

DARLINGTON LOCAL AUTHORITY CHILDCARE SUFFICIENCY REVIEW, 2022-23

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.'

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 twice termly and is consulted regarding local policies and the Early Years Leads meeting for schools continues to meet termly. Schools and providers are able to access a monthly drop-in session with Darlington's Public Health Team. Providers also 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. Officers meet with the regional DfE representative every 6 weeks and attend regional DfE events where concerns of the local childcare sector are reported back to the DfE.

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. The Early Years Inclusion Panel meets termly, awarding funding for children with emerging and significant Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Financial Support for Providers

From January 2022, headcount data has been collected and processed in the usual pre-pandemic way regarding funding.

During Summer 2022, local authorities were informed by the Department for Education, that nationally, there are around 800,000 families who are eligible to receive Tax Free Childcare but have not yet applied for it. Tax Free Childcare enables working families, including the self-employed, to claim up to 20% of their childcare costs from the government (up to £2,000 per child per year or up to £4,000 per child per year for a child with a disability). Childcare costs can be claimed for children aged

0-11 years or up to 16 years for young people with a disability where families are not in receipt of Tax Credits, Universal Credit or childcare vouchers. Childcare must be accessed via Ofsted registered providers and childminders who have activated their Tax Free Childcare accounts. The Education Partnerships Team has produced Tax Free Childcare fliers which can be distributed via schools, childcare providers and other interested stakeholders to parents. The fliers have also been distributed via the business e-newsletter to local businesses. Information about Tax Free Childcare has also been included in 'One Darlington', on the Council and Housing Facebook pages and has been linked to the Council's money advice pages, in the Early Years Autumn '22 newsletter, in the Schools' briefing, in the Council staff briefing and has been discussed at provider network meetings, the Autumn SENCo Network and at a meeting with Firststop, Darlington. A JobCentre Plus Job Coach team meeting will be attended, to discuss the early years funded entitlements and help with the cost of childcare. Officers will also continue to share information about the funded entitlements, including a recording produced for professionals, with interested stakeholders.

During October 2022, a childcare costs survey was released for parents/carers who access childcare in Darlington. The survey link was distributed via childcare providers and schools, Families' Information Service social media sites, Children's Centres, the health visitors, the library, Children's Centres, the Council staff briefing, the Parent/Carer Forum and Darlington Association on Disability, representatives from Learning and Skills, SENDIASS, Jobcentre Plus and the Council's Economic Growth Team. The purpose of the survey was to gather feedback about childcare costs and Tax Free Childcare from parents/carers who are using childcare in the borough. This information will be shared with the childcare sector and may encourage those providers who are not already registered to deliver Tax Free Childcare, to do so.

In Summer 2022 the Early Years Team attended two half day training sessions delivered by the childcare consultancy Hempsalls. The training set out a business map which supports officers to speak with providers during setting audits, about whether the pandemic has affected their business and if so, to consider ideas and options to support business direction, develop plans to balance service delivery with safety and sustainability and to embed a regular process of review.

Providers regularly receive DfE up-dates from the local authority which may assist their business sustainability. These up-dates can range from DfE extensions to funded places eligibility criteria to up-dates on the Energy Bill Relief Scheme, explaining the discounts on wholesale gas and electricity prices for non-domestic customers.

Provider Training

Settings have been supported by the Early Years Team through regular virtual and in person briefings for all group settings and evening sessions for childminders. Regular 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.

A nationally recognised Early Years consultant has continued to support the local early years sector in understanding and implementing the Early Years Foundation Stage

reforms, this has taken the form of virtual training and online surgeries. Good practice meetings have continued to run which provide an opportunity for private settings and schools to come together and share good practice both virtually and face to face. Good practice is also shared via the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators' Network. Information regarding external training opportunities is sent to the sector twice termly via the Early Years newsletter. Each setting and childminder have been assigned a member of the Early Years Team as a Link Officer. Link Officers arrange termly visits/contacts with their settings.

