

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel

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PART I **FOR COMMENT & CONSIDERATION**

COVID-19 IMPACT ON EARLY YEARS SERVICE

1. Purpose of Report

To provide an update to members of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Panel on the effects of Covid 19 on the early years sector across Slough.

2. Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action

The Panel is requested to note the report and comment as appropriate.

3. The Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA and the Five Year Plan

3.1. Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy Priorities

The services described in this report and the improvements being made to them support the following priorities:

Priorities:

1. Protecting vulnerable children
3. Improving mental health and wellbeing

3.2. Five Year Plan Outcomes

This report refers to priority outcome 1 of the Five Year Plan

Slough children will grow up to be happy, healthy and successful.

4. Other Implications

(a) Financial

Early years provision is funded by the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) across the range of statutory funded early education entitlements; *2yr olds (15 hours), 3 and 4yr olds (15 hours, universal entitlement) and *3 and 4yr old (30 hours, extended entitlement) * subject to eligibility criteria.

Central financial, administrative and advisory functions are also funded from the centrally retained element of the Dedicated Schools Grant.

(b) Risk Management

Each of the targets within the Outcome 1 plan are included within the service planning framework of the relevant council directorates and overseen by the corporate Five Year Plan Board, Cabinet and Scrutiny Panels.

Risk	Mitigating action	Opportunities
Legal	None	
Property	None	
Human Rights	None	
Health and Safety	None	
Employment Issues	None	
Equalities Issues	Seeking to close gaps between peers and vulnerable groups	
Community Support	None	
Communications	None	Promoting the local authority's educational successes
Community Safety	None	
Financial	None	
Timetable for delivery	None	
Project Capacity	None	
Other	None	

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

There are no significant Human Rights Act or other Legal implications.

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment

There is no need for an equalities impact assessment.

(e) Workforce

There are no workforce implications

5. Supporting Information

5.1 Statutory Duties

The local authority has a statutory duty, enshrined in legislation, for the provision of early education. The duty is detailed in the following sections of the Childcare Acts 2006/16:

Childcare Act 2006:

- Section 6 secures sufficient childcare for parents;
- Section 7 secures early years provision free of charge;
- Section 7A discharges its duty;
- Section 9 gives local authorities the power to attach requirements to the arrangements they make with providers (other than the governing body of a maintained school) to deliver childcare including free early years provision;
- Section 9a allows regulations to be made which prescribe the requirements local authorities may or may not impose when they make arrangements;
- Section 12 provides information, advice and assistance to parents about childcare in the area;
- Section 13 secures the provision of information, advice and training to childcare providers and childcare workers

Childcare Act 2016:

- Section 1 places a duty on the secretary of state to secure the equivalent of 30 hours free childcare over 38 weeks of the year for qualifying children;
- Section 2 allows the secretary of state to discharge her duty under section 1 of the Act by placing a duty on English local authorities to secure free childcare for qualifying children;

5.2 Early Years Strategy and key functions

The key statutory functions for Slough Borough Council include:

- management of statutory funded early education entitlements
- supporting and monitoring standards and provision across early years settings
- SEND services and support for early years provision
- the moderation of EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) statutory assessment
- Slough's network of children's centres
- Undertake an annual childcare sufficiency assessment.

There is Cabinet support for the network of children's centres and development of additional early years and childcare places across the sector as part of the annual childcare sufficiency assessment. Longer term, the service intends to:

- review and redesign services towards a more sustainable and integrated model, including the network of children's centres
- contribute to reductions in the levels of obesity at the end of the foundation stage
- improve the oral health among under 5's
- increase boys attainment and reduce the gender gap in attainment at the end of the foundation stage
- increase the number of childminders undertaking the I Talk programme
- develop early years and childcare places in order to meet demand through the provision of a sustainable market aligned with wider regeneration developments
- support the development of gender diversity and qualification levels within the early years workforce with a specific focus on recruitment and retention
- ensure inclusive provision for children enables the early identification of specific needs, including SEND and provides access to free early education and appropriate support services.

5.3 The impact of Covid 19 across the early years sector

Since the lockdown was first ordered by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson on 23rd March 2020 the early years service mobilised to meet the needs of the early years sector and implemented the service's business continuity plan.

The Department for Education instructed all early years settings (and schools) to close with the exception of providing services to the children of key workers and vulnerable children.

