

DARLINGTON LOCAL AUTHORITY - CHILDCARE SUFFICIENCY ASSESSMENT, 2021-22

Introduction

The Department for Education's 'Early Education and Childcare Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, June 2018' requires local authorities to 'secure sufficient childcare, so far as is reasonably practicable, for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment, for children aged 0-14 or up to 18 for disabled children'. In carrying out this requirement local authorities should 'report annually to elected council members on how they are meeting their duty to secure sufficient childcare and to make this report available and accessible to parents. The report should include specific reference to how they are ensuring there is sufficient childcare available to meet the needs of: children with special needs and disabilities, children from families in receipt of the childcare element of Working Tax Credit or Universal Credit, children with parents who work irregular hours, children aged two, three and four taking up free early education, school age children and children needing holiday care.'

Following the lockdown in March 2020 childcare providers were only permitted to offer places to children whose parents were key workers or vulnerable children. From early June 2020 providers were again able to admit other children and by the end of the Summer 2020 term there were 263 pre-school children in attendance in childcare settings in the borough. In comparison, by the end of the Summer 2021 term there were 839 pre-school children in attendance in childcare although this figure had reached a high of 1,413 by the end of May 2021. The comparable figure in early December 2021 was 1,117.

Support for Providers

Support for the sector has continued over the last year with termly Private and Voluntary Provider and Childminder Network briefings which include regular up-dates from the Education Safeguarding Officer. The Early Years Education Strategy Group has continued to meet termly and is consulted regarding local policies and the Early Years Leads meeting for schools continues to meet termly. Providers are also able to access a weekly on-line drop-in session with Darlington's Public Health Team. Providers now have a dedicated Early Years in box, named Link Officers as their first point of contact and a half termly Early Years newsletter is also produced.

Targeted work to support transitions has continued to be undertaken by the Inclusion Team which has facilitated input by a range of professionals, including headteachers and health professionals. In addition, the Early Years Inclusion Panel has continued to take place virtually, awarding funding for children with emerging and significant Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Financial Support for Providers

Local authorities were instructed by the DfE to continue to fund childcare providers who were open during the Autumn 2020 term, at pre-pandemic levels. The DfE

recognised that the number of children attending childcare may not have returned to pre-pandemic levels by early January 2021. As a result, in March 2021 the DfE published its Spring 2021 term and financial year 2021-22 funding guidance. Local authorities were able to claim top-up funding for funded 2 year old places, Universal Entitlement places for 3 and 4 year olds and 30 Hours Extended Entitlement places for 3 and 4 year olds if the take-up of any of these entitlements, at the time of the January 2021 census, was lower than 85% of the January 2020 census figure and this take-up had increased over the course of the Spring 2021 term. Local authorities were allocated funding based on termly actuals during the Summer and Autumn 2021 terms. It is the DfE's intention that data will be collected from the January 2022 census and processed in the usual pre-pandemic way. In the October 2021 Spending Review £160 million was allocated nationally for the 2022-23 financial year, to facilitate an increase in Early Years Entitlements funding rates.

The deadline for final claims to the Businesses Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme was the 30th September 2021. The scheme had enabled childcare providers to place employees on furlough whereby they received up to 80% of their wages. The government made a contribution of up to 60%, while employers covered the remaining 20% along with pension and National Insurance contributions.

During Spring 2021 Darlington's childcare sector was also able to apply for Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) funding. The ARG funding aimed to support businesses which had been severely impacted by pandemic restrictions. The availability of this support was advertised via the Council's website and was included in the Education Partnerships communications to providers. Providers with on-going premises costs were eligible for the full ARG grant, backdated to the 5th November 2020, at around £930 for every 28 day period. Childminders who were registered with HMRC for business purposes, could access a one-off support grant of £500 and an additional £500 was also awarded to each successful childminder application to help the business through the 'recovery' stage of the Government's roadmap. In total, over £32,000 in support funding was awarded to 18 childminders and 3 group settings in Darlington.

Provider Training

Settings have been supported by the Early Years Team through regular virtual briefings for all group settings and evening sessions for childminders. Weekly virtual drop-in sessions with Public Health have been offered with the option of sending a question via the Early Years Team if providers are unable to attend.

Training for the Early Years Foundation Stage reforms have been delivered for all sectors of the childcare market. To support the implementation of the reforms County Durham and Darlington Oral Health delivered training for group settings and childminders in partnership with the Early Years Team. A nationally recognised Early Years consultant has been commissioned to support the local early years sector in understanding and implementing the reforms, this has taken the form of virtual training and online surgeries. This training programme is scheduled in to 2022. Good practice meetings took place in late Autumn 2021 which provided an opportunity for private settings and schools to come together and share good practice virtually. Up to the

Summer 21 term a regular round up of information was sent to providers via a weekly e-mail and a termly newsletter has now been introduced.

In May 2021 a Healthy Early Years (HEY) task group was established with the aim of supporting settings to engage and educate parents towards a 'nourish to thrive' outlook. The group is composed of leaders from early years settings and schools, local authority Childcare Development Officers and representatives from Environmental Health and Workforce Development. The group's work has included:

- the promotion of Healthy Eating Week in June '21;
- a HEY newsletter for settings and childminders;
- HEY messaging through the Oral Health Training for childminders and settings;
- cascading information and resources through the Private and Voluntary and Childminder briefings in May and October '21;
- the creation of videos to promote healthy eating for the DBC website;
- the development of a Healthy Eating policy for settings and childminders; and
- the development and trial of the Healthy Early Years Catering Award which is to be promoted through briefings and link officer work in the coming months.