The government is providing a package of workforce training, qualifications and support and guidance for the early years sector to support staff and settings and address the impact of the pandemic on the youngest and most disadvantaged children called the Early Years Education Recovery Programme. The local authority has accessed part of this package called 'Experts and Mentors' and were part of the pilot phase. In mid-autumn the pilot finished and the next phase has now started with 3 private day nurseries and 2 pre-schools from Darlington receiving support.

The local authority was also part of the Early Years Professional Development Programme (EYPDP), which was another part of the package of support from the Department for Education. The local authority was selected to be part of phase 2 of this support, whereby practitioners were able to access an online course with a focus on Communication and Language, Personal, Social and Emotional Development and early maths. 10 practitioners from 6 settings took part in phase 2 of EYPDP and the programme is now entering the 3rd phase, which will see it have national rollout. The local authority supports with promoting the programme and liaising about recruitment with the delivery partner.

Providers are also able to choose from a training offer which includes Oral Health, Physical Development training from Tees Valley Sport, Child Development for babies and 2- to 3-year-olds, training on the 0 to 5 Education, Health and Care Plan process and starting out in Early Years Foundation Stage. Training for practitioners regarding English as an Additional Language is being developed and settings are made aware of Early Education training. Details of the Early Years Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator Award has been shared with the sector and practitioners are also able to benefit from the Early Bird and Early Bird Plus Programmes for families who have a child with an Autism Spectrum Condition. Settings also have the opportunity to take part in the Basket of Opportunities (BOO) programme which is an early intervention programme whereby settings invite parents to participate, with a focus on raising awareness of supporting children's development at home.

During Summer 2022 the Early Years Team undertook Hemsalls Business Map training which supports the childcare sector to monitor the health and sustainability of their business and adapt in an agile, timely manner, to meet any changing demand. During the training plan cycle this training will be cascaded to providers. Additionally, the local authority is introducing a Liquid Logic software package to assist with the termly collection of early years headcount data and making provider payments. Providers will be supported through this software introduction in 2023.

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 Autumn 2021 this take-up figure had increased to 80% and by the Spring 2022 was back to pre-pandemic take-up levels at 86%. In Summer 2022 the take-up rate dipped to 78% (the national average was 72%) but by Autumn '22 it was 89%. There also appears to have been a decline in children accessing a Universal Entitlement place in Autumn 2022. The availability of funded places is advertised via health visitors, Children's Centres, Jobcentre Plus, Learning and Skills, in the 'One Darlington' magazine and on local authority, Housing and Health Facebook pages. In addition, an Early Years Entitlements funding webinar has been produced by the team for professionals and officers have attended social care team meetings, to present and answer questions about the funded entitlements. Finally, a more conversational Early Years Entitlements funding webinar for parents/carers has been produced.

Looking at actual take up, the number of children accessing funded places in the Autumn 2022 term was: 336 funded 2-year-olds; 484 3- and 4-year-olds accessing Universal Entitlement; and 589 3- and 4- year-olds accessing the Extended Entitlement; a total of 1,409 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. However, when Autumn 2019 data is compared with Autumn 2022 data, there are 178 less children accessing a Local Authority funded place in Autumn 2022. When comparing Autumn 2019 with Autumn 2022, looking at the private and voluntary sector providers, there was a decrease of 130 funded children. Take-up has increased in pre-schools only. However, there has been a decrease of 121 children in private day nurseries, 32 in out of school clubs and 3 with childminders. When comparing Autumn 2019 data to that of Autumn 2022, with regard to nursery schools and units, there has been an increase of 63 funded 2-year-olds, a decrease of 165 funded 3- and 4-year-olds accessing the Universal Entitlement and an additional 54 children accessing the 30 Hours Extended Entitlement. The total number of funded children in the private and voluntary sector is at 86% of the take-up in Autumn 2019 and the number of funded children in the school sector is at 92% of the take-up in Autumn 2019.

