

## Slough Borough Council

<b>Report To:</b>	Cabinet
<b>Date</b>	20 <sup>th</sup> January 2025
<b>Subject:</b>	Early Years Strategy
<b>Lead Member:</b>	Cllr. Puja Bedi – Lead Member for Education and Children’s Services
<b>Chief Officer:</b>	Sue Butcher – Executive Director for People: Children
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	Neil Hoskinson – Associate Director of Education
<b>Ward(s):</b>	All
<b>Key Decision:</b>	YES
<b>Exempt:</b>	NO
<b>Decision Subject To Call In:</b>	YES
<b>Appendices:</b>	Appendix 1 - Early Years Strategy November 2024

### 1. Summary and Recommendations

- 1.1 This report requests approval of the draft Early Years Strategy November 2024 which is included as an appendix to this paper. In June 2024, the Local Government Association [LGA] carried out a Mini Peer Review of the early years sector in Slough. The review evidenced a clear commitment to the early years agenda by senior managers but found that there was not yet a mature and active structure in place. The key recommendations of the review, based on feedback from key officers and stakeholders, have informed this Early Years Strategy based around legal compliance and a needs-led approach specifically designed for Slough.

As the strategy itself states, “Slough are on an exciting journey to realise the full potential of early intervention and getting it right from the start. There is a clear commitment and passion throughout all levels of the organisation and across partners to support, facilitate and enable Slough families to thrive. There is also clear commitment to supporting childcare beyond the early years which enables families to take up or remain in work and as a result reduce multiple disadvantage and support the local economy”.

#### **Recommendations:**

Cabinet is recommended to:

- (a) Approve the Early Years Strategy attached as Appendix 1.
- (b) Note the findings of the LGA Mini Peer Review that informed the Strategy.

## **Reason:**

- 1.2 The Early Years Strategy makes clear our commitment to the first years of a child's life. Research has shown us, time and again, that our development from conception to age two lays the foundation for our physical, emotional, social, educational and economic futures. The coordination of services, to enable a universal and targeted framework of support from pre-birth to aged five, is critical for improving the outcomes of children, families, communities and society. In short, there is no better stage in a child's life in which to invest, if we are committed to long-term change.

It is a diverse and multi-agency sector, made up of children's centres; maintained nursery schools; child minders together with private, voluntary and independent Nurseries [PVI's]; in which local authorities have the legal duty to ensure that there is sufficient childcare and early education provision. This strategy sets a direction of travel and a clear vision for future developments in the sector to build the existing good practice.

## **Commissioner Review**

This report has been reviewed by Commissioners and there are no specific comments to add.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 The new Early Years Strategy is a key document for SBC due to the importance of children making the best possible start to life. The early years sector is complex with children's centres, maintained nursery schools, PVI's and child minders all providing different options for families. Within this overall picture, the move to family hubs will be a key element of the support for young people and families in the future. There are a number of existing strengths within early years education and childcare which means that there is a positive foundation for Slough to build on. However, our self-evaluation identified that there was the potential for early years and childcare to impact even more positively and to support greater sustainability.

A new approach is also required to reflect the changes introduced over the last four years; the national focus on the first 1000 days, (including the Best Start Programme), the move to family hubs with its more integrated working model and the largest expansion of early years and childcare entitlements in a decade.

- 2.2 Therefore, in June 2024, the Local Government Association [LGA], were invited to deliver a Mini Peer Review, focusing on any gaps between delivery and strategic priorities. This was led by Ann Van Dyke MBE, a nationally renowned early years consultant and LGA Peer. Slough already benefit from a significant free training program from the charity Dingley's Promise to support inclusion in the early years, which Ann also provides support for. The review produced a series of recommendations using feedback from all stakeholders.
- 2.3 The second aspect of the support provided by Ann Van Dyke, on behalf of the LGA, was to support the writing of an Early Years Strategy based on the findings from the peer review and the experiences of all stakeholders in the sector. This Strategy aims to develop a coordinated approach built on the best practice already present in Slough,

examples of excellence locally and nationally as well as drawing on the latest research in early years practice. As set out in its first section, “the strategy will lift the current focus on individual department and agency service delivery, to a multi-agency approach led by and dictated by the Council duties. Moving the Council from operational to strategic priorities across agencies will impact directly on a range of Council priorities including employment, regeneration, safeguarding, school attainment and SEND”.

