

# SCRUTINY REPORT



**MEETING:** Children's Scrutiny Report  
**DATE:** 23/11/22  
**SUBJECT:** Early Years and School Readiness  
**REPORT FROM:** Cllr Lucy Smith  
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## 1.0 BACKGROUND

This report provides some detail of the council's duties linked to its early years delivery and how this supports children's readiness for school. Early years is defined as children from conception to age 5. School readiness is measured through assessment when children enter school at reception.

The report provides information on the council duties for its early years population which contributes to children's readiness for school namely,

- Universal Offer
- Sufficiency
- Early Years Foundation Stage and school readiness

The report also provides some wider national context which members may wish to be sighted on and scrutinise over the next three years,

- The first 1001 days (Leadsom Review)
- The Family Hub agenda

Finally, the report provides some detail on the Bury picture including some of the issues for consideration for the council to meet requirements of its delivery of early years services and the impact on school readiness.

### 1.1 Early Years – Duties on the Council

#### Early Years Universal Offer

- 1.2 Early Years is defined as children pre-birth to age 5 and the universal offer refers to the offer available to all families with children aged 0-5. The council has certain duties placed on it to deliver a universal offer to families some of which include, conception to birth support, and parenting support around key development stages (weaning/walking/starting nursery/home environment, learning)

In short as part of its duties the council should provide parents/carers access to support across a range of needs and services. This is usually delivered through the councils, children centres

Children centres are defined through the Sure Start initiative and, until 2015 were inspected by Ofsted. The inspection process was suspended pending government review - it was not revoked.

- 1.3 Current legislation regarding children centres is contained in the Childcare Act 2006 and underpinned by the Sure Start statutory guidance which was updated in 2013. The guidance seeks to assist Local Authorities and partners by making it clear what they must provide. The government guidance lays out an expectation that the universal early years offer is delivered both through children centres as well as some off-site delivery.
- 1.4 The children centre offer should improve the well being of early years children (0-5) in the following areas
- physical and mental health and emotional well-being
  - protection from harm and neglect.
  - education, training, and recreation:
  - the contribution made by them to society.
  - social and economic well-being.
  - Reduce inequalities between young children in those areas.
  - make arrangements to secure that early childhood services in their area are provided in an integrated manner.

The early years offer particularly between the age of 0-2 provides the foundation for children to be ready for nursery having met the basic developmental milestones to support ongoing learning.

### **Sufficiency of Child Care**

- 1.5 As well as a universal offer delivered to families, the council has a responsibility to ensure that there is sufficient childcare provision across the borough to allow parents to access free childcare in line with government eligibility criteria. Childcare is accessed via its early years' settings  
Early years settings are made up of childminders, playgroups, crèches, nurseries and before and after school provision across the borough, ranging from very small business models to larger group chains.
- 1.6 Bury has 183 early years providers. 72 are group-based settings (nurseries) and 111 are childminders. All providers are regulated by Ofsted.  
Whilst these are private businesses and therefore not managed by the Council, the Council has a responsibility under law to
- Secure free early education places for 2-, 3 and 4 year olds in line with the government offer which provides entitlements for parents to access a number of hours free childcare dependent on their own circumstances and age of the child. All parents regardless of circumstances should have access to some free childcare and the Council must ensure it has this available – this is called sufficiency
  - Fulfil demand across the eligibility criteria including any children who move into the Borough.
  - Complete a Childcare Sufficiency Assessment annually giving a picture of the different factors surrounding the supply and demand of childcare
  - Proactively, provide information to parents about its childcare provision and how they can access it.

- Undertake outreach to identify disadvantaged children and promote the take up of free places
- Act as broker between parental demand and capacity in any given area.

Sufficiency of childcare settings and good take up of free places ensures that children have access to the Early Years Foundation Stage which forms the basis of early years education and prepares children for school and for school readiness

### **Early Years Foundation Stage and School Readiness**

- 1.7 The early years foundation stage in short sets out the curricula activity for early years settings. It sets an expectation that children will receive support across 7 learning areas
- Communication and language
  - Physical development
  - Personal social and emotional; development
  - Literacy
  - Mathematics
  - Understanding the world
  - Expressive arts and design

Between the ages of 2 and 3 children are assessed against these areas of development to track progress and then are assessed again at school, in reception against the same criteria and this criterion (called the early learning goals - ELG) defines whether a child is perceived to have achieved a good level of development (GLD) which is the measure used for school readiness.

