

SCRUTINY REPORT



**MEETING: Children's
Scrutiny Report**

**DATE: 16th January
2024**

**SUBJECT: Early Years
and School Readiness**

**REPORT FROM: Cllr
Lucy Smith**

**CONTACT OFFICER: Sandra Bruce- Assistant Director Early Help and School
Readiness**

1.0 BACKGROUND

This report provides information on the work undertaken in the Early Years services since the last report to Overview and Scrutiny, 12 months ago, in November 2022. The report outlines the progress we have made in building back our early years offer and the impact of this on our youngest children. The previous report is provided as an appendix for information.

This report provides updated information on,

- Reshape of the Early Years Service and increase in the early years offer
- Roll out of the Family Hubs
- Government drivers

Finally, the report provides some detail on the current Bury picture including sufficiency, school readiness data and two year take up including areas we have seen impact from improvements made.

Finally, the report sets out some further issues for consideration which may inform future scrutiny of this area of work

Re-shape of the Early Years Service

- 1.1 Early Years is defined as children pre-birth to age 5. The council has certain duties placed on it to deliver a universal offer to children and parents within this key stage of family life, 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 services to meet needs and provide children with the best start in life. This offer is usually delivered through the councils, children centres.

Children centres are defined through the Sure Start initiative and, until 2015 were inspected by Ofsted. As noted in the report in 2022 the children centre offer was significantly reduced in Bury and by 2019 there were no dedicated centres.

- 1.2 The re-shape of the Early Years Service has sought to build back some capacity to deliver against the statutory duties from some remaining centres as well as build a service that is agile and able to adapt to the new government drivers specifically in terms of the focus on the first 1001 days and the Family Hub agenda
- 1.3 The restructure in Early Years in 2022/23 has sought to bring back those functions that had moved to different divisions, to support a cohesive early years service that reflected the statutory requirements, namely the return of
 - Early Years finance Lead – managing the funding associated with childcare
 - Early Years Family information Officer – Supporting the brokerage and family information service
 - Early years lead for SEND

As well as the creation of some dedicated early years practitioners who have started to roll out the new universal offer.

The team is now established under a new service lead and is working closely together, sharing expertise and building stronger data governance and performance across the early years system.

Early Years Offer

- 1.4 Whilst Bury originally had 19 children centres situated in its most challenging wards this is now reduced to 5. Whilst there was some activity delivered from some centres this was minimal and without dedicated practitioner resource. Through the restructure and introduction of a small workforce (5 practitioners) we have worked to build back some of this offer with plans to extend this in 2024.
- 1.5 We have also looked to provide an offer from other sites to improve our reach and connectivity. We have focused on an offer in line with our LET'S strategy and delivery across the 5 neighbourhoods.
As we have built back and begun to deliver the offer we are starting to collate data and whilst this is in the early stages already, we have seen an increase between quarter 1 and quarter 2 of 2023 of parents and children accessing our sessions. At the sessions we create space for children to explore all elements of the early years foundation stages, namely
 - Communication and language
 - Physical development
 - Personal social and emotional; development
 - Literacy
 - Mathematics
 - Understanding the world
 - Expressive arts and design

If children and parents are supported to help children play and learn we know this will have an impact on our children's outcomes in terms of their readiness for school but also beyond. The early years foundation stages set a course for life and it is imperative that we continue to build our offer to provide the best start for all families in Bury. A robust early years offer is central to reducing inequalities across the Borough.

Woodbank Children Centre – Based in the north neighbourhood

In 2023 Woodbank was designated as our early years centre and all staff in the early years service are now based there so that they can collaborate, plan and deliver services across the borough.

From Woodbank we now deliver maternity services, training, networks and development opportunities for our early years providers. We also deliver a weekly Stay and Play session for children age 0-5 years, a baby stay and play session for babies 0-1 year, a parent carer drop-in session, a 5-week Sensational baby course for new babies and first-time parents aimed at support bonding and attachment, Speech language and communication and supporting parents to understand how their baby develops. We also host a monthly drop-in session delivered by the DWP.

From no delivery, in 2023 we are now averaging 23 sessions every quarter and in the last quarter 591 parents and children attended the building to take part in group sessions.

Whitefield Children Centre -Based in Whitefield neighbourhood

We are now delivering from our Whitefield centre which also includes maternity services and sessions for parents with young children. We also deliver a weekly Stay and Play session for children age 0-5 years, a baby stay and play session for babies 0-1 year, a parent carer drop in session which is co delivered by our portage team, a 5 week Sensational baby course for new babies and first time parents aimed at support bonding and attachment, Speech language and communication and supporting parents to understand how their baby develops.