Table 1 – Autumn 2019, Autumn 2021 and Autumn 2022 funded entitlements take-up

	Autumn 2019 (pre-pandemic)				Autumn 2021				Autumn 2022			
	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	215	164	278	657	180	138	306	624
Pre-Schools	27	49	66	142	32	60	85	177	34	57	77	168
Out of School Clubs	-	-	32	32	-	-	11	11	-	-	-	-
Childminders	11	4	28	43	13	4	28	45	8	9	23	40
Private & Voluntary Sector Totals	270	242	450	962	260	228	402	890	222	204	406	832
Nursery Schools	21	80	32	133	46	94	44	184	50	60	38	148
Nursery Units	30	365	97	492	48	441	133	622	64	220	145	429
School Totals	51	445	129	625	94	535	177	806	114	280	183	577
Childcare Market Totals	321	687	579	1,587	354	763	579	1,696	336	484	589	1,409

Unmet Childcare Demand in 2022

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. Cases of unmet demand are gathered using various methods: from providers through the monthly attendance returns, by analysing parental enquiries via the Families' Information Service, via the unmet demand list and from any parental complaints to the local authority. The Families' Information Service received 64 childcare related enquiries between April 2022 to December 2022. There have been no recorded cases of parental unmet demand.

Attendance during the Summer 2022 holidays was surveyed, out of 37 registered childminders who are active during the holidays, 22 returned the survey and out of 11 group settings who offer holiday care, 4 returned. Across the sector, occupancy was as follows: 173 4-8 year olds; 31 9-11 year olds; 1 12-14 year old; and 0 15-18 year olds with a disability. A total of 205 children and young people accessing holiday childcare, compared with 229 in Summer 2021. Unmet demand was recorded as zero amongst the childminders. 2 group settings stated that over 4 days demand was so low, the provision of care was financially unviable.

Attendance during the Autumn 2022 half term was also surveyed, of the providers who offer holiday childcare, 26 childminders and 7 group settings submitted returns. Across the sector, occupancy was as follows: 68 4-8 year olds; 12 9-11 year olds; 0 12-14 year olds; and 0 15-18 year olds with a disability. A total of 80 children and young people accessing holiday childcare. There were no reports of unmet demand. 4 childminders reported closing during this holiday as they had had no requests for holiday care. 1 group setting explained that due to low demand on Thursday and Friday, it became financially unviable for them to stay open so they closed. Demand for holiday care needs to continue to be monitored.

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. Unmet demand is recorded by the Families' Information Service who received 64 childcare related enquiries between April 2022 to December 2022.

Provider profileTable 2 - The number of settings in Darlington pre-March 2020, November 2020, November 2021 and November 2022

	Pre-March 2020	November 2020	November 2021	November 2022
Nursery schools	2	2	2	2
Nursery units	17	17	17	17
Private & Voluntary	34	31	31	32
Childminders	80	71	63	51

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. In late December 2022, one private day nursery closed as a result of the owner's health issues. The business consisted of two nurseries and most children were relocated to the other nursery. During the last year 12 childminders have de-registered. Anecdotal feedback suggests that, of those who have provided a reason for leaving childcare, 3 childminders have retired and 7 have left to work in other sectors of the economy. These de-registrations are not concentrated in any particular geographical area of the borough. 3 prospective childminders are currently undergoing training. The Rydal Academy has introduced funded places for 2 year olds in its nursery unit.