## **2 National Drivers**

### **The first 1001 day (Leadsom Review)**

- 2.1 Scrutiny and interest in the early years offer has gained traction in the last two years. The Leadsom review commissioned by Government and completed in 2021 in response to the impact of the pandemic on very young babies and infants, set out a vision for support to children in the first 1001 days (conception to age 2) The review concluded that **'2 is too late'**

***The 1,001 days from pregnancy to the age of two sets the foundations for an individual's cognitive, emotional and physical development. There is a well established and growing international consensus on the importance of this age range.***

The review laid out certain areas for action, namely

- A seamless coherent and joined up start for life offer
- Family Hubs to be established as a place for families to access start for life services
- Designing digital virtual and telephone offers for families
- Developing a modern skilled workforce to meet changing needs for families
- Improving data, evaluation outcomes and proportionate inspection
- Ensuring local and national accountability through improved leadership across the sector

The review sets out greater expectations on councils in respect of its universal offer for the first years of life (first 1001 days) and builds on the expectations already enshrined in guidance, broadening the support through its Family Hub initiative.

This also sets the ambition for greater integration across the early system i.e. providers, the council, public health, midwifery and health visiting working together to share data to ensure targeted support to our more vulnerable cohort.

## 2.2 Family Hubs

In 2020 the government confirmed its commitment to develop family hubs by providing 2.5 million investment monies to trial the concept in several LAs. Between 2020 and 2021 more funding was made available (20 million) and in 2022 another 82 million was provided to 75 Local Authorities to develop Hubs in their area. Bury was unable to apply for additional funding as we were not able to provide the early years data required to evidence system maturity. The additional monies provided in phase two were not allocated to Bury as we did not meet the criteria in terms of indices of deprivation. Bury is one of two GM localities that has not been granted monies but who are progressing the agenda to ensure we are in line with national drive and if there is a further phase of funding, we will be in a better position to apply.

2.3 The focus of family hubs is centred on the requirement to reform public service driven through children's partnerships and specifically has directed much of the funding and guidance to respond to the Leadsom Review and development of the universal early years offer. For those councils that received funding, 60% must be directed to early years programmes.

## 3 The Bury Picture

The 0-5 cohort equates to 7% of Bury's population

Age	Female	Male	Total
0	1,044	1,079	2,123
1	973	1,207	2,180
2	1,129	1,205	2,334
3	1,110	1,100	2,210
4	1,135	1,268	2,403
5	1,179	1,268	2,447
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6,561</b>	<b>7,043</b>	<b>13,604</b>

### 3.1 Children Centres and Universal Offer

Not dissimilar to many councils Bury has reduced its investment in early years delivery over the past 5 years. Initially all councils received monies to build sure start children centres as part of a huge programme to invest in early years in the early 2000s. In Bury this saw the development of 14 children centres. Children centres had to be built in areas based on local demographics so where there were higher needs and indices of deprivation more centres were built. The core premise of children centres was that they had to be built within communities and within walking distance of families.

Since 2015 Bury has had to respond to reduced financial investment and has disestablished or repurposed most of its centres (9).

In 2019 the council agreed to disestablish its early years workforce and merge this into its targeted early help teams due to demand for targeted support for children and increase of children entering social care services. Whilst necessary, this significantly reduced capacity in the early help division to deliver against the required early years universal offer with much of the resource now focused on working with families in a case management and targeted way

3.2 Currently Bury has three centres in Whitefield, Redvales and Radcliffe that are fully operative and from where some limited early years services are delivered from but there has been a reduction in delivery and the range of services available. This has included

some withdrawal of health services such as midwifery and joint work with health visitors which through the family hub initiative we will seek to rebuild so that families can access a more integrated and comprehensive offer through their local centre.

- 3.3 Additionally in light of the Leadsom review and the family hub initiative the recent children's directorate restructure has re-established some of the early years provision through the creation of a small early year's team, including a manager and 5 early years workers. This will be an agile team which will start to develop delivery across the 5 neighbourhoods out of 5 retained children centres

Woodbank children centre will be established as an early years base and centre of excellence, to start to rebuild expertise, including data collection and analysis, to drive through improvement. It will provide support to families out of the centre as well as build back some key deliverables to be offered from Whitefield, Redvales and Radcliffe. The team will look to map provision across the 5 neighbourhoods to start to rebuild some universal delivery out of other community spaces to ensure availability to families.