In September 2021 each setting and childminder was assigned a member of the Early Years Team as a Link Officer. Link Officers arrange termly visits/contacts with their settings.

Early Years Entitlements take-up

In Autumn 2020 the DfE re-started collecting national data for the funded 2 year olds termly, take-up score cards. In the Autumn 2020 term 55% of Darlington's eligible 2 year olds were accessing a funded 2 year old place. By Spring 2021 this take-up figure had increased to 73%, compared with 79% in Spring 2020 and was at 83% in Summer 2021. During the Summer 2021 term, 'Golden Tickets' were issued by the local authority to further increase take-up. Tickets were sent to eligible families on the Department for Work and Pensions list who were not already accessing a funded place, the tickets enabled parents to bypass the eligibility checker process and go directly to a childcare provider. During the Summer 2021 term, an additional 19 children accessed a funded 2 year old place through Golden Tickets. The availability of funded places was also advertised via health visitors, Children's Centres, Jobcentre Plus, Learning and Skills and the Council's Housing newsletter and Facebook pages. In addition, an Early Years Entitlements funding webinar was produced by the team for professionals and this was distributed to health visitors and interested stakeholders via the Childcare Sufficiency Group. The Early Years team's childcare leaflets have been refreshed and social media tags have been produced by the Communications Team to further market the entitlements. Finally, a more conversational Early Years Entitlements funding webinar for parents/carers is in production and there are plans to attend social care team meetings with up-dates regarding early years funded places.

Looking at actual take up, the number of children accessing funded places is back to pre-pandemic rates. For example, the Autumn 2019 term headcount showed there

were 321 funded 2-year-olds, 687 3- and 4-year-olds accessing Universal Entitlement and 579 3- and 4- year-olds accessing the Extended Entitlement: a total of 1,587 funded children. The same data for the Autumn 2020 term gave a total of 1,089 funded children. By the Autumn 2021 term, the data showed 354 funded 2-year-olds, 763 3- and 4-year-olds accessing Universal Entitlement and 579 3- and 4- year-olds accessing the Extended Entitlement: a total of 1,696 funded children. Please see **Table 1**.

Table 1 shows that the difference between the number of 2 to 4 year olds accessing a Local Authority funded place between Autumn 2019 and Autumn 2021 was 109 additional children, as opposed to 498 less children when comparing Autumn 2020 with Autumn 2019. When looking at the private and voluntary sector providers, there was a decrease of 387 funded children between Autumn 2019 and Autumn 2020 but by Autumn 2021, this decrease had reduced to 72 funded children. Take-up has increased in pre-schools and marginally with childminders. However, there has been a decrease of 88 children in private day nurseries and 21 children in out of school clubs. When comparing Autumn 2019 data to that of Autumn 2021, with regard to nursery schools and units, there has been an increase of 43 funded 2-year-olds, an increase of 90 funded 3- and 4-year-olds accessing the Universal Entitlement and an additional 48 children accessing the 30 Hours Extended Entitlement. Whilst the total number of funded children and the number of funded children in the school sector has increased, when compared to Autumn 2019 data, the private and voluntary sector is at 93% take-up compared to Autumn 2019.

Table 1 – Autumn 2019, Autumn 2020 and Autumn 2021 funded entitlements take-up

	Autumn 2019				Autumn 2020				Autumn 2021			
	Funded Places for 2 Year-Olds	Universal Entitlement for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	30 Hours Childcare for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	Termly Totals	Funded Places for 2- Year-Olds	Universal Entitlement for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	30 Hours Childcare for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	Termly Totals	Funded Places for 2- Year-Olds	Universal Entitlement for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	30 Hours Childcare for 3- & 4-Year-Olds	Termly Totals
Private Day Nurseries	232	189	324	745	123	127	208	458	215	164	278	657
Pre-Schools	27	49	66	142	18	23	50	91	32	60	85	177
Out of School Clubs	-	-	32	32	-	-	0	0	-	-	11	11
Childminders	11	4	28	43	5	7	14	26	13	4	28	45
Private & Voluntary Sector Totals	270	242	450	962	146	157	272	575	260	228	402	890
Nursery Schools	21	80	32	133	27	45	25	97	46	94	44	184
Nursery Units	30	365	97	492	59	244	114	417	48	441	133	622
School Totals	51	445	129	625	86	289	139	514	94	535	177	806
Childcare Market Totals	321	687	579	1,587	232	446	411	1,089	354	763	579	1,696

Unmet Childcare Demand in 2021

In May 2021 a time limited task group, consisting of staff from Education Partnerships, the Families' Information Service and the Performance Team, was set up to review the Childcare Sufficiency data collection processes. Following consultation with the sector via the Early Years Education Strategy Group, the Private and Voluntary sector providers, nursery schools and primary schools were asked to provide setting level data regarding non-local authority funded early education and childcare places, for example, baby places, parent 'paid for' 2 to 4 year old places and wrap-around places for 5 to 14 year olds or up to 18 year olds for young people with disabilities. Of the 25 Autumn returns, when asked where they were experiencing pressure for places, 13 providers stated they were experiencing high demand in some areas. 3 providers mentioned funded 2 year olds places, 5 providers mentioned care for 4 to 8 year olds, 4 providers stated places for under 2 year olds and 1 setting said funded places for 3 year olds were in high demand. Generally, there is little unmet demand reported on the fortnightly attendance sheets. There do appear to be 'pockets' where there is pressure for specific types of places but providers seem to be managing this. This situation and the ability of providers to flex to meet changing demand will need to be monitored. There were 19 returns from the nursery schools and primary schools and 6 schools said they were experiencing high demand in some areas. 6 schools stated there was pressure for wrap-around care, 2 schools mentioned funded places for 2 year olds and 4 schools mentioned 30 Hours places. 16 schools offer breakfast clubs, 10 offer after school clubs and 4 offer regular, reliable holiday clubs. The majority of schools run these clubs themselves, apart from 3 schools where private provision run on site care. The take-up of wrap-around care is good, especially with regard to breakfast clubs. 3 schools reported that there was insufficient demand for holiday clubs in their area to make such clubs financially sustainable. No secondary schools reported concerns about a lack of childcare or were experiencing unmet requests from parents.