Ofsted Inspections

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 2022)

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	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	18
No. of Holiday Clubs	1	15	0	0	6	0	0	0	22
No. of Out of School Clubs	1	16	0	0	1	0	0	0	18
No. of Out of School Clubs (school registered)	0	7	1	0	0	0	1	0	9

No. of Breakfast Clubs	0	11	0	0	1	0	0	0	12
No. of Breakfast Clubs (school registered)	0	15	4	0	0	0	3	0	22
No. of Playgroups	2	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	9
No. of Childminders	3	37	0	0	7	0	4	0	51

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)

Population

In Darlington, the population size has increased by 2.1%, from around 105,600 at the 2011 Census to 107,800 at the 2021 Census. This is lower than the overall increase recorded for England of 6.6% but is slightly higher than the increase in the North East population of 1.9%. Nearby areas like Stockton-on-Tees and Hambleton have seen their populations increase by around 2.6% and 1.8%, respectively, while others such as County Durham saw a smaller increase (1.7%) and Richmondshire saw a decrease of 4.4%. As of the 2021 Census, Darlington ranked 223rd for total population out of the 309 local authority areas in England, which is a fall of six places in a decade.

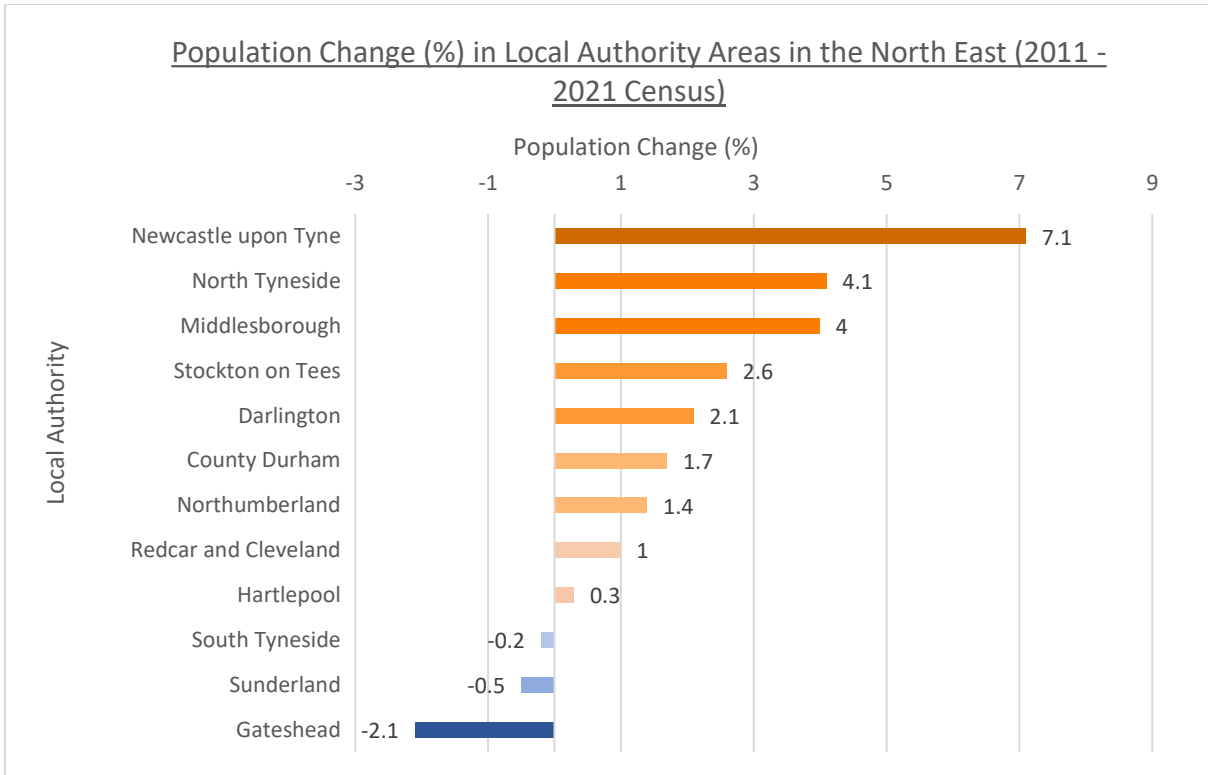


Figure 1: Examples of North East Local Authority Population Change (%) between the 2011 and 2021 Census.