As a result, the below tables illustrate the operational levels across the borough in the first two weeks of the lockdown:

Numbers	Provider type	w/c 23.03.2020 operational providers	27%
109	Childminders	27	25%
5	MNS	1	20%
30	PVI	13	43%
10	Children's Centres	1	10%

		w/c 30.03.2020 operational providers	16%
109	Childminders	17	16%
5	MNS	1	20%
30	PVI	5	17%
10	Children's Centres	1	10%

In contrast, the following tables show more recent operational levels across settings:

Numbers	Provider type	w/c 22.06.2020 operational providers	46%
109	Childminders	48	44%
5	MNS	5	100%
30	PVI	10	33%
10	Children's Centres	8	80%

		w/c 29.06.2020 operational providers	54%
109	Childminders	50	54%
5	MNS	5	100%
30	PVI	20	67%
10	Children's Centres	8	80%

Throughout lockdown, the early years service has maintained daily and weekly contact with all providers across the town inc:

Communications with the early years and childcare sector

- Between 23rd March and 28th May 2020 the Early Years and Prevention Service sent out daily news e-bulletins to all early years providers in Slough regarding local and national changes to legislation, guidance updates and news services as a result of the COVID pandemic.
- From the 29th May the Early Years and Prevention Service produced a daily newsletter providing the sector with information regarding COVID 19, recovery planning and government and local sector updates. More recently we have reduced this newsletter to twice weekly to help the sector balance requirements and in total 17 newsletters have been distributed to date.
- All news bulletins and newsletters are available on TheLink website <https://thelink.slough.gov.uk/news/covid-19-latest-updates-schools-early-years-and-fe-providers>

Provider Support

- On 29th May after the government announced plans to reopen early years and childcare provision to more children, Slough Early Years and Prevention Service published an Early Years and Childcare Recovery Action Planning document: <https://thelink.slough.gov.uk/la-services/early-years-business-development>
- The service has been providing support to all early years providers; settings and childminders through weekly contact calls and emails to address their reopening plans including managing risk assessments and adapting their provision and practice following the Government guidance for CV19, as well as providing advice and recommendations for supporting families and carers with home learning for the children not attending settings during lockdown and those that remained closed. Most recently discussions around supporting children's transition to school has been a priority and facilitating sharing information with schools
- The early years SEND team continue to provide support for providers with children who have identified SEND needs and facilitating assessment and advice to support next steps for plans, individual behaviour plans and risk assessments
- Where settings have remained closed the team have worked with owners and nursery group managers to ensure that contact with the local authority has been sustained and information is shared regularly so that they are supported with reopening
- Families and carers with children with identified SEND and complex needs receive a minimum of a weekly call from their allocated teacher to ensure their wellbeing and provide advice for supporting their child at home as well as signposting to other services during lockdown. The team are working with families and settings to plan for and support transition to their new settings in September
- Providing support to follow the guidance and settings own risk assessments and procedure when there has been a potential case of CV19 identified.

Lost Learning – supporting quality home learning during lock down

- The team worked with maintained nursery schools and children's centre staff to develop a home learning pack covering all aspects of the early years curriculum including activities that families can adapt to items they will have easy access to at home, and a section to address children with SEND and sensory needs. Resources such as social stories to support children's understanding of returning to their setting and being able to communicate their feelings and experiences around Covid 19 have also been developed by the service and shared with providers, families and children
- Outdoor learning: another document to support early years practitioners and families with the importance of outdoor learning and how to make the most of this in settings and in local parks / green spaces around Slough was produced and made available
- Assessment aide memoire – a supportive document for early years practitioners looking at good practice in assessment; what to do at different stages in the early years, what you should notice and observe and how assessments are used for planning, provision and supporting the next stage of children's learning including transitions.

- Transition document and tool kit for early years providers to support the planning for children's transition and sharing information as a partnership with parents and the new setting <https://thelink.slough.gov.uk/early-years/early-years-foundation-stage>
- The early years foundation stage, Bursts for Learning <https://www.slough.gov.uk/schools-and-learning/early-years-and-childcare.aspx> covers all aspects of the curriculum
- Recommendations including websites and the Bursts for Learning document have been shared across the town
- Discussions with early years providers is currently focusing on preparing for the autumn term; the returning of children after lockdown and summer holidays as well as settling in new children, children's learning and expectations following the time away from the setting, the emotional and mental wellbeing impact of the current CV19 situation for children, families and staff, what learning looks like in the provision that has been adapted to meet the government guidance of social distancing and risk assessments.