Twinkle Boost also deliver 2 sessions each week to support children with emerging need and SEND in the development of their speech and language.

We also host a monthly drop-in session delivered by the DWP.

We are now delivering an average of 25 sessions a quarter and in our last quarter, 595 parents and children attended the sessions

Radcliffe Children Centre - Based in our West neighbourhood

We are now delivering maternity services We also deliver a weekly Stay and Play session for children age 0-5 years, a baby stay and play session for babies 0-1 year, a parent carer drop in session which is co delivered by our portage team, a 5 week Sensational baby course for new babies and first time parents aimed at support bonding and attachment, Speech language and communication and supporting parents to understand how their baby develops.

We also host a monthly drop-in session delivered by the DWP.

Through our sessions to parents, we reached 802 parents and children in the last quarter through 25 sessions

Prestwich

Currently we do not have a centre in Prestwich but we are currently exploring options.

Through dedicating one of our roles as an apprentice family worker. Linkes to the Charedi community we now have an apprentice form the community who we are employing o work specifically to support that community and develop the parent and child offer

We are also exploring use of our building at Toodle Hill to start to deliver more parent child sessions in this neighbourhood. We are closely linked to the PSLTs and are working with leads to explore other venue options for delivery

Alternative Settings

All childrens centre sessions are full and we have a waiting list, once our new staff start in January, we will be delivering more stay play opportunities and launching a new session for children aged 1-2 years called inbetweeners.

1.6 Outdoor sessions

In addition to the offer in centres we now deliver outdoor sessions across our park areas. This is an area we are growing, and early data analysis suggests this supports greater school readiness for our boys. Where we have had park sessions, we can see improved school readiness in our male cohorts.

In the first two quarters of 2023 we have seen over 1000 parents with children attend. Each week we deliver from a larger park and one of our smaller parks within our most deprived areas. We ensure we chose and rotate the parks, so we have a presence in the north and the south of borough each week.

Portage Drop Ins

Our Portage service, Early Years workers and the SEND HV deliver a weekly stay and play session from the SEND hub in Radcliffe in conjunction with Bury together, this session supports families with children with emerging needs and SEND aged 0-5 years. All of our sessions have been full in the last quarter with 70 children attending in total.

Form a very low base and within 12 we have been able to develop a presence and to start to connect again with our families with young children. We are receiving positive feedback and have significant demand for our sessions.

Family Hubs

1.7 The last scrutiny report set out the government agenda linked to the 1001 days (support to families from conception to age 2) and the Family Hub agenda

The focus of family hubs is centred on the requirement to reform public services driven through children's partnerships and specifically to the development of the universal early years offer as well as the wider early help prevention agenda.

1.8 During the end of 2022 and 2023 we have worked with partners to develop and deliver on the first family hub in Bury, this is situated in East Bury and replaces what was the children centre, developing both the early years offer alongside the extended family offer

Whilst the hub only opened in October 2023, we have extended our early years offer form here which includes maternity services, breast feeding support, DWP drop-in session's, early attachment services as well as the more traditional stay and play sessions.

Since the opening of the hub, we have developed and delivered the following sessions:

- Sensational baby 1 full course has been delivered with a second planned to commence in January.
- Building Blocks to words a 5-week GMCA pilot programme for parents
- Parent Carer drop in sessions
- Parent stay and play session delivered by a community member

From January we will expand our offer to include further sessions for parents and families.

As we move through 2024 a work group has been established to look at other assets across the Council to support roll out of the Family Hub offer across our other neighbourhoods

Government Drivers

- 1.9 There is significant focus on early years by central government. The Family Hubs and the renewed energy on the delivery of the first 1001 days is supported through a new government initiative which extends the entitlement for access to nursery provision which will be rolled a out starting in September 24.