Demographics

Comparison between the 2011 and 2021 Census shows that Darlington has an aging population. There has been an increase of 19.9% in people aged 65 years and over, and a decrease of 2.5% in children aged under 15 years. Since 2011 there has been a reduction of the working age population of 2.7% or 1,700 people. 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.

2021 Age Cohort Demographics



Age Cohort	2021 Population	2021 Percent
Under 16 years	19,891	18.6%
16 to 34 years	22,271	20.8%
35 to 54 years	27,269	25.5%
55 to 74 years	26,709	25.0%
75 years and over	10,794	10.1%

Figure 2: Darlington's Age Cohort Demographics 2021. Source: Lightcast Analyst.

Employment

The latest data from Lightcast Analyst, a data analysis program combining multiple data sources including the Annual Population Survey and Labour Force Survey, shows that from 2011 to 2021 the number of jobs in Darlington increased by +8% from 47,482 to 51,366. By comparison the regional increase in jobs was +2%. In 2021, the average wages per job for Darlington was £25,600, just above the North East average of £25,292.

The ONS Business Register and Employment Survey, from a total employee jobs figure for Darlington of 52,000 jobs estimates that 35,000 of these are full-time and 17,000 part-time.

2021 Labour Force Breakdown

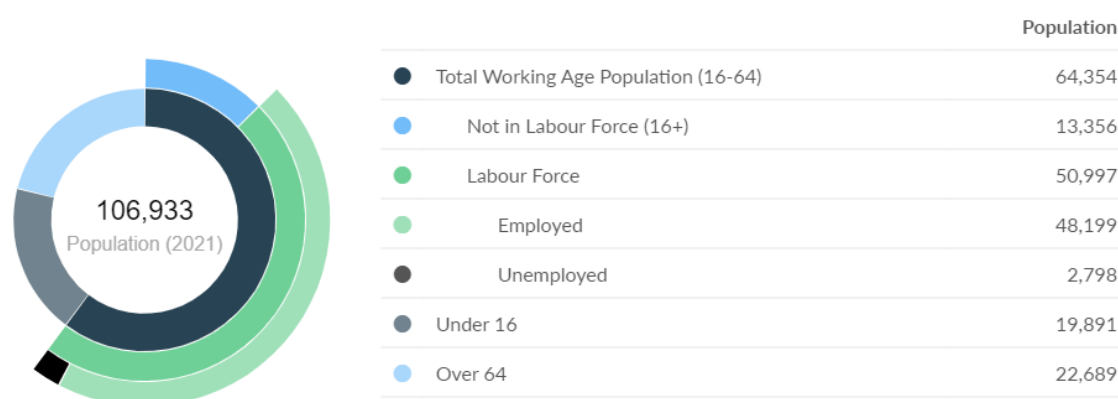


Figure 3: Labour Force Breakdown for Darlington. Source: Lightcast Analyst

As of 2021 (Source: Lightcast Analyst), of a total working age population in Darlington of 64,354 people, 50,997 people are in the labour force, with 48,199 employed and 2,798 unemployed. The ONS Annual Population Survey for Jul 2021 – Jun 2022 calculates that Darlington has an employment rate of 75.4%; taken as a percentage of the economically active population aged 16–64. Darlington’s employment rate was above both the North East average of 74.6% but below the national average of 78.6%. Darlington’s in employment figure ranked highest of all 12 North East authorities. Unemployment in Darlington stands at 4.9%, below the North East rate at 5.3% but higher than the national figure of 3.8%. This is the lowest Darlington’s unemployment % has been since March 2018. In September 2022 the ONS Claimant Count estimated that 2,870 people or 4.4% of the population of Darlington are claiming out-of-work benefits.

