

Committee Name and Date of Committee Meeting

Cabinet – 12 February 2024

Report Title

Rotherham Early Years Education and Childcare Strategy 2024-2027

Is this a Key Decision and has it been included on the Forward Plan?

Yes

Strategic Director Approving Submission of the Report

Nicola Curley – Strategic Director, Children & Young Peoples Service

Report Author(s)

Aileen Chambers – Head of Service, Early Years & Childcare

Ward(s) Affected

Borough-Wide

Report Summary

All local authorities have a statutory duty to meet the Childcare Act requirements, including ensuring that there is sufficient, high-quality childcare and education to meet needs.

This report summarises and seeks approval for the Early Years Education and Childcare Strategy 2024 – 27. This has been developed to highlight the importance of the early years, the impact of the pandemic, the current position in the Borough, the key priorities and forthcoming changes which will impact the sector. The Strategy sets the expectation for children in the Borough through its vision and identification of key aims.

Recommendations

1. That Cabinet approve the implementation of the Rotherham Early Years Education and Childcare Strategy 2024-2027.

List of Appendices Included

- Appendix 1 Rotherham Early Years Education and Childcare Strategy 2024-2027
- Appendix 2 Early Years Education and Childcare Strategy consultation findings
- Appendix 3 Equalities Impact – Full Screening
- Appendix 4 Carbon Impact Assessment

Background Papers

House of Commons Education Committee [Support for childcare and the early years](#)

Consideration by any other Council Committee, Scrutiny or Advisory Panel

Yes, presented to Improving Lives Scrutiny Workshop on 27.11.23

Council Approval Required

No

Exempt from the Press and Public

No

Early Years Education and Childcare Strategy

1. Background

1.1 Local authorities have a number of duties in relation to childcare and early education in the Childcare Act 2016. Delivery of these duties has been managed through annual action planning which included working in partnership with the early years sector and wider partners.

1.2 Priorities in recent years have included:

- Development and implementation of a speech, language and communication strategy and training programme
- Supporting the continued high quality of childcare delivery in the borough (99% of providers have good / outstanding Ofsted grades)
- Supporting an increase in take-up of early education by disadvantaged families (94% of eligible 2 year-olds are taking up a place)
- Supporting children with SEND to access childcare / early education through removal of barriers and support
- Providing parents / carers with up-to-date information on childcare availability to enable them to make informed choices (Families Information Service)

1.3 National investment in early years has continued for over 20 years with a series of expansions and reforms, including Sure Start programmes, Children's Centres, the expansion of the early education entitlements (to include the least advantaged 2-year-olds and working families), a focus on speech, language and communication and investment in training.

1.4 The government are now implementing a significant expansion of early education entitlements which will be rolled out between April 2024 and September 2025 as detailed below. This will enable more children to access a free entitlement but will also require an expansion of the sector:

Timescale	Policy Change
April 2024	working parents of two-year-olds will be able to access 15 hours of free childcare
September 2024	15 hours of free childcare will be extended to all children from the age of nine months
September 2025	working parents of children from 9 months to under the age of five will be entitled to 30 hours free childcare per week

1.5 Development of a Rotherham Early Years Education and Childcare Strategy will support wider awareness raising of the importance of early years on the outcomes for children as well as the current challenges faced by the sector.

The report outlines actions being taken to ensure Rotherham children have access to the new early education entitlements.

2. Key Issues

2.1 Early Years

Conception to age five is a vitally important time in a child's life. Providing the best opportunities at this time can have a positive effect on children's educational, cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes in the short and long term.

2.2 Most children in Rotherham have positive experiences in their early years and are well prepared for starting school. However, nationally, and locally there are large differences in outcomes between children from different backgrounds and these differences generally continue in later life. All Rotherham residents should be given equal opportunities to have positive and fulfilling lives and this Strategy sets out the Council's commitment to ensuring a consistent, high quality early education and childcare offer is available to all families.