### **3. Report**

- 3.1 The Slough Corporate Plan sets being “a borough for children and young people to thrive” as the first priority in its Corporate Plan. The key targets under this priority were based on research from the King’s Fund which demonstrates that a person’s early years are of fundamental importance in shaping their future education, employment and income outcomes. At the same time, Slough Children’s Services have set their overall priorities around the vision “Happy, Safe and Loved, Thriving”.

The importance of high-quality early years education and childcare was also evidenced by the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education Project which followed the educational journey of pupils over a sixteen year period. The project found clear evidence that what happens between the ages of three and five is an important phase of education in its own right and has long-term implications for children as learners. High quality pre-school reduces the risk of anti-social or worried behaviour and leads to improved attainment, particularly for children where parent/carers had poor or no qualifications. Attending high-quality early years education settings is especially important for boys, children with SEND and disadvantaged pupils predicting higher attainment and social-behavioural development. Students attending these settings are more likely to have better GCSE results and go onto higher education.

#### **Early Years Outcomes**

- 3.2 The quality of early years education settings in Slough is already clear with 99.75% of two year olds currently in provision ranked as Good or Outstanding together with 100% of three and four year olds. At the same time, the take up of nursery places has increased considerably with 67% of two year olds from low household income families (Bright Futures) in funded places during the summer term 2024, rising from 54.5% in the summer term 2023, the national average is 74%. Slough is slightly below national average (88.5%), with 87% of 2 year olds accessing places from working families (based on applications) and 83% of three and four year olds in free education places in the Summer term 2024.

In 2022, the percentage of pupils in Slough Reception classes achieving a Good Level of Development was slightly below the national average. However, following a lot of hard work by the Early Years Team and our education settings, we saw an improvement in 2024, with Slough performance back above the national average.

### LGA Mini Peer Review

3.3 In June 2024, the LGA were invited to deliver a Mini Peer Review, focusing on any gaps between delivery and strategic priorities. The LGA have a strong track record of encouraging involvement from families, partners and other stakeholders. Prior to working with Slough, they had already supported 28 local authorities in reviewing and developing their early years and childcare strategy. The methodology had therefore evolved from this previous experience and was further refined for the Slough context in scoping meetings with key officers and partners.

The review was led by Ann Van Dyke MBE, a nationally renowned early years consultant and LGA Peer. Slough already benefit from a significant free training program from the charity Dingley's Promise to support inclusion in the early years, which Ann also provide provides support for. The support programme agreed with the LGA included the development of a new Early Years Strategy considering all aspects of early years, but with a particular focus on family hubs, speech language and communication as well as the home learning environment. To support this approach, Ann Van Dyke brought her nationally renowned expertise in SEND and was supported by peers with family hub experience and speech and language therapy.

In total 52 individuals were directly engaged in the process (26 staff, 15 early years and childcare practitioners, and 11 parents). The LGA peers supported the process by coordinating and facilitating the engagement sessions. Attendees to other sessions as part of the review included the Chief Executive, the Lead Member for Education, the Executive Director of Children's Services and other key Council staff together with partners from health, public health, social care and education settings.

3.4 Activities included;

- Initial scoping meetings to shape the support needed.
- Presentation and discussion with the Lead Member, Chief Executive, Executive Director of Children's Services and Director of Education.
- Engagement and feedback at appropriate Senior Management meetings.
- Key stakeholder engagement sessions; e.g. staff who operationally manage services across the early years and childcare sector.
- Engagement with parents and carers by joining activities already planned and offering space to share experiences.
- An online search for support and information from a parent/carers perspective (mystery shopping).
- A review of existing Council plans and strategies

### Mini Peer Review Recommendations

3.5 The review process evidenced a clear commitment to the early years agenda by senior managers but found that there was not yet a mature and active structure in place. The review produced a series of recommendations and offered some priorities based on the feedback from all stakeholders. These were used to inform the new "needs-led" Early Years Strategy specific for Slough in order to ensure that the Council meets its statutory and legal requirements moving forwards.

The review made it clear that, at the core of the Local Authority's strategic role in the early years sector, should be its statutory functions for data analysis, commissioning, the development of services and the proactive management of multi-agency working across a range of services including health, employment support, community services etc.

The Local Authority was further encouraged to carry out a comprehensive needs analysis to support a shared understanding of the early years and childcare needs of children and families across Slough. Together with establishing a performance management framework across the Childcare Act aims with particular emphasis on the current outcomes and pathways for children with SEND, ethnic minority groups and hard to reach families.

