vulnerable children, including using reserves to support holiday periods and provide better funding certainty for providers.

5.4 The quality profile of our early years providers across the city remains high. The percentage of childcare providers on non-domestic premises achieving good or better Ofsted outcomes remains at 99% even though the overall number of providers in this has category decreased. Childcare on domestic premises remains

at 97% of providers achieving good or better. Also, 91 % of schools with a Nursery class achieved good or better outcomes at inspection, 7% requires improvement and 2% were found to be inadequate.

- 5.5 Early years health and education services, continued to be vigilant in identifying children who required high levels of support, to successfully transition to school in September 2021. Consequently, a higher number of children than ever before began school with an Education Health and Care Plan in place. However, referrals to the SEND early years services continued to place unprecedented demands on service capacity both within the portage service (this service works with children and families within their home) and specialist teachers, who work with children in a setting. To a level, this growth in demand was pre-empted by an extension of the service offer. Additional capacity was created to enable practitioners to work directly in schools, supporting children who had not been previously identified because they had not attended an early years setting or been referred by a health practitioner. Anticipated demand growth for specialist school places was also pre-empted by the commissioning and reservation of an additional 10 reception places in special schools. These placements have subsequently been filled.
- 5.6 It is evident that transition because of the necessity to limit access to mainstream school environments, children have not been able to experience the breadth of transition support. Therefore, some children with SEN have started school without the pre-understanding of school routines and expectations. Consequently, early play skills are under-developed, and some children are exhibiting challenging behaviours because of the challenges formal education presents in terms of new routines and rules, socialisation skills and separation anxiety. The ongoing number of children identified as requiring support for presenting SEN. is continuing to increase month by month across both early years and schools' settings, saturating the capacity of support services.

## **6 The Coventry Offer - Support Available to improve school readiness**

- 6.1 It is clear that nationally there has been a negative impact on early learning. Although there are emerging studies, the full extent of this is not understood. We remain committed to ensuring that practitioners are well equipped to support children's' learning. The early years team have continued to provide advice, information and training throughout the pandemic via a variety of media, including the production of a COVID Operational toolkit to ensure providers have continued to meet legislation and EYFS requirements. Face to face visits have now resumed to further support the providers where appropriate.
- 6.2 Over the last year we have implemented the Early Years Team restructure, which was to increase the emphasis and level of focus on quality in the sector. We now have a full time permanent post leading on quality and we are working with EYFS leads across networks and providing support to embed work the EYFS reforms. There was a training offer in the summer term for Headteachers, Early Years Leads and Governors on the reforms and take up was high.
- 6.3 We have recently launched an Integrated Early Years Strategy, which also includes collaborative work related to closing attainment gaps, increasing uptake of early years provision, providing resources to support families and offering wider opportunities for training and development. This is focused on the wider role of partners and practitioners in the Early Years sector including health and early help.

- 6.4 In February 2021, the Government announced £10 million for a pre-reception programme to provide high quality training to early years staff in order to support children who were at risk of falling behind at a critical stage of their development due to the COVID-19 pandemic 'Building on Success programme'. Coventry have been invited to join this programme and have nominated early years providers who meet the criteria below:
- Highest numbers of funded two-year olds
  - Highest numbers of children with SEND (EHCP/Inclusion Grant)
  - Highest numbers of children in receipt of Early Years Pupil Premium
- 6.5 We are also offering a targeted training program for leaders, managers and practitioners, with several courses offered free of charge, to encourage engagement by practitioners and ultimately improve outcomes for children
- 6.6 Our Autumn 21 data shows that 2 year old take up of funded places is back in line with Autumn 18 and 19, and for 3 and 4 year olds take up of funded places is back up to Autumn 2019 levels. This shows strong recovery for Coventry, which we suspect outstrips the national average although we do not yet have the figures to confirm the position. We continue to use local criteria for 2 year old places to ensure access to a wider cohort of disadvantaged children.
- 6.7 Schools have received recovery funding to support pupils through a recovery premium, national tutoring programme and school-led tutoring grant. The Education Partnership has jointly identified key priorities for Coventry for the current academic year, which are:
- Ensure that early years practitioners working with children and professionals supporting families are resilient well trained, knowledgeable and confident to deliver high quality services
  - Be ambitious for children and young people with SEND and effective in the provision that we make for them so that their educational outcomes improve across all key stages, including in the early years
- 6.8 All networks will be considering how they use joint funding to pursue priorities within their network.

## Reference

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/974907/EYFS\\_framework\\_-\\_March\\_2021.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974907/EYFS_framework_-_March_2021.pdf)

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