In 2020 the ONS Annual Population Survey suggests the number of workless households in Darlington reached 5,500 or 16% which is above the national average of 13.6% but below the North East average of 17.1%.

The ONS Business Register shows that as of 2022, 87.5% of enterprises in Darlington are micro-enterprises with 0 to 9 employees. This is in line with the North East figure of 87.7%. A further 10.2% are small businesses employing between 10 and 49 employees. 2.3% of Darlington’s business base is characterised by a smaller number of medium to large businesses (employing more than 50 employees).

Regeneration projects are evident throughout 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 on the 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 has commenced.

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. 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 early November 2022, an on-line parental survey was carried out via providers, schools, Jobcentre Plus contacts, Darlington library, health visitors, Children's Centres, the Parent/Carer Forum, Darlington Association on Disability, the Local Authority staff bulletin, the Local Authority business e-newsletter and various other parental social media groups. The survey was aimed at a particular group of parents who are currently using registered childcare provision in Darlington and asked questions about the cost of childcare and use of Tax Free Childcare. The return rate was high at 157 responses.

When asked which type of childcare provider(s) parents used: 34% said they used a standalone nursery school; 23% used a childminder; 22% a registered breakfast and/or after school club; 18% a private day nursery; 13% a pre-school; 8% a registered holiday club; and 7% used a nursery unit attached to a primary school. When asked what the age was of the child(ren) accessing childcare: 44% of children were aged 3 to 4 years; 43% were 1 to 2 years old; 23% were 5 to 8 years old; 12% were 9 to 11 years old; 5% were babies aged under 1; and 1% were 12 to 14 years old. There were

no responses relating to young people aged 15 to 17 years with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

Parents/carers were asked to tell us the reason(s) why they use childcare. 78% of parents used childcare to enable them to work; 53% said they use childcare to enable their children to access opportunities to develop and grow; 43% said childcare is used to enable their children to get ready to go in to school; 42% to enable their children to make friends; 8% to give them a break from caring; and 7% of parents used childcare to enable them to access training opportunities. Parents were also asked when they use childcare: 58% of parents used childcare during term-time only; 40% during term-time and school holidays; and 2% used childcare only during school holidays.

Parents were then asked how they pay for childcare. 36% of parents paid for all of the childcare they use themselves; 21% had a 2, 3 or 4 year old child who accessed 15 funded hours a week only; 6% had a 2, 3 or 4 year old child who accessed 15 funded hours a week and additional hours paid for by parents; 18% had a 3 or 4 year old child who accessed 30 funded hours a week only; and 10% had a 3 or 4 year old who accessed 30 funded hours a week and additional hours paid for by parents. 26% of respondents said they accessed Tax Free Childcare. 6% used Childcare Vouchers and 5% of parents said that they accessed an employer support/childcare scheme. Parents were asked whether they expect their childcare costs to rise over the next 6 months. 40% of respondents said that they did expect costs to rise and 23% said that they did not. 37% of respondents replied that they did not know.

Parents were asked how much of their family income they spent on childcare, compared to the situation in Autumn 2021. 38% said they spent a larger proportion of their income on childcare; 14% said this was a smaller proportion; 17% said they spent about the same proportion on childcare; and 31% said that they did not pay for childcare as they only accessed funded places. Parents were asked what the reason(s) were for the proportion of their family income they spend on childcare changing since Autumn 2021. 30% of parents reported that their childcare fees have increased; 16% said that they are now working more hours and so need to access more childcare; 12% said that they have more children accessing childcare; 10% said that their family income had decreased; 6% said that they are working less hours; 6% said that they are now using family and/or friends as informal childcare; 5% said that they have less children accessing childcare; 3% said that their childcare fees have decreased; and 2% said that they have had an increase in family income.