Across Darlington, there is a mixed supply of holiday and out of school provision. As well as full day care services and childminders who offer this service, there are a small number of standalone organisations, including Darlington Association on Disability's holiday playschemes, DASH, who cater solely for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Attendance during the Summer 2021 holidays was surveyed, out of 54 registered childminders who are active during the holidays, 39 returned the survey and out of 14 group settings who operate in the holidays, 8 returned. Across the sector, occupancy was as follows: 202 4-8 year olds; 20 9-11 year olds; 5 12-14 year olds; and 2 15-18 year olds with a disability. A total of 229 children and young people accessing holiday childcare. Unmet demand was recorded amongst 2 childminders and this affected 3 children, these enquiries were fed back to the Families' Information Service. One provider indicated they were very busy during the first and last week of the holidays and another provider explained that during August 2021, they had closed on Mondays and Fridays due to a lack of bookings. Attendance during the Autumn 2021 half term was also surveyed. Returns were low at 15 childminders and 4 group settings. Across the sector, occupancy was as follows: 69 4-8 year olds; 19 9-11 year olds; 0 12-14

year olds; and 0 15-18 year olds with a disability. A total of 88 children and young people accessing holiday childcare. 3 childminders reported closing during this holiday as they had had no requests for holiday care and 1 group setting explained that they had received a request for 2 days of care for 2 children but they were unable to open on those days, as they would not have covered their running costs. Demand for holiday care needs to continue to be monitored as we emerge from the pandemic.

The Local Authority has established a childcare sufficiency task group which meets regularly and monitors childcare demand and supply, as well as the health of the local childcare sector. In addition to officers, the group includes representation from the Darlington Families' Information Service, SENDIASS (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Service), Darlington Association on Disability, Jobcentre Plus, Children's Centres, Economic Growth and Learning and Skills. The group cross references with the Early Years Strategy Group.

Provider profile

Table 2 - The number of settings in Darlington pre-March 2020, November 2020 and November 2021

	Pre-March 2020	November 2020	November 2021
Nursery schools	2	2	2
Nursery units	17	17	17
Private & Voluntary	34	31	31
Childminders	80	71	63

Table 2 shows that between March and November 2020 three nurseries in Darlington permanently closed. In each case all children were successfully accommodated in other childcare settings. Two of these nurseries were owned by providers who had more than one setting and had places available at their other sites located in Darlington. During the last year 8 childminders have de-registered.

Ofsted Inspections

On the 17th March 2020, all routine Ofsted inspections of registered early years provision were suspended. Ofsted inspectors continued regulatory work during this time. As part of a phased return to routine inspection from Autumn 2020, Ofsted inspectors carried out interim visits. These visits were not inspections and did not result in an inspection grade. Inspectors could use regulatory or enforcement actions, if appropriate. Ofsted inspectors visited providers that were judged 'less than good' and that had safe guarding and welfare actions raised at their last inspection. From September 2021, Ofsted inspections have been in line with the requirements set out in the revised EYFS framework for all early years providers.

Table 3 – Ofsted Judgements (source: FIS as at November 2021)

2020 Ofsted	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate	Met	Not met with actions	Awaiting 1 st Inspection	Not Required	Total
No. of Private Day Nurseries	3	14	0	0	0	0	1	0	18
No. of Holiday Clubs	1	12	1	0	5	0	0	4	23
No. of Out of School Clubs	1	16	0	0	2	0	0	0	19
No. of Out of School Clubs (school registered)	0	4	1	0	0	0	2	0	7
No. of Breakfast Clubs	0	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	14
No. of Breakfast Clubs (school registered)	0	12	4	0	0	0	4	0	20
No. of Playgroups	2	6	0	0	0	0	1	0	9
No. of Childminders	5	40	0	0	10	2	6	0	63

Childcare providers who only work with children from the end of Early Years Foundation Stage are registered on the childcare register. They are expected to meet the requirements relating to people, premises and provision and make a declaration that they will do so. They are inspected to ensure they are still complying with these requirements and are judged as either meeting the requirements of the register or not meeting the requirements i.e. 'Met' or 'Unmet'.

Demographics and Economic Regeneration

(source: Economic Growth Team)

Darlington's current population is 107,400 (ONS Mid-year population estimates 2020), 65,100 of this population are of working age (16-64 years old). Since the last census in 2011 we have seen a reduction of working age population of 2.7% or 1,700 people due to Darlington's ageing population. Prior to March 2020, within this working age population, 80.1 were economically active (in work or unemployed), 58% of these people worked in the borough and 21% commuted out of the Borough to work.

In 2020 Darlington had a healthy employment rate of 80.1%; taken as a percentage of the economically active population aged 16–64. Darlington's employment rate was above both the North East average of 75.7% and the national average of 78.4%. Darlington's in employment figure ranked second highest of all 12 North East

authorities. The unemployment rate fell from 6.7 per cent in 2015 to 6.1 per cent in 2019. This equated to a reduction in unemployment in the borough from 3,600 people in 2015 to 3,200 people in 2019. In December 2019 it was estimated, 4.6 per cent of our 16 – 64 population or 3,010 people were claiming work related benefits; this estimate has risen by 1.1 per cent or an additional 765 claimants, compared to the December 2017 estimate.

