

The Childcare Sector in Staffordshire: The current picture, future challenges and implications for Safeguarding

1.0 Context – Childcare sector & statutory duties

Under legislation, all three and four year olds are entitled to fifteen hours of free early education/childcare and approximately forty per cent (32% in Staffordshire – scheme known as Think2) of less advantaged two year olds. From September, most working families will be entitled to thirty hours of free early education/childcare. Staffordshire is currently one of eight local authorities trialling an offer (415 places).

Staffordshire benefits from a mixed economy of provision across the county. Access to different types of provision in summer term for three year olds was:

- 81% in Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI)
- 16% in schools

This highlights how important the PVI sector is in Staffordshire in terms of childcare sufficiency.

2.0 Free entitlement: Take up & quality

Think 2 take up peaked at 86% in autumn term against a national take up of 68%. Take up is also good amongst cohorts from vulnerable groups:

- Child Protection = 98%
- Children in Need = 91%
- Looked After Children = 83%
- SEND = 78% (with a further 9% being supported to access places)

Currently, 96% of places in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector (non-domestic) are in good and outstanding provision. 84% of Childminders operate at good or outstanding.

3.0 Sufficiency duty

Under section 6 of the Childcare Act 2006, local authorities are required to 'manage the childcare market'. This is essentially involves working with the PVI sector and schools to create, develop and sustain places aligned to demand and changing demographics.

4.0 Future challenges and implications for safeguarding

With the exception of two Nursery Schools, SCC no longer provides or commissions childcare and therefore, a sustainable, quality childcare sector is essential. Often, settings will see vulnerable children more than any other professional so they play an essential role in the safeguarding and monitoring of children. Challenges over the next eighteen months are:

- Sufficiency – With a new 30 hour entitlement imminent, there is a requirement to sustain current provision and develop new places in identified areas. We are working with providers to ensure that '30 hour' places are not at the expense of 'Think2' places as a result of sector re-modelling. We are also trying to ensure that the introduction of a new local funding formula will not result in closure of provision. Many providers are concerned that the introduction of 30 hour childcare is impinging on their opportunity to privately charge parents for hours beyond the current entitlement. In addition, retaining childminders continues to be an issue (nationally). In Staffordshire, we have 450 less childminders operating than in 2009.
- Quality – Maintaining an overall high percentage of good and outstanding settings countywide as sector support is reduced.

5.0 Mitigating risks

We will initiate and continue with a number of key actions to ensure we maintain and develop a thriving mixed economy of provision that keeps children safe and supports best outcomes. These include:

- Twice yearly sufficiency audits and sector analysis. This provides us with intelligence to RAG rate areas in terms of priorities for business/development support.
- Close working with School place planning team – We work closely to share information with colleagues and ensure any decisions regarding new schools and expansions is cognisant of current and future childcare requirements
- Early Years Take up Dashboard – We have now enhanced our analysis to understand where our most vulnerable children are attending, by type and quality of provision. This helps us to know where to target support.
- New Local Funding Formula for Early Years – Introducing a new formula will signal an end to the current variable rate model where different providers receive different rates, simplifying a model from sixteen bandings to three. We hope this will help sustainability in the sector.
- Continue to target our sector support in Entrust by:
 - Focussing on welfare requirements & safeguarding which encompasses, policies, procedures and recruitment with all providers
 - Intensive packages of support for Requires Improvement and Inadequate settings

- Undertake analysis of the core themes for 'Inadequate' graded settings to learn lessons and share with all providers
- Introduce a new 'Attendance Policy' which offers support and guidance to settings to ensure families are supported into consistent attendance patterns and routines and provides information on who to contact for further support
- Increase the number of audits to support attendance monitoring and ensure providers understand the importance of regular and consistent attendance.
- Continue to pull together and triangulate all information regarding settings causing concern at our Nursery Education Funding (NEF) and Sufficiency Operational Group. Escalate issues to Ofsted (as the regulator of PVI provision) via our termly meetings.
- Continue to focus on improving the uptake of Think2 places & closer working with Families First to ensure vulnerable children access free entitlements.

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