Parents were asked whether they thought their childcare provider may have to make changes to current arrangements for users in the next 6 months, for example, by no longer being able to offer 30 Hours funding during the school holidays. 11% of respondents said yes; 16% said no; and 73% said that they did not know. Parents were asked whether the increase in the cost of living would result in changes in access to childcare. 70% of parents said that they did not think there would be a change in the amount of childcare they use; 14% said that they would use less childcare a week; 14% said that they would use family and/or friends as informal childcare; and 6% said that they would stop using childcare altogether.

Parents were asked whether they had heard of Tax Free Childcare. 69% said that they had and 31% said that they had not heard of it. Parents were asked how they

heard of Tax Free Childcare. 68% said by word of mouth from parents, family members or friends; 33% said that their childcare provider had told them about it; 4% had found out about it on social media; and 2% had heard about it on T.V. or the radio. The source of information which was mentioned most in the narrative was the Government website 'Childcare Choices'. Parents were asked whether their childcare provider had informed them of Tax Free Childcare when they registered. 74% said that they had and 26% said that they had not.

Parents were asked if they had accessed Tax Free Childcare (TFC). 63% said that they had and 37% said that they had not. 89% of parents were currently accessing TFC and 11% had accessed TFC in the past. Respondents were asked what information they thought parents needed to know about TFC to help them to decide whether to apply. 81% said that what the potential financial benefits are was important; 76% said that information on how to apply would help; 68% of respondents said that information on who can apply would help; 58% said that it would be helpful to know which childcare providers were registered on the scheme; and 52% said that it would help to know the age range of eligible children.

Parents were asked how easy it was to sign up to the TFC scheme. 45% said that it was easy to sign up; 27% said that it was very easy; 23% said that it was neither easy nor difficult; 5% said that it was difficult to sign up; and no respondents said that it was very difficult. When asked whether they would recommend the TFC scheme, 100% of parents/carers said that they would.

Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

In the Autumn 2022 term, local authority officers met with senior leaders from Beaumont Hill Academy. The school runs a weekly parents/carers group and they had been sent a mini survey about holiday childcare to consider and discuss at the group. The purpose of the meeting was to gather survey feedback from the group via school staff. Parents were asked whether they used any form of childcare or registered activities during the Summer holidays. Those parents who do use childcare, tend to use DASH, the Darlington Association on Disability (D.A.D.) playscheme. During the Summer 2022 holidays, 85 children and young people resident in Darlington attended the DASH schemes. Feedback from D.A.D. via the Childcare Sufficiency group is that, like the rest of the childcare sector, they are experiencing difficulties with recruitment.

Following the meeting the mini survey questions were distributed on-line to all parents/carers at Beaumont Hill Academy. There were 27 returns. Parents/carers were asked if they use holiday childcare or registered activities during the school holidays: 22% said that they do and 78% said that they do not. Parents were asked if they access the D.A.D. playscheme DASH: 15% said that they do and 85% said that they do not. Parents were asked if they have accessed any other type of childcare provisions, other than DASH: 4% said that they had and 96% said that they had not. Parents who accessed childcare generally were asked whether they did this because they work: 13% said that they did use childcare because they work and 87% said they used childcare for other reasons. Parents who do not use childcare were asked if they would like to use it to enable their children or young people to mix with their peers during school holidays: 79% said that they would and 21% said that they would not.

Parents were asked if they have heard of schemes to support with childcare costs, such as, Tax Free Childcare or the Universal Credit Childcare Offer: 62% of respondents said that they had not and 38% of respondents said that they had.

Provider feedback

In October 2021 a Childcare Recruitment and Retention survey of local providers was undertaken and 59% of returning providers stated they were experiencing issues with recruitment and retention. As a result, a discussion about recruitment and retention is included within provider funding audits.