In 2019, Darlington Businesses had 49,000 employee jobs (32,000 full time and 17,000 part time). The total number of people in employment in Darlington increased by 4.1% between 2014 and 2019 compared to 2.5% across the region and 3.3% nationally. The proportion of total jobs that were part time decreased by 11% from 2015 to 2018. This compared to a decrease of 0.3% in the North East and an increase of 6.4% nationally. 2.6% of Darlington's business base is characterised by a smaller number of medium to large businesses (employing more than 50 employees), 85.4.2% of Darlington's businesses are micro businesses employing 9 or less employees with a further 12.2% being small businesses employing between 10 and 49 employees.

In 2019 the number of workless households in Darlington reached 6,100 or 17.9% which is above the national average of 13.9% but below the Tees Valley average of 22.3%.

Regeneration projects are evident throughout the borough of Darlington. Since 2012 Darlington has identified four key growth locations for economic growth and regeneration namely, North Western Growth Zone, Central Growth Zone, Eastern Growth Zone and Durham Tees Valley Airport Growth Zone. Since 2012 these areas have seen major investment and regeneration in excess of £150 million, £54.4 million of this is being spent in the town centre and £10 million Opus North retail development on North Road. Planned further investments include the redevelopment of the train station and Darlington's Indoor Market whereby phase one is now complete and phase two will commence in 2022. Additionally, there is the development of Treasury North in Darlington, an economic campus which will bring together staff from five government departments and initially 1,500 members of staff.

With regards to the economy, the COVID-19 pandemic is presenting challenges across all sectors and we are facing an unprecedented economic crisis with little prospect of a rapid bounce back. Many businesses, jobs and voluntary organisations are at significant risk and investment in the economy is likely to be slow to return. There will be implications for the town centre but there may be opportunities depending upon the government response.

Largescale unemployment is anticipated:

- the proportion of residents claiming unemployment benefits is already at levels not seen since 1994 and this is predicted to rise further as government support is withdrawn;
- young people are expected to be particularly affected, with hundreds of thousands of education leavers set to join the labour market about to find themselves competing for job opportunities against high numbers of experienced and qualified adults. Even those who can find work are likely to suffer from significantly depressed earnings; and

- residents who were already on low earnings are expected to be disproportionately affected.

Local job quality is at risk of being detrimentally affected by growing unemployment should this translate into reduced wage levels and security. Levels of material deprivation are consequently likely to continue increasing and income and health inequalities widen. For many of those 'just about managing', this crisis and its associated economic shock is likely to tip them into 'not managing', no longer being able to afford basics, such as, housing costs and food.

It is clear that economic conditions nationally remain fluid. Childcare providers are facing uncertainty with regard to childcare demand, early years entitlements and parent paid income as families' circumstances change. Indicators show that there is sufficient capacity to meet demand, nevertheless, unmet demand will need to be continually monitored to ensure that parents are able to access training and work in the coming months and years.

Housing

(source: Economic Growth Team)

When we look at the local housing market, the Council is currently preparing the Darlington Local Plan for the period 2016 – 2036. The plan is currently being examined by an independent planning inspector and public hearing sessions took place between May and September 2021. A main modifications consultation is also underway (19th October – 30th November 2021) and it is anticipated that the plan will be adopted by the Council by January 2022. To inform the plan, the Council commissioned a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) in 2017, which identified a need for 9,840 additional dwellings over the 20-year period 2016-36. This is a significant increase from previous projections and will require a continuation of recent delivery rates of housing in coming years, to maintain a delivery of around 500 dwellings per annum. In the short term, residential development in the Borough continues, with new dwellings being recorded on around 31 active sites at West Park and Central Park, as well as a range of smaller sites in locations around the Borough, including rural areas such as Heighington, Hurworth and Middleton-St-George. Anecdotally, the housing market appears to be strong post lockdown, however, the effect of increased social restrictions during the winter months and the impact of redundancies may take some time to filter through.

The views of parents

During early September to mid October 2020, an on-line parental survey was carried out via providers, schools, Jobcentre Plus contacts, Darlington library, health visitors, Children's Centres, Darlington Association on Disability, the Local Authority staff bulletin, the Local Authority business e-newsletter, CAMHS and various other parental social media groups. The return rate was particularly high at 643 responses and because of the high return rate, a large scale parental survey was not conducted again as part of the 2021-22 CSA. Of the 643 responses, 68% were from two parent/ carer

families who were both working; 20% were from single parent/carer families who were working; and 3% were from non-working families. 72% of respondents said they needed childcare for 5 to 11-year-olds; 25% needed childcare for 0 to 2-year olds; 20% required care for 3- to 4-year-olds; and 5% of respondents needed care for 15- to 18-year-olds.

71 respondents or 11% were completing the survey on behalf of a child or a young person with a disability and 68% of special educational needs were classed as 'Speech and language / communication needs (including Autism Spectrum Disorder)'. 22 respondents with a child or young person with a disability said they had some concerns about accessing childcare from the Autumn 2020 term. These concerns included cost, location, flexibility and pandemic related issues. Many of these themes were echoed by parents who did not have a child or young person with a disability.

When parents were asked what they take into consideration when choosing formal childcare, 77% said they look at the location of the provider, for example, close to their work or home; and 70% of respondents said that the cost of childcare was an important factor. 58% of respondents considered the safety and security of a provider; 56% looked at the flexibility of opening and closing times; and 52% considered the quality of care and education. Comments from respondents indicated some lack of flexibility to accommodate parents who work changing shift patterns.