The Family hub initiative which will be developed across the 5 neighbourhoods starting with East Bury will have a renewed core early years offer. This will include midwives delivering out of local hubs as well as building better integration with health visitors and other universal early years partners in the voluntary sector, to start to increase our universal offer in each neighbourhood but crucially to ensure it is an integrated offer across key stakeholders, namely health, the council and voluntary sector.

Additionally, we are working with IT to secure a system for recording and supporting data management across the universal delivery so we can better track support to families especially in the 0-2 year range (the 1001 critical days) including impact and outcomes for children to support better targeted service delivery.

3.3 The health economy is crucial to the delivery of early years services especially from health visitors who provide the universal offer including, ante natal support, new birth visits, 6-8-week visit, 8-12 month assessment called the ages and stages questionnaire and the 2-2.5 year assessment. These assessments can identify developmental needs even prior to take up of nursery provision and support identification of the need for targeted work with families to support children's development and readiness for school.

### 3.4 Sufficiency

The council is required to have sufficient childcare places for families to access free childcare in line with eligibility. Bury has sufficient places required to meet its sufficiency target. Sufficiency is tracked and supported through a sufficiency lead as well as through the brokerage system which every council has in place through its Family Information Service, to support application of childcare places

- 3.5 As part of its duty in relation to sufficiency Bury early years advisory team track and support the quality of childcare offered to our children to ensure that across the sector education is delivered in line with the early years foundation stage, contributing to overall good level of development and ensuring our children are school ready. Every year the council has a duty to complete a childcare sufficiency assessment to ensure it tracks availability.

Our assessment this year evidence that there are sufficient childcare places and that currently our 2 year old take up is at 77%. Take up for 3 year olds is at 94%. Bury compares well in relation to take up which is nationally at 69% for 2 year olds and is higher than government target for 3 year old take up which is at 90%

- 3.6 The quality of childcare in Bury is also good, with 97% of our child minders judged to be good or outstanding and 98% of nurseries.

Our early years advisors provide universal support to the sector through early years network support and targeted training. Targeted support is delivered through specific programmes to support the ongoing development of quality of practice and drive

improvement. If a setting is judged inadequate or requires improvement by Ofsted, then the setting can request targeted in-house support from their early year's advisor. We currently have no settings judged to be inadequate in Bury and 98% of our settings are good or outstanding

### 3.7 School Readiness

Up to 2019 Bury was above national average for children assessed as having a good level of development (GLD), or assessed as school ready, at 71% which was in line with national averages and above the northwest which was at 69%

The first reporting on GLD post pandemic showed a decrease, nationally in children ready for school with the England average reducing to 65% and the northwest reducing to 62%. Burys grading was at 63% which was below the national average though still slightly above the region. However, it dropped further than our northwest statistical neighbour by 1%.

The breakdown across Bury is,

#### GLD Breakdown

Area	Overall GLD	Boys	Girls	SEND
National	65%			
GMCA	62%			
Bury	63.3%			
Whitefield	67.4%	64.3%	70.4%	18.5%
North	68.6%	61.5%	75.9%	9.1%
East Bury	57.3%	52.2%	62.3%	11.6%
West Bury	65.0%	59.9%	70.8%	21.6%
Prestwich	61%	58.8%	63.4%	18.3%

Children with SEN achieving GLD in Bury is below the national average (20%), at 15% overall but is in line with GM and the same or better than most GM localities.

### 3.8 In response to the drop in GLD a survey has been completed across a number of early years providers to assess the development of children as they enter an early years setting to look at how we can address support to our children and to inform the development of the universal offer. Some of the findings are of concern and emphasise the impact on our 0-2 year olds, of the last two years.

22% of all providers contributed to the survey so whilst a small number it is a reasonable percent to suggest findings will be replicated across the system. Of note, 78% of settings said speech and language had deteriorated, 68% said there was a noticeable impact on children's emotional wellbeing with 38% describing children as being more vulnerable in terms of lower socio-economic context. Bury is working in partnership with GMCA on pathways to talking and we have a considerable programme to support early years speech language and communication. We have a project worker part funded through Public Health to deliver training on Wellcom an early assessment on speech and language to determine children's development in this area and identify support needs. In the last two years we have trained 194 Wellcom leads across our early years and school system.