During 2022 early years funding audits have taken place with 13 of the 27 day nurseries and pre-schools in the borough. When managers are asked whether they have any difficulties affecting their business, the overwhelming response is that of recruitment and retention. Of the 13 settings audited, 9 are private or community association day nurseries and 4 are pre-schools. All of the audited day nurseries commented that they are experiencing unprecedented problems in recruiting appropriately qualified and experienced staff and only 2 said that retention of staff is not an issue. Anecdotal evidence from settings is that there is little interest from appropriately qualified and experienced applicants. Two settings have had to restrict numbers due to recruitment problems. Providers are encouraged to sign-post parents to the Families' Information Service so that alternative provision can be sourced although parents/carers, can if they wish, remain on the provider waiting list until a vacancy is available. One manager explained that they have a number of staff who have worked in the nursery a long time and are approaching retirement age and that they recently lost 3 young members of staff to office and retail work because the hours are more flexible, there is less responsibility, better pay and some employers are able to offer a 'Golden Hello' payment.

Of the audited pre-schools, 2 managers explained that recruitment had been difficult but none of the audited pre-schools were experiencing retention issues. Both pre-schools who were experiencing recruitment issues decided to 'grow their own' and employ apprentices, some of them mature.

During 2022 D.A.D. have experienced some challenges when recruiting Pay Workers for their holiday play scheme for disabled children. D.A.D. has explained that the lack of and quality of applications has been a major concern for them.

In October 2022, the team attended the Darlington Jobs Fair to promote childcare as a career and also to ensure people are aware that if they need childcare to enable them to work, there is help available with childcare costs, such as Families' Tax Credit. The team was approached by a number of people, including older people looking for a change of career and people who have newly settled in Darlington from other countries. Information was also available about supported internships for students with Education, Health and Care Plans via the Project Choice Team at NHS Health Education England. Placements are for 2 to 3 days a week and last up to 12 weeks. There is no obligation on a childcare setting to make the placement permanent but if they wish to do so, the setting can submit a funding support application. This information has been shared with Darlington's childcare providers.

Links are being made with Careers Advisors based in the borough's secondary schools. Links are also being formed with Teesside University who run a module enabling students to find out more about the world of work and future career paths. The team will be attending, amongst others, a Careers Fair at Carmel School in March 2023 to promote childcare as a career. The team will also have a stall at the Darlington Jobs Fair in February 2023 where local childcare vacancies will be advertised.

Recruitment and retention is a serious issue, it 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. There is also anecdotal evidence 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. To address this, the Education Partnerships Team has been establishing a list of providers and schools that would be happy to provide work experience.

From Autumn 2022, as part of the early years funding audits, providers are being asked whether the rising cost of living is affecting their business and also, whether their charges will need to increase significantly to cover the increased costs of running a business in the current climate. During the Autumn '22 term, regarding the supply side, there have been no reports of substantial rent rises but some providers are reporting that as the cost of food, consumables and staffing costs rise they have increased their fees marginally. On the demand side, there have been no reports from parents of substantial increases in childcare charges.

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.

Additional information

Birth data shows that in recent years the number of birth registrations in Darlington has declined. This may have market implications for providers. Please see Appendix A, page 17.

Conclusion

Indicators have shown that there continues to be sufficient capacity to meet demand. 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. It is not entirely clear yet, whether working patterns will permanently change as a result of the pandemic and if so, how they will change. Data from the Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS) showed that of trading businesses, when asked in Summer 2021 whether they saw homeworking continuing, 24% said they intend to use increased homeworking as a permanent business model going forward and 28% were

unsure. Businesses in the Information and Communication industry were most likely to intend to increase homeworking in the future (49%) (Source: ONS, 'Business and individual attitudes towards the future of homeworking, UK: April to May 2021'). 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 B for the 2022 Childcare Parental Survey results.

Appendix A

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
2020/21	1,061
2021/22	1,038

Source: 2009/10 – 2019/20 - Office for National Statistics (ONS), Birth Registrations

Source: 2020/21 onwards - NHS Primary Care Registration Data (data is more appropriate for use as it is available earlier than ONS data and is released as academic year rather than calendar year data).