Respondents were asked whether the pandemic had changed their childcare arrangements and if so, how. 32% of respondents said they would carry on accessing childcare at the same levels as before March 2020. 12% of respondents said that they had accessed childcare before the pandemic but would be accessing less childcare over the coming year; 10% said that they had accessed childcare before the pandemic and would be accessing more childcare over the coming year and 7% said they had accessed childcare before the pandemic but would not be accessing childcare over the following year. When asked to explain why childcare usage had changed since April 2020, 32% of respondents said they had experienced a change in employment circumstances (for example, a change of job, unemployment or a change in working hours); and 32% said they had had a change in family circumstances (for example, working from home or more flexible working patterns).

Parents/carers were asked whether they had stopped using childcare, reduced the amount of childcare they use or were unhappy with their formal childcare provision and if any of this was the case, what was the reason. The costs or charges were cited by 24% of respondents; 11% said the lack of flexibility around opening and closing times of provision; and 11% said that parents/carers, family or friends were able to provide childcare. Parental satisfaction with the quality of provision remained high across the 2019 and 2020 surveys and there have been no parental complaints to suggest a change in satisfaction.

During this difficult period, there continues to be general parental satisfaction with childcare in the borough and parental feedback continues to be that childcare is of a good quality. Parents have indicated that there are some potential areas of dissatisfaction: the cost and flexibility of childcare; and access to childcare for school aged children and young people with disabilities. The continuing uncertainties created by the pandemic have made childcare demand more difficult to predict.

Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

In the early Summer 2021 term, following consultation with the Darlington Parent/Carer Forum as to the best way to work with parents to better understand any issues regarding access to childcare and any unmet demand, it was agreed that updated marketing information, sign-posting parents to sources of information about different types of local, registered, inclusive childcare across the borough could be shared.

In the Autumn 2021 term, local authority officers met with senior leaders from Beaumont Hill Academy. The purpose of the meeting was to gather feedback regarding any unmet demand for before, after school and holiday care which the school felt its parents may have and to find out if there were any particular issues around access to childcare. The school reported that enrichment opportunities are provided for children and young people and training for parents which takes place after school has childcare provided. The school also has a breakfast club. The school added that the majority of children use school transport and therefore many children are away from the home from 8am until 4pm which supports parents to work and train. The school said that although they were not aware of parents who have issues with taking up employment due to lack of childcare, they would be consulting with parents via their parental survey and would feedback any comments relating to childcare demand. Additionally, the Beaumont Hill Academy runs themed coffee mornings for parents/carers and the local authority has been invited to attend one of these sessions, to discuss inclusive childcare. It was explained that holiday childcare for Beaumont Hill children is usually accessed through the DASH playschemes as school staff often work with Darlington Association on Disability during the holidays and this provides continuity of care for these children.

A further consultation with parents/carers of children aged 0-7 years with disabilities is planned for the Spring 2022 term. The local authority is keen to gather parental views on the expenditure of Disability Access Funding which is provided to enable access for 3 and 4 year olds with disabilities to their free Universal Entitlement Early Years Education place.

Provider feedback

Anecdotal feedback from some providers during the Summer was that they were experiencing recruitment and retention issues, such as, a lack of suitably qualified and experienced job applicants and experienced staff who are preferring to leave the childcare profession to work in other areas of the economy, such as the retail sector. Therefore, a Childcare Recruitment and Retention survey of local providers was undertaken in October 2021. Of the 31 private and voluntary sector providers who were invited to respond, 17 providers completed the survey, this total consisted of 9 private day nurseries, 7 pre-schools and 1 out of school business representing 3 clubs. It is worth noting, an owner of three private day nurseries in the borough apologised at being unable to complete the survey, due to time constraints caused by business recruitment issues.

When asked what three difficulties childcare providers faced with the recruitment and retention of staff: 65% said 'applicants without the relevant qualifications applying'; 47% said 'the quality of applicants at interview is poor'; 41% said 'applicants without the relevant experience applying'; 41% stated they had not experienced issues with recruitment and retention; 24% stated 'staff leaving for another job in a different sector'; 18% said 'staff leaving for another job within the childcare sector'; 6% stated 'no applicants applying'; and 6% said 'applicants interview skills are poor'. Providers were asked if the pandemic, in particular, has had an affect on the recruitment and retention of staff: 18% said yes but 82% said no.

When asked whether providers currently had any staff vacancies, 18% stated yes but 82% said no. Of those businesses which had vacancies: 2 were for apprenticeships; 1 was a Level 2 practitioner; 8 were for Level 3 practitioners; and 1 was for an auxiliary member of staff. Of those providers who stated they had issues with recruitment; 41% found it difficult to recruit at Level 3; 24% found apprentices difficult to recruit; and 18% found Level 6 practitioner vacancies difficult to fill. When asked for the three main reasons for these difficulties: 65% of responses stated 'salary is too low'; 63% said 'level of responsibilities are too high compared with other jobs of a similar salary'; 41% said 'hours which can be offered are insufficient'; and 35% stated 'hours which can be offered are irregular'. Other comments which were submitted included:

'Can get better wages elsewhere.'

'Applicants do not realise the amount of work required within the nursery environment and find it hard to remain focussed and retain the passion for the job they think they wanted to do.'

'Too many people leaving the sector.'

'No guaranteed hours.'