2.3 COVID

The Covid pandemic has had a significant impact on children in their early years and the early years and childcare sector. Early education take-up was disrupted during the pandemic and research shows the impact of this disruption on children. Speech and language delays were reported across all age groups as children had fewer opportunities to develop their communication skills at home. Children struggled to adapt to new situations and missed out on opportunities to socialise and develop self-regulation skills. Increased support required in settings to meet needs, coupled with significantly increased delivery costs and challenges recruiting staff has impacted on the ongoing sustainability of the sector.

2.4 Market Issues

The following factors could impact on the Council's ability to ensure children are able to access their entitlements to ensure a positive impact on outcomes:

- Lack of capacity in the sector to meet the increased entitlements (particularly from September 2024).
- Financial sustainability of day nurseries, pre-schools and childminders is a concern which has been confirmed by the sector. Any loss of provision will increase the capacity gap.
- Lack of availability of suitably qualified early years professionals to support current delivery. The impact will be magnified with the expansion required to meet the new entitlements.

2.5 To try and mitigate the above risks, the Council have developed the following Strategy aims to ensure that:

- Parents/ carers can access affordable, sufficient, high quality and fully inclusive childcare places that support early learning and working parents/carers.
- Children's early learning and development is expertly supported by a strong, skilled, and knowledgeable early years and childcare workforce.
- Children who may be at risk of poor outcomes are prioritised for high quality targeted support.
- All children have a positive journey through their early years and are well supported to transition to Foundation 2 (Reception).

2.6 An action plan is being developed to support achievement of each of these aims.

3. Options considered and recommended proposal

3.1 Option 1 – recommended: That Cabinet approve the Early Education and Childcare Strategy. This option will raise awareness of the challenges and opportunities in the Borough and enable the ongoing development and support to the sector which will ensure improved outcomes for Rotherham children.

3.2 Option 2 – That Cabinet do not approve the implementation of the Early Education and Childcare Strategy. It would be possible to take the identified aims forward in an action plan with internal oversight within CYPS. Awareness raising of the priorities will take place through direct work with providers and social media messaging for parents, but the opportunity for the profile of a cohesive strategy would be lost.

4. Consultation on proposal

4.1 A consultation was carried out with 276 early years and childcare providers in July 2023 to inform the development of the Strategy. The full details are included in Appendix 2. The main findings were:

- 63% of all providers highlighted cost of delivery as a challenge, with 16% highlighting the early education funding rate as a factor.
- 75% of school respondents stated increasing numbers of children with SEND is a challenge.
- 61.5% of group childcare providers stated staff recruitment is a challenge.
- 55% of childminders stated that increases in cost of delivery is a challenge.

4.2 A workshop was carried out with the Improving Lives Select Commission on 27th November 2023.

4.3 Appendix 2 sets out the full findings from the consultation.

5. Timetable and Accountability for Implementing this Decision

5.1 The Strategy will be published following Cabinet and implemented in line with the Action Plan.

6. Financial and Procurement Advice and Implications

6.1 The government provide Early Years Block, Dedicated Schools Grant funding to local authorities to passport to schools and childcare providers to deliver early education places to eligible children. This will include funding to deliver the increased entitlements from April 2024. The total Early Years Block in 23-24 was £18m.

6.2 Local authorities can retain a percentage of the Early Years Block to fund central services. This funds the Early Years and Childcare Service who will support implementation of this Strategy.

6.3 The government has provided £2,375,344.23 of additional funding to support the implementation of the Wraparound Childcare Programme to increase availability of wraparound childcare nationally.

6.4 The government has also provided £538,652 of capital funding in 2024-25 to enable local authorities to support schools and childcare providers to increase capacity to meet both the extended early years entitlements and the wraparound childcare programme.

6.5 There are no direct procurement implications arising from the recommendations detailed in this report.

7. Legal Advice and Implications

7.1 The main body of the report has referred to the statutory duties placed upon Local Authorities under the Childcare Act 2006 (as amended). Those duties are as set out below.