Vulnerable and children of keyworkers

- Following the Government guidance on vulnerable and children of keyworkers, early years providers have been supported to enable them to provide spaces to attend during lockdown. Where settings were unable to remain open, families have been supported to access alternative provision and settings by a dedicated section on the Family Information Service website
- As settings reopened from the 1st June, providers have used the government guidance to identify vulnerable and keyworker children to extend their offer
- The service has gathered and collated information to track the numbers of children attending settings and which of those are vulnerable and keyworker children.

Closure rates from 23 March 2020 and the incremental opening of services inc Children's Centres

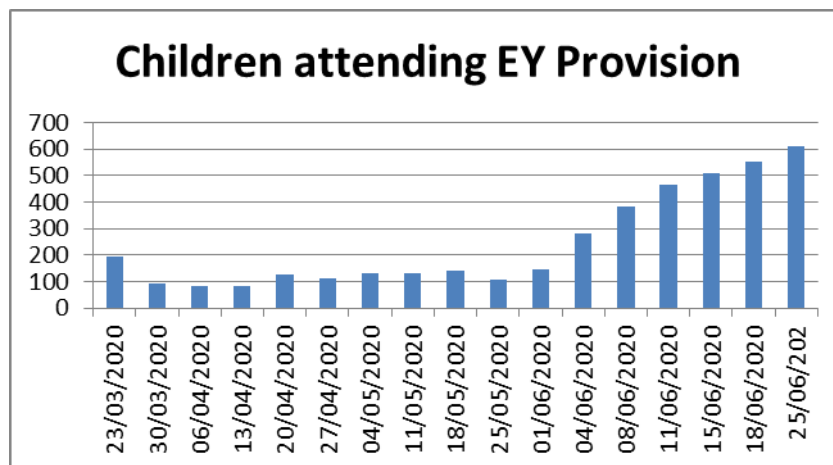
- Penn Road Children's Centre remained open during lockdown with the remaining centres reopening from 01.06.20; except Wexham Road and Chalvey Grove Children's Centres
- Priority vulnerable and key worker children attended the Penn Rd site; nursery managers worked with their staff teams and families to identify children that required ongoing childcare during lockdown
- Penn Rd Children's Centre was able to provide key worker childcare to children whose setting was closed during lockdown
- Staff worked on planning and providing home learning activities including videos which have been shared on social media and as part of the Burst for Learning resource pack.

Training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

- On 1st June the service published information in the daily newsletters regarding online CPD opportunities for sector professionals, this included safeguarding, supporting children with SEND, Introduction to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Health and Social Care Prevent, COVID-19, The Skills Tool Kit and a directory of further courses <https://thelink.slough.gov.uk/early-years/cpd>

Number of children attending early years and childcare provision

- Since lockdown began on 23 March 2020, the lowest number of children attending early years and childcare was on 6th April with 81 children and gradually since restrictions have eased the numbers have incrementally risen to 610 children.



- Throughout June, 85 early years providers were open representing 55% of the total number
- It is anticipated that during July and August another 16 providers will reopen taking the total number to 66% and by September another 26 will open taking the total to 82% (please note this figure fluctuates with the issue of governmental guidance and staff well-being).

Ofsted

- The Service Lead participated in joint interviews with Ofsted and the DfE regarding early years provision which supported Ofsted's work with the DfE through the REACT group (made up of DfE staff from all of their teams, including early years and Regional Schools Commissioners) to help them organise their risk assessment work in relation to cases and re-inspections.
- Settings of concern: the service has continued to work with Ofsted to raise concerns about settings in particular one provider who was evicted during the lockdown and began operating from domestic premises.

Sustainability and sufficiency of provision

- Throughout lockdown some providers have accessed government financial support such as the job retention scheme, self employment scheme, business rates relief, small business grants, business loans and the local authority discretionary grant. This support has been invaluable during a time when many settings were closed or unable to operate at full capacity, meaning income was low and expenditure continued at the same rate. Without this support many settings could have permanently closed. There are a few providers who were ineligible for any governmental support due to their structure and the service continues to have concerns about their financial sustainability.
- The service has raised concerns with the DfE about the sectors' medium and long term financial sustainability, which is primarily down to future participation rates and the uncertainty of how funded early education will be paid.
- Government guidelines initially stipulated that all providers worked in 'bubbles' capping numbers in order to provide a safe environment for children. This meant that many settings have been operating at a loss due to high staffing costs and low participation rates. There is currently very little opportunity for settings to build up income which they would normally do this time of year to financially support the autumn term when participation rates are much lower.
- The service is awaiting confirmation the DfE regarding how local authorities can pay for funded early education. Currently funding can only be paid when a child is in a place (previously places that were available but not accessed were funded). If participation rates are considerably lower in the autumn term and the funding available is also lower, many providers will financially struggle and this could cause them to permanently close.