Currently working parents of two year olds are able to access 15 hours of childcare. This will be increased in September 2024 for all children over 9 months and from September 25 this will be further increased to 30 hours of childcare for children over 9 months

Government is investing significant monies to support local authorities to deliver this and Bury will receive 309k which will be provided directly to providers to expand their provision through extension of current buildings, through to new builds. The Council will set up a grant finding scheme to deliver this based on providers who can offer the greatest number of additional places. Internally we will be looking at birth rates to support us to predict the likely demand. A work group has been established to support this roll out

The Bury Picture

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	1,1101	1,100	2,201
4	1,135	1,268	2,447
5	1,179	1,268	2,447
TOTAL	6,561	7,043	13,604

Our Providers

- 1.10 Bury has 187 early years providers. 96 are group-based settings (nurseries) and 91 are childminders. All providers are regulated by Ofsted. We have sustained our good and outstanding ratings in the last year with 97.6% of settings rated good or outstanding, this remains slightly higher than England averages and the GM average which stands at 96%.

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 know that settings who work with us almost always move their judgement on at least one grade. We currently only have 1 Childminder graded as inadequate, and 1 out of school club that received a not met judgement and both providers are working with the team receiving targeted support.

Sufficiency

- 1.11 Whilst our settings 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

Our assessment this year evidence that there are sufficient childcare places and whilst our two year take up of childcare dropped to 69% at the start of this year, through a media campaign as well as the extension of our universal offer we have seen it rise now to 83%.

Each year we carry out a survey to review sufficiency and this year 75% of providers reported that they had no concerns about their sustainability with 71% reporting that they continue to have places within their settings. This was reflected by our childminders with 83% reporting that they were sustainable and 28% reporting that they continued to have vacancies.

- 1.11 We also use our brokerage system which supports parents to find appropriate childcare and this provides a window into our sufficiency status.
Of 68 requests for support we were able to meet 63 this included 35 requests for children with SEND where we were able to meet 32. Where we have not met needs, this was not due to there being no placement but parental choice

Take Up of Childcare

- 1.12 The more children that access their two year take up the more we can support school readiness and identify any emerging concerns.
Our current 2-year-old take up for the Autumn term is 84.1% this is an increase of 14.2% on the last term. Our two year take up is now almost back to our highest rate of 85% when we had a full children centre offer.

Take up for 3-year-olds is at 92.7%. Bury compares well in relation to take up which nationally is at 72% for 2-year-olds and is slightly lower than government target for 3-year-old take up which is at 94%

School Readiness

- 1.13 Up to 2019 Bury was above national average for children assessed as having a good level of development (GLD), the measurement of school readiness, 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

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Area	Overall GLD	Boys	Girls	SEND
National	67.2%	60.6%	74.2%	19.8%
GMCA	63.3%			
Bury	65.7%	59.3%	72.1%	19.7%
East Bury	60.0%	54.7%	65.5%	29.2%
North	71.3%	64.0%	78.2%	18.2%
West Bury	66.1%	61.0%	70.8%	17.9%
Prestwich	65.6%	56.7%	74.0%	20.9%
Whitefield	64.5%	58.6%	71.5%	9.7%

Green denotes areas of improvement

Of note is the correlation between the areas we have targeted in terms of our increased universal offer and improved outcomes for school readiness

Children with SEN achieving GLD in Bury is slightly below the national average (20%), at 19.7% overall but is higher than the GM average (15.8%) and is better than most GM localities. It is also improved on last year

Considerations and Risks

- 1.12 Universal Offer – There has been significant work to build back our universal offer in Bury and we have not only seen a huge increase in reach out in the last 12 months but we are seeing this translate into improvements in some of our predictive statistics related to longer term outcomes for our children as noted through improved two year take up and outcomes in relation to assessment of school readiness. We are also seeing a slight reduction in the requests for formal assessment in relation to SEND.
- 1.13 Sufficiency – There is availability of good childcare in Bury and now we are seeing good take up of the free childcare for 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. The roll out of the extension of free childcare will place further pressure on the system and we will be monitoring this carefully and working with our providers to build additionality to meet demand.
- 1.14 The early years service 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. As this embeds 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. Whilst there is the vision to roll this out across the borough through the introduction of 4 more family hubs we need to move at pace to ensure we are track to deliver this by 2025.
- 1.15 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.

CONCLUSIONS

- 1.16 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. In the last 12 months we have extended our universal offer and we are starting to see the evidence of positive impact of this on our children's outcomes.

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.

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 scrutiny of the extension to the early years childcare offer and any detrimental impact on sufficiency.

Members may wish to scrutinise the changes to the extension in childcare and wrap around service as they start to roll out in later 2024.

List of Background Papers: -

Contact Details: -

Sandra Bruce -Assistant Director Early Help and School Readiness

Executive Director sign off Date: _____

JET Meeting Date: _____