Providers were asked what they thought the impact of the pandemic would be on staff recruitment and retention in the childcare market. Comments included:

'Staff have worked above and beyond and had so many restrictions placed upon their daily routines. The staff have coped well to keep the children in the setting safe, but it is such a low paid job. Staff have to train and have qualifications to work in a nursery yet they can get paid more to work in retail/hospitality, it seems to be putting people off the industry or making them want to leave.'

'Psychologically and mentally it will have an impact, low wages do not help in retaining staff, staff could work in a supermarket for better pay rates...the hourly funding rates are low.'

'Not just the pandemic - but less qualified staff are available to fill vacancies as they would rather not be in the sector.'

'When there are plenty of higher paid jobs with less qualifications needed young people will not be tempted to work in Early Years, particularly when some employers are giving new starters extra benefits to start working with them.'

The childcare sector was asked whether the number of applicants applying for posts has changed compared to 2 years ago: 53% of respondents said it had remained the same; 29% said it had decreased; and 18% said it had increased. When asked whether the overall quality of job applicants has changed: 59% stated it has remained the same; 35% said it is worse; and 6% said it is better. Providers were asked to describe the general wellbeing of the childcare sector compared to 2 years ago: 53% said it was worse; 41% said it was about the same; and 6% said it was much better.

The relatively low survey return rate makes it difficult to make generalisations regarding local recruitment and retention issues. It appears that some providers are experiencing difficulties recruiting at certain levels, for example, for Level 3 practitioners. Survey feedback suggests that issues have not necessarily been caused but perhaps exacerbated by the pandemic. However, they can have an effect on a provider's ability to operate at full capacity and may go on to affect childcare sufficiency in the borough. Additionally, anecdotal evidence from provider groups is that the pandemic has impacted on work experience and volunteering opportunities, for example, sometimes parents volunteer to work in a setting and then find that they enjoy it and decide to go into childcare. This lack of opportunity may have impacted on recruitment, so to address this, the Education Partnerships Team is establishing a list of providers and schools that would be happy to provide work experience and this will be shared with secondary schools and colleges.

In the Autumn term 2021, staff from the Learning and Skills Team attended the Private and Voluntary Providers' Network meeting. Settings were given useful information about the apprenticeships scheme for the childcare sector and this meeting also provided childcare managers with an opportunity to feedback their various experiences regarding recruitment and retention of staff. Darlington College will attend the next Network meeting.

Local Employer feedback

Previous employer surveys have investigated the use of family friendly employment practices and explored the extent to which childcare supply meets the needs of businesses. They have reported that the number of businesses frequently experiencing problems due to childcare issues is relatively low; however, many found childcare was an occasional problem. Anecdotal evidence from the Childcare Sufficiency Task Group is that some businesses have recognised this and have introduced working patterns that fit in with school hours to encourage more women in particular to apply for roles and to open up recruitment to those who are unable to work full-time hours due to a lack of available childcare.

During the period August to September 2021, a survey was issued to the local employment market to ascertain whether local employers have had to change their working patterns or arrangements as a result of the pandemic and whether employers felt these changes would become permanent. This is pertinent for childcare sufficiency because a change in a household's working arrangements, such as an increase in home working, may affect childcare demand.

The survey was widely advertised via the Economic Growth Team and their communication channels including on Facebook, Twitter and the Council's monthly business newsletter. The link was posted on the Council staff briefing and was also disseminated via a Tees Valley Combined Authority list of over 600 Darlington businesses e-mail addresses. Unfortunately, the return rate was low at 21 responses. The main sector responses were, 21% from the Retail Sector, 15% from Manufacturing, 15% were from the Hospitality Sector, 10% were from Business and Professional Services and 10% from Education/Childcare. 48% of completions were from micro businesses (1-9 employees), 29% were small businesses (10-49 employees), 19% were medium sized businesses (50-249 employees) and 5% were large businesses (over 250 employees). 71% of respondent businesses did not operate shift working but of the 29% that did, 19% ran shift patterns that change on a weekly basis. The majority of businesses gave a month's notice of a change in shift patterns. 67% of respondents said that since April 2020, they had not had to make a permanent change to their business working patterns, 33% said that they had. Some of the explanations for a permanent change were:

'Some customers have wanted extra cleaning due to covid so extra shifts have been added.'

'We now work a 3:2 office-home hybrid in the office and an extended four day week in the training centre.'

'We have had to extend hours and open extra days to accommodate demand after lockdowns.'

50% of respondents did not have staff who worked from home. Of the 50% who did have staff working from home, 5% were self-employed, 28% had seen an increase in staff home working since April 2020 and 17% had the same number of home working staff as before April 2020. When asked whether they felt they would see a permanent change in the size of their workforce within the next year, 75% said they thought the workforce size would remain the same and 25% said they expected a permanent increase in the size of the workforce. When asked within the next year whether a permanent change in business working patterns was expected, 88% of respondents said no and 12% said yes and explanations for this response included:

'Will keep the hybrid working and home flexibility.'

'People have got used to flexi hours. I will either have to change shift patterns or add childcare into the contract to cover costs.'

71% of respondents stated that they employ staff who use registered childcare and 29% said their staff did not use childcare. When asked whether a lack of childcare is an issue when recruiting or retaining staff, 86% of respondents said no. When asked whether businesses thought a lack of childcare had prevented prospective staff from taking jobs with them or not staying with their business when they become parents, 79% of respondents said no.

Additional information

Table 4 shows that in recent years the number of birth registrations in Darlington has declined. This may have market implications for providers.

