

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 APRIL 2008



LIGHT TOUCH REVIEW WORKING GROUP

PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION (Early years Provision)



Making a difference where you live

Introduction

A Working Group was established, with Members from Durham County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee to identify challenges, policy changes and opportunities for change around pre-school provision.

Approach

The Working Group consisting of Councillors Armstrong, Barker, Burlison, Coates, Holroyd and Stradling agreed to take evidence from key witnesses involved directly in the provision of pre-school provision. This included Mr F Firth, Nominated Strategic Officer, Sure Start, Janet Bennett, Primary Inspector, Pauline Cogan, Children's Centre Cluster Manager, Barbara Wilkin, Head Teacher of Horden Nursery School, and Fiona Fitzsimmons, Family Nurse. The Group would receive information on the pre-school provision that was currently in place in County Durham, and future plans. The Group determined that it would like to know how family engagement took place and how health visitors linked into that provision.

Information

Childcare Act 2006

1. The early year's provision was underpinned by the Childcare Act 2006, which for the first time enshrined such provision in law. The two main objectives of the Act were to improve the well-being of all young children and reduce inequalities by driving up the quality of childcare provision while rationalising inspection and regulation to give parents assurance of a minimum national standard for the quality of provision.

Sure Start

2. The three 'ages' of Sure Start are as follows:

- The First Age- to work with parents-to-be, parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual, social and emotional development of babies and young children, particularly those who are disadvantaged, so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school and thereby break the cycle of disadvantage for the current generation of children
- The Second Age- to achieve:
 - A Sure Start for all children by providing integrated and high quality services, so they can grow up to contribute positively to their communities and society as a whole;
 - Better outcomes for all children, and particularly, closing the gap in outcomes between children living in poverty and the wider child population;
 - Better outcomes for all parents, increased opportunity to effectively participate in the labour market, ensuring pathways out of poverty and strengthened families and communities;
 - Better outcomes for communities, including less crime, higher productivity, a stronger labour market and the building of a civic society

- The Third Age-
 - To support the delivery of “Choice for Parents: The Best Start for Children”, which was the Government’s Ten Year Strategy for Childcare;
 - To develop a core set of services in and around Children’s Centres and schools;
 - To improve the development of young children, narrow the gap in achievement between children in the most disadvantaged areas and the rest of England and to contribute to reducing the proportion of children living in workless households.

3. Important themes of Sure Start were to work with parents and children, closing the gaps in outcomes between those children living in social disadvantage and the wider population, enabling parents to work, ensuring pathways of poverty, developing integrated core services in and around Children’s Centres and schools, and strengthening families and communities.

The Early Years and Childcare Grant for 2008-2011

4. The Early Years and Childcare Grant for 2008-2011 is dedicated revenue funding for Sure Start Children’s Centres and other early years and childcare purposes. The Grant would support the new phase of delivery of early years and childcare underpinned by the new statutory framework in the Childcare Act 2006. There is one-off funding for extended services, a 2 year pilot in Easington which ends March 2009, and PSA (Parent Support Advisers) Parenting Pilot which ends September 2008. The 2 year pilot in Easington, which involved 1,000 children receiving 7½ hours provision each week, had resulted in good learning outcomes. The PSA Parenting pilot in the Bishop Auckland and Dales area which enabled children to either stay in school or get back in to school. Funding for this pilot was made available from the Standards Fund.

Children’s Centres

5. Children’s Centres, which were developed from the pioneering work started by Sure Start Local Programmes, and were viewed as the key mechanism for improving outcomes for children pre-birth to 5 years, reducing inequalities in outcomes between the most disadvantaged and the rest, and helping to bring an end to child poverty. Children’s Centres were a national Government initiative, and the Local Authority had developed the programme in accordance with the rules set out nationally. There were three phases between 2004 and 2010 - by the end of phase 2 in March 2008 all of the most disadvantaged Super Output Areas would have a Children’s Centre, and when phase 3 was completed by 2010, there would be a Children’s Centre for every community. Wherever possible, Children’s Centres had been attached to schools to forge a partnership, to integrate play and learning and that the teacher in school provides the required teacher involvement in the Children’s Centres .

Super Output Areas

6. In the 30% Super Output Areas the core services which must be delivered are Early Years Provision, family support and parental outreach, child and family services, parental involvement and links with Jobcentre Plus. Beyond the 30% Super Output Areas there is some flexibility. The Local Authority and its statutory partners along with local communities, must decide on those services to provide the minimum, based on mapping local needs and existing provision.