Additionally, we are working with settings to encourage the home learning environment, equipping parents to support their children through play, communication etc in the home, to support children's development.

## 4 Considerations and Risks

### 4.1 Universal Offer – There is significant challenge for the council to meet the requirements of its universal offer. The Leadsom review highlights the intent to re-establish the inspection framework which was formerly linked to children centres and carried out by Ofsted. The family hub initiative together with the re-established small early years practitioner team will provide a vehicle to rebuild some universal provision, in partnership with other providers in the health economy and the third sector and gives Bury an opportunity to deliver something

new and more bespoke. This will focus on an offer to families for the first 1001 days. A comprehensive plan has been developed across partners to support this delivery. As well a task group has been established to start to build a system whereby, we can again record and manage data in relation to early years delivery including an outcomes framework which measures impact on children.

- 4.2 Sufficiency – There is availability of good childcare in Bury and good take up of the free childcare 2 years and above. However, the workforce in childcare settings is some of the lowest paid and the costs of childcare provision against funding provided by government to councils to provide free places is challenging and likely to become more so in the current economic climate. The early years sector is vulnerable to market forces, and we may see some in the sector unable to continue to afford to continue delivery which may impact on future sufficiency.  
That said there is good tracking of childcare sufficiency and monitoring which means we will be able to predict and respond to changes in the market. Direct meetings with Early Years lead in the Department for Education as well as Ofsted has allowed us and other localities across GM to raise issues directly on the challenges to the sector which is also now receiving national attention.
- 4.3 School Readiness - The early years division is working at pace with partners through the development of its first family hub in East Bury to deliver a coherent and joined up offer to families especially in the 0-2 age range. This will support children to be 'ready' for nursery and support settings to deliver against the outcome's framework of the Early Years Foundation, so our children are school ready.
- 4.4 Our early years advisory team provide support through network meetings including training as well as direct support to the sector in delivery of the Early Years Foundation stage where this is required.
- 4.5 Bury is well connected with Greater Manchester Combined Authority, School Readiness Board and has contributed to the development of a shared delivery model (8 stage delivery model) which supports the journey for children through early years to school readiness. This will inform the early years delivery model for family hubs and ensure the seamless delivery of services to our youngest children
- 4.6 The changes to the early years' service in 2019 included the decommissioning of the bespoke early years system which provided the platform for recording much of the early years delivery work and whilst there is work being completed in the corporate performance team to bring data together this is not currently available. This means that data in respect of early years is difficult to scrutinise and to layer the journey for children through birth to school. This includes data from other sources such as midwives and health visitors which it is crucial to triangulate to accurately track the development of our youngest children. Bury is part of a GMCA pilot linked to digitisation of health records so that the information from the ages and stages questionnaires can be triangulated with other data to help us identify those children and families who may require more targeted support. Once this is available this will support our data maturity and analysis.

We have seen a rise in our early years cohort requiring support through an education health, care plan (EHCP) as children are presenting at nursery with some global delay. In 2019 pre pandemic there were 60 requests for SEN support, but this increased to 121 children in 2021 and is continuing to rise. Good data would allow us to review the ages and stages questionnaires at an earlier opportunity and reach out to families more quickly to offer support prior to entry to nursery.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Early years for children and especially the first 1001 days is one of the most crucial development stages which lays the foundation for learning and future achievements. The

current GLD data evidence a drop in children being ready for school and whilst this is not unique to Bury, there are some gaps in universal provision which may compound the impact on babies and infants, of the pandemic.

The Childrens Directorate and the early years division is responding to this through a significant transformation programme, which includes building a comprehensive universal offer in line with the 1001 days agenda and there is clear commitment across key stakeholders to create a seamless offer to families.

The expertise in the early years' service and the high quality of the childcare in Bury will support the development and delivery of the universal offer which will support children to be ready for nursery and subsequently ready for school.

Improved data across the health and care economy will be a crucial element to support better targeting and support to our more vulnerable children at an earlier opportunity which still requires significant development.

Members will want to consider how regularly they wish to scrutinise the developments in early years and the impact for children as well as consider any appropriate actions to ensure this challenging agenda is delivered against other competing needs across the children's system.

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**List of Background Papers: -**

**Contact Details: -**

*Sandra Bruce -Assistant Director Early Help and School Readiness*

Executive Director sign off Date: \_\_\_15/11/22\_\_\_\_\_

JET Meeting Date: \_\_\_\_\_