Table 4 - The number of births registered in Darlington

Year of Birth (Sep-Aug)	Number of Births
2009/10	1,359
2010/11	1,324
2011/12	1,336
2012/13	1,284
2013/14	1,220
2014/15	1,231
2015/16	1,187
2016/17	1,107
2017/18	1,138
2018/19	1,048
2019/20	1,026

Source: Office for National Statistics Birth Registrations

Conclusion

Indicators have shown that there has been sufficient capacity to meet demand throughout the pandemic. However, the pandemic has impacted on the financial stability of some settings. Our consultation with parents demonstrates the need for local childcare to be affordable and flexible, to be available to meet existing or new working patterns and where required, the need for accessible, affordable, inclusive holiday childcare. Both the pandemic and recruitment and retention issues may ultimately impact some sectors of the childcare market and this will need to be monitored. The Local Authority is engaging with providers to ensure sufficiency of places over the coming months and to assist with sustainability.

The Local Authority intends to continue to monitor and evaluate the market position.

Please see Appendix A for the 2021-22 Childcare Sufficiency Action Plan.

Please see Appendix B for the 2021 Childcare Provider Recruitment and Retention Survey results.

Appendix A

Childcare Sufficiency Action Plan, 2021-22

	Gap identified	Objectives	Actions	Responsibility and Timeframe	Outcome
1)	From late March 2020, a need to collect frequent childcare occupancy data, particularly with regard to vulnerable children and key worker's children.	To ensure frequent, accurate attendance data is available.	Draft a survey which meets the LA's data requirements and uses as little childcare provider resource as possible.	Families' Information Service/ Education Partnerships Team. March – July 2020 on a daily basis August 2020 onwards – on a weekly basis. May '21, on a fortnightly basis.	Monitoring of unmet demand. Tracking attendance of vulnerable children. Ability to complete weekly DfE occupancy returns and termly DfE funded 2 year olds return. Ability to apply for DfE support to increase the take -up of funded 2 year old places.
2)	From late March 2020, a need to collect frequent childcare supply data, particularly with regard to vulnerable children and key worker's children.	To ensure frequent, accurate supply data is available.	Draft a survey which meets the LA's data requirements and uses as little childcare provider resource as possible.	Families' Information Service/ Education Partnerships Team. March – July 2020 on a daily basis August 2020 onwards – on a weekly basis. May '21, on a fortnightly basis.	Monitoring of unmet demand. Ability to utilise DSG more effectively. Ability to complete weekly DfE returns.
3)	Need for urgent support for the market following 'lockdown'.	To ensure providers/schools had access to the most up-to-date	Movement of the private and voluntary sectors' termly briefing to virtual meetings.	Education Partnerships Team/Public Health/Finance. From March 2020 onwards.	A more knowledgeable, confident and resilient market. More providers staying open – Darlington has

		<p>DfE/Public Health guidance. To ensure that the market had access to DfE/LA funding policy. To provide a support network and opportunities for providers open and closed, to learn from each other and to access regional/national feedback.</p>	<p>Movement of the childminders' termly briefing to virtual meetings. Establishment of an Early Years strategy meeting with sector representatives who informed LA policy. Access to timely public health information which may include drop in sessions. To provide virtual support to experienced settings to enable them to continue to deliver intervention programmes with parents. To plan innovative ways of using intervention programmes to support settings to work with families.</p>		<p>had very few private and voluntary sector permanent closures. Sufficiency and choice and diversity for parents/carers.</p>
4)	<p>Need to have more accurate and up-to-date data relating to unmet demand, particularly re. children and young people with SEND.</p>	<p>Tighten unmet demand processes.</p>	<p>Agreement with FIS on procedures to ensure providers signpost unmet demand and parents are fully supported to access childcare via the brokerage service. Ensure that providers who are unable to meet a childcare enquiry, sign-post parents back to the FIS. Carry out CSA Data Exercise to ascertain which data is currently being regularly collected and ensure this is fed in to the</p>	<p>Childcare Development Officers/Families' Information Service Process agreed by September 2020 then on-going. Early Years Projects Officer – May '21</p>	<p>All reported unmet demand investigated, and families supported. Full set of CSA data available on a rolling basis.</p>

			<p>assessment process and highlight which data is required but is not regularly collected.</p> <p>July '21, agreed actions following sector consultation – in addition to headcount data from Autumn '21, private and voluntary sector providers and schools will be asked to provide demand and supply data at setting level, including questions about non LA funded places.</p> <p>An on-line discussion has taken place with the Education Village in Autumn '21, to ascertain whether staff feel there is unmet demand for out of school provision for children and young people with disabilities and if there is, what the barriers to access may be. The school reported there is no immediate recorded unmet demand but a question re. this is to be included on a parental survey and local authority staff have been invited to attend a parental themed coffee morning re. inclusive childcare.</p> <p>Registered holiday childcare providers to be asked to complete a snapshot data collection following school holidays (not including Christmas breaks).</p> <p>Again, the data collected is at</p>	<p>Education Partnerships Team/ FIS/Performance Team</p> <p>On-going from September '21</p> <p>Early Years Projects Officer/CDOs</p> <p>Autumn '21 term</p> <p>Families' Information Service – from Summer '21</p>	
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			setting level and is about the demand and supply of places.		
5)	Need to carry out further research regarding unmet demand for children and young people with disabilities.	Objectives To find out whether there is hidden unmet demand. To advertise the availability of inclusive childcare to specific groups of parents using various media	Inclusive childcare could be advertised via the PCF's social media platforms. Early Years posters have been refreshed and social media tags have been created which promote inclusive childcare, to be shared with interested stakeholders, such as, D.A.D., SENDIASS, Children's Centres, Jobcentre Plus, Darlington Carers, Adult Learning and social care parental groups. Consult parents regarding Disability Access Fund expenditure. Early Years Entitlements funding webinar for professionals created and disseminated to health visitors and members of the sufficiency group. Early Years Entitlements funding conversational webinar for parents/carers created and disseminated. Task limited focus group with health visitors, the FIS, Data Team, Jobcentre Plus and	Education Partnerships Team/ Families' Information Service – on-going from November 2021 Early Years Projects Officer – Spring 2022 Early Years Projects Officer/CDOs – July 2021 Early Years Projects Officer/CDOs – January 2022 Early Years Projects Officer – April 2021	Less hidden childcare demand for children and young people with disabilities