Private, Volunteer and Independent (PVI)

7. There would be a clear focus on PVI sector in the next three years to ensure it took the Early Year Foundation stage seriously, ensure that more children reached a good level of development at age 5, narrow the gap between those children who do least well and the rest, and this included children with SEN, those living in poverty and those from particular minority ethnic communities. The focus on the PVI sector would also provide rigorous support and challenge to early years settings, and would fund the training and development of the early year's workforce and ensure there was a Graduate Leader in every PVI setting by 2015.

8. There was a requirement for all Children's Centres staff to be qualified to NVQ3 level however this is not a requirement for the PVI sector. Most providers pay minimum wages which results in higher staff turnover and low wages can impact negatively on the quality of provision for children.

9. There is tension between the minimum standards set for the County Council and those in the PVI. Currently the inspection frameworks that apply to the PVI sector and county council provision are different which means that outcomes can not be used to compare quality between the sectors.

Funding

10. Funding was allocated to strengthen the support and challenge to settings in order to continuously improve the quality of practice, develop the early year's workforce to respond effectively to the stronger support and challenge and to directly support the recruitment and/or training of a graduate leader for every PVI day-care setting in the Local Authority.

Visit to Hordens Children's Centre

11. The Group visited Hordens Children's Centre and was impressed by the facilities and ethos at the centre. The Group learnt about the effective practices in early year's provision. This included how a child's emotional wellbeing was paramount, they should be happy and confident, independent but involved in activities, all of which should be based on secure relationships, they should be able to concentrate and then work with others, use their senses, their day be based around routine however every part of a day has to be special for a child. They learn through organisation, adults plan activities and are role models, and children activate activities themselves. They need to develop personal, social, and communication skills, and be independent, have the ability to make choices, to take responsibility, to empathise and support, to contribute to ideas and share with others. They need to be challenged so they can solve problems, and learn and apply new skills.

12. Practitioners need to be creative and committed. The importance of having good staff was emphasised and that quality does not come cheap. Their main resource was people and they need to invest in that. All workers within early years setting receive continuous training so they all work in the same way.

13. The early years centres have grown as independent bodies, with every partner other than schools and GP's having a duty to comply. In future the PCT will have to be more involved in centres and supply staff. There are no explicit national indicators for early year's centres although there are some that are indirectly linked.

Family Nurse Partnership

14. A nurse practitioner gave a presentation to the Group about the family nurse partnership. Horden was one of 10 pilots schemes which came about as a result of the Social Exclusion Action Plan 'Reaching Out'. There have been reductions in child poverty, unemployment and crime, and they now need to help those families caught in a cycle of disadvantage and exclusion by earlier and better identification of at risk families, earlier and more effective intervention and prevention, building on the strengths of existing universal health visiting and midwifery services, builds on policy successes for children and families and multi-faceted risks need multi-faceted but integrated responses.

15. As part of the Family Nurse Partnership nurses visit first time parents from pregnancy until a child is age 2. The goals are to improve pregnancy outcomes, improve child health and development and future school readiness and achievement, and involve parents' economic self-sufficiency. Consistent results have shown improvements in women's antenatal health, reductions in children's injuries, fewer subsequent pregnancies, greater intervals between births, increase in father's involvement, increase in employment, reductions in welfare and food stamps, and improvements in school readiness. Nurses have been recruited into the programme from health visiting, and are able to deliver on their promise to help because of their high level of clinical skill in physical health, behavioural and social health.

16. It was acknowledged that they needed more family nurses in order to tackle a bigger group of children, and that funding for this should be mainstreamed. The Group learnt that like any other hard to reach groups it was difficult getting the vulnerable involved, so it was about making services more accessible, and it was very resource intensive. Changes in the workforce in the children's centres were being made so that they all came under family support, and that so there is a cohort of family workers to support other practitioners.

Main Findings

The Working Group, after considering the issues suggest that:-

- The pilot on the review of health visitors (family nurse practitioner) was welcomed, and support that this should be rolled out to other areas funding dependent.
- Services for children must be of high quality if they are going to impact positively on outcomes. This means investment in well trained staff, a commitment to continued professional development, and funding to provide support for evaluation and improvement to services.
Funding of projects that focus on Pre-School Provision should be supported and considered for mainstream funding.
- Welcome the changes being made to the workforce in the children's centres so that they all come under family support and so that there is a cohort of family workers to support other practitioners.
- That the Corporate Parent Panel be informed about this work.

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Chair of the Working Group**

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