This would generate a sufficiency issue and impact the council in relation to its statutory duty.

- There are approximately 27 childminders who are uncertain about their continued future following Covid. Numbers of childminders both nationally and locally have been on the decline for many years and the recruitment and retention remains a high priority for the service. We are promoting childminding opportunities and continuing to offer support to existing childminders across the town.

Financial uncertainty issues - the early years service has submitted the following questions to the DfE:

- How are DfE proposing to financially support the long term impact of COVID 19 on the sector?
- How are DfE proposing local authorities pay autumn term early education funding to providers, will this be based on actual number of children or based on actual numbers from previous years/terms? We know many parents will still be apprehensive in September about using early years and childcare provision and this will impact on the sectors' participation rates causing them financial hardship. Also during the summer term many providers would have made a small profit to support the autumn term when numbers drop but staffing levels remain the same, again causing financial hardship in the long term?
- Will updated guidance confirm transition options for September regarding dates, funding to support transitions? Many children will need extra settling in sessions this September so providers will offer staggered starts. Historically, parents continue to send their child/ren to their existing childcare provider whilst their child is settling in with their new provider. This often means splitting the funding which is difficult for the providers to financially sustain (they continue to have the same staffing requirements).
- What operational procedures will early years providers need to put in place with regards to class sizes / bubbles and space requirements and how these might impact on the EYFS Statutory Framework? How will the proposed operational plans link with government support for the sectors financial viability? For instance, less children but high staffing levels to accommodate bubbles, current financial support such as the job retention scheme will not support this way of working.
- Will there be any support with transitions for the MNS sector?

Marketing and promotions

- The service will be implementing marketing plans to help regenerate the market, particularly for new children starting in the autumn term.
- The take up of 2 year old funding is much lower than pre pandemic levels therefore we are looking to raise parent's awareness of the benefits of early education, the funding entitlements and how to access a place.
- Following the reopening of settings the service has shared messages about what the sector is doing to support children and families and what procedures they are putting in place to keep them safe once they start back.
- The marketing materials include specific messages about the use of childminders, as families will be apprehensive about using childcare generally but more specifically childminders.
- Workforce development plans currently focus on the recruitment and retention of childminders. The service is targeting marketing plans at people who may want to continue to work from home and have a keen interest in a career in early years and childcare. We are looking at support packages that help to support people who would like to become a childminder and plan to run recruitment information sessions online in order to support new practitioners into the sector.
- Messages regarding help with childcare costs have also been promoted.
- The service's Bright Futures campaign material has been used to support all promotional work regarding funded early education, childcare and workforce recruitment.

- The Family Information Service have been supporting families to find provision and answer questions that may lead to children starting a placement.

Transition issues with children taking up school places in the autumn term

- Support has been provided for settings and families to confirm offers of school places with the Admissions Team and enable applications to be completed and submitted
- SEND families receiving support from the service are able to discuss preparing for school and planning for September with the new setting
- Identification of children and planning for transition has been discussed with settings and where needed support to contact schools – making use of the new guide
- Preparing for school and signposting settings to websites that they can use with families has formed part of the transition conversations and support provided.

Case studies to illustrate the impact on providers- Appendix 8

- Please see newsletter 10th June for an article from a childminder about her experience of reopening following closure due to Covid
- Please see newsletter 11th June for an article from a children's centre manager about what the children's centres have experienced during the Covid pandemic.

6. Comments of other Committees

This information has not been to any other committees.

7. Conclusion

The early years sector has responded well to the impact of the pandemic and mobilised sufficiently to meet the needs of children of keyworkers and vulnerable children. There remains funding uncertainty for the autumn term which is normally offset by increases during the summer term. Transitional flexibilities will support providers through financial uncertainty. If resources are not forthcoming this will impact of the sufficiency of providers and early education and childcare places which has a direct impact on the council's statutory duties.

8. Appendices Attached

Appendix A – Newsletters (referenced from case studies regarding the impact of Covid19 on early years providers).

9. Background Papers

1. Early Years Strategy 2019-22 (on request)