			<p>Children’s Centres created to increase take-up of funded 2 year old places and run ‘Golden Tickets’. Funded 2 year olds advert issued on Housing Facebook page and in Housing newsletter to tenants.</p> <p>Local Offer reviewed - up-date templates issued to the childcare providers</p> <p>Ensure providers have access to training via the SENCO Network and the Accessibility Toolkit</p>	<p>Early Years Projects Officer – May 2021</p> <p>Families’ Information Service/CDOs – Summer ‘21</p>	
6)	<p>Need to carry out further research regarding the flexibility of childcare and whether this meets the needs of parents in a changing employment market.</p>	<p>To meet any changing parental demand in the ‘new normal’.</p>	<p>Survey employers regarding their thoughts on changing employment patterns and the childcare needs of their employees.</p> <p>Draft survey, pilot and disseminate via Economic Growth social media and monthly business newsletter, DBC newsletter and social media and business groups such as Federation of Small Business, North East England Chamber of Commerce, Darlington Business Club, etc. and distribute using TVCA business data base. Link widely disseminated, survey ran mid July to mid September ’21.</p> <p>Ask providers regularly whether nature of childcare requests are</p>	<p>Early Years Projects Officer – July ‘21</p> <p>Early Years Projects Officer – April ‘21</p>	<p>Parental demand for childcare is met</p>

			changing – up-date fortnightly attendance sheets to include this question.		
7)	Ensuring access to business support	To ensure, for sustainability reasons, the market has access to business support	<p>Ensure officer attendance at the Hemsalls’ Business Toolkit training. Advertise Hemsalls’ childcare sustainability training to the market. Enable provider access to Additional Restrictions Grant – £32k grants awarded to the sector including childminders</p> <p>Identify and promote other opportunities, for example, networking and sharing good practice. Sustainability/business health questions are included in the setting review questionnaire Ensure appropriate representation from Economic Growth on the Childcare Sufficiency Group. Draft, pilot and release a recruitment and retention survey for the childcare market Invite Learning and Skills to the Autumn ’21 Private and Voluntary providers’ network to discuss apprenticeships and Darlington</p>	<p>Early Years Projects Officer/CDOs – January 2021 Families’ Information Service/CDOs – February 2021</p> <p>Early Years Projects Officer/CDOs – March 2021</p> <p>Early Years Projects Officer/CDOs – on-going</p> <p>Early Years Projects Officer/CDOs – from Autumn ’21 term Early Years Projects Officer – on-going</p> <p>Early Years Projects Officer – August to October 2021</p> <p>CDOs – October ’21</p>	Improving providers access to business, sustainability and development support

			College to Spring '22 Private and Voluntary providers' network		
8)	Need to monitor sufficiency on a rolling basis and utilise expertise of other LA teams/departments and interested stakeholders.	To establish a Childcare Sufficiency task group which meets regularly to monitor sufficiency from Autumn 2020 and tackles arising issues. Ensure this group feeds in to the EY Education Strategy group which meets half termly.	Contact appropriate representatives, explain the objectives and set up the group.	Early Years Projects Officer/ Childcare Development Officers. From early August 2020 and on-going.	From August 2020, the group has met regularly and includes representatives from Children's Centres, Darlington Association on Disability, Jobcentre Plus, SENDIASS, Learning and Skills, Economic Regeneration and Growth, the Families' Information Service and the Education Partnerships Team.
9)	Need to monitor wrap-around and holiday provision supply and demand.	To ensure accurate holiday attendance is available.	Draft a mini survey which meets the LA's data requirements and uses as little childcare provider resource as possible.	Early Years Projects Officer/ Childcare Development Officers/ Families' Information Service. Summer '21 onwards (excluding Christmas holidays).	Monitoring of unmet holiday demand. Ability to complete weekly DfE occupancy returns. Ability to apply for DfE business support for providers.
10)	Gather feedback from parents re. existing and future childcare requirements.	To ensure the LA and the childcare market is aware of how demand	Draft a parental childcare survey and disseminate the link as widely as possible, via the task group links and social media sites. Run	Early Years Projects Officer. Survey ran from early September to mid	Information from parents about their recent experiences of the childcare market and their intentions re.

		has/is changing post March 2020.	the survey from early September to mid October 2020.	October 2020 with over 600 responses. Run survey again in 2022/23.	childcare use in Spring and Summer 2021 which can be fed back to the childcare market. A return rate of 643 was achieved.
11)	Need to support the childcare sector to effectively market their services.	To enable providers to target their marketing, utilising numerous media forms.	The production of a marketing plan to support providers and parents with childcare. Feeding in advice from the DBC Communications Team, including infographics, good news stories, access to social media sites and the webinar link and up-dating the adverts in 'One Darlington'. A specific focus for 2 year old funded places and children and young people with disabilities. Advertise the 'Changing Lives through Childcare' session to front facing professionals.	Childcare Development Officers. Plan sign off by the end of September 2021. Implementation starting in October 2021. Early Years Projects Officer/CDOs/ Families' Information Service – March 2021	Parents/carers will be better informed and have more choice. Increased sustainability for the sector.