7.2 Sections 1 to 5 of the Act relates to the duty placed upon local authorities to improve the well-being of young children in their area and reduce inequalities between young children in their area. Well-being is defined based upon 5 outcomes: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being.

7.3 The Local Authority is required to deliver this outcome by ensuring that early childhood services are delivered in an integrated way and as part of this they must encourage the involvement of parents and prospective parents, providers and any others who contribute to the well-being of young children, when developing and delivering integrated services. The Act also imposes a duty

upon the Local Authority to work together with relevant partners in their local area in improving outcomes.

- 7.4 Sections 6-13 set out the duties placed upon the Local Authority in respect of the provision of childcare. Specifically, Section 6 requires Local Authorities to secure, as far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient childcare to meet the needs of working parents and those making the transition to work. (This applies to childcare for disabled children until they reach 18 and to childcare for other children until the 1st September after their 14th birthday).
- 7.5 Section 7 places a duty on local authorities to secure free early years provision of the prescribed description [by Regulations] for each young child in their area who has attained a prescribed age but is under compulsory school age.
- 7.6 Section 11 places a duty on the Local Authority to ensure that at least every 3 years an assessment is carried out as to whether the childcare provision in their area is sufficient, they must also keep those assessments under review.
- 7.7 Section 12 places a duty on the Local Authority to ensure that information, advice and assistance is available and accessible to enable service users to make informed choices on childcare, early education, activities or support services in relation to 0–19-year-olds and their families. Parents and prospective parents must be provided with information as prescribed by regulations.
- 7.8 Section 13 places a duty on the Local Authority regarding the provision of information, advice and training to childcare providers and childcare workers. This duty must be discharged in accordance with Regulations.
- 7.9 In addition to ensuring compliance with the legal duties placed upon the Local Authority by the Act and associated Regulations, the Local Authority must also ensure compliance with Statutory Guidance [Early Education and Childcare – April 2023].
- 7.10 In approving the Early Years Education and Childcare Strategy this will, to an extent, ensure that the Council is able to demonstrate compliance with its statutory duties.

8. Human Resources Advice and Implications

- 8.1 Additional staffing will be required within the Early Years and Childcare Service to support the implementation of the Department for Education increased entitlements. There will be adequate funding within the Early Years Block centrally retained funding to cover these costs.

9. Implications for Children and Young People and Vulnerable Adults

- 9.1 Working parents will be able to access free childcare for children from 2 years from April 2024 and 9 months of age from September 2024. More children will have access to high quality early education provision which will support improved outcomes.

10. Equalities and Human Rights Advice and Implications

10.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment (initial screening and full assessment) was undertaken in relation to the proposal and is Appendix 3 to this report.

11. Implications for CO2 Emissions and Climate Change

11.1 An impact assessment has been undertaken linked to the proposals contained within this report and is attached as Appendix 4.

12. Implications for Partners

12.1 The main partners in the delivery of early education and childcare are schools (academies and maintained), day nurseries, pre-schools and childminders as well as colleagues across the local authority and externally (education and inclusion, early help, libraries, estates, health, voluntary sector). The local authority role in childcare sufficiency is to manage the market. The increased entitlements and increased expansion needed will require the support of all partners to ensure capacity in the sector and support for families to access their entitlements.

13. Risks and Mitigation

13.1 There is a risk that there will not be enough trained early years professionals to meet the increased demand. The Early Years and Childcare Service have put plans in place to support recruitment, including working locally and regionally to increase awareness of opportunities and support individual to access early years training.

14. Accountable Officers

Julien Kramer (Assistant Director of Education and Inclusion)

Approvals obtained on behalf of Statutory Officers: -

	Named Officer	Date
Chief Executive	Sharon Kemp	29/01/24
Strategic Director of Finance & Customer Services (S.151 Officer)	Judith Badger	24/01/24
Assistant Director, Legal Services (Monitoring Officer)	Phillip Horsfield	24/01/24

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