The peer review recommendations fall into a number of key areas:

1. Strategic Leadership for Early Years & Childcare
2. Developing a Comprehensive Multi Agency Dataset
3. Service Structure and Functions
4. Focusing on Early Years Inclusion
5. Securing Effective and Accessible Information
6. Securing Childcare Sufficiency
7. Celebrating Diversity and Tackling Discrimination

### **Early Years Strategy**

- 3.6 The second aspect of the support programme provided by Ann Van Dyke, on behalf of the LGA, was to draft the Early Years Strategy based on the findings from the peer review including the experience of all stakeholders in the sector. To ensure sector ownership, there was engagement with senior leaders, operational leads and key stakeholders around the priorities from the review. Regular check ins throughout the process took place with the Group Manager for Early Education, the Head of Service for Children's Centres and the Director of Education.

The Slough Early Years Strategy sets out the importance of early education and childcare, the national and local context, the legal framework, baselines and starting points as well as a framework to measure successful implementation. This strategy aims to develop a coordinated approach across the sector built on the best practice already present in Slough, examples of excellence locally and nationally as well as drawing on the latest research in early years practice. As set out in the first section of the draft Strategy, "the strategy will lift the current focus on individual department and agency service delivery, to a multi-agency approach led by and dictated by the Council duties. Moving the Council from operational to strategic priorities across agencies will impact directly on a range of council priorities including employment, regeneration, safeguarding, school attainment and SEND".

As stated above, the main content of the Strategy are sections following on from the recommendations from the Mini Peer Review.

### Strategic Leadership for Early Years & Childcare

- 3.7 The review process revealed a clear commitment to the Early Years agenda from senior leaders, however there is a need to promote respect for and value of the agenda across all departments. The new strategy will drive a more preventative approach to a range of council services such as education, employment, housing, regeneration, community cohesion, and safeguarding.

### Developing a Comprehensive Multi Agency Dataset

- 3.8 Whilst a great deal of data is collected, it is not yet sufficiently coordinated to evidence needs and target resources effectively. A comprehensive needs analysis, along with regular reporting at a strategic level, would support shared understanding of the local early years and childcare needs, and clear performance management across the Childcare Act aims.

### Service Structure and Functions

The Strategy does not include a preferred model for the delivery of early education and childcare for Slough. Rather, given the diverse and multi-agency nature of the sector, it encourages strategic leadership to be built around market management functions. SBC should therefore consider the wider childcare market to ensure that the particular needs of all our groups of children are met. Further exploration is being carried out through a series of planned steps to clarify the role and functions together with an agreed matrix of where specialist responsibility rests.

The Council has already started to work on an outreach model for the Children's Centres to transform them into family hubs. This model should be designed with clear targets to reach families across the whole area. This work has already started to an extent, and could include identifying community spaces, supporting parent led activities, setting up (but not delivering) stay and play sessions etc to create community led universal services.

As stated above, it will also be important to consider the market management functions that are currently offered to support the Early Years and Childcare sector (training, information, support etc). These services must be coordinated across all those settings delivering the Early Years Foundation stage including schools. There are also opportunities to further enhance services for the early years children with SEND through this model (which would fit with the council only delivering services which the market will not respond with).

The Strategy is designed to maximise resources and work towards a more level playing field for providers to provide a wider choice of high-quality provision for families. Children should receive the same high quality inclusive provision whether they access a childminder, pre-school, day nursery or school. That choice should also be consistent wherever in the borough they live.

### Focusing on Early Years Inclusion

- 3.10 Maintaining a focus on early intervention and prevention work for children with additional needs and SEND will be particularly important in the context of the local

increase in the number of children requiring high-needs/high-cost statutory support. Children with SEND are also more likely to come from least advantaged families.

The Mini Peer Review recommended that the concept of creating development centres should be continued. The centres will support the continued development of expertise, enable assessment and support at the earliest stage, whilst supporting inclusion in mainstream early years provision. A particular focus should be placed on inclusion in the school sector to support the sufficiency of early years places and impact positively on transitions and exclusions from school.

The Council have a significant opportunity to realise in being selected to work with the charity Dingley's Promise on the Comic Relief funded Inclusion Project. This project brings significant resource to transform the entire early years workforce over the next two years. Nationally the project currently has over 15,000 practitioners taking part, with 96% consistently reporting they can take more children with SEND as a result.

A focus on creating development centres, alongside upskilling the wider mainstream workforce through the Dingley's offer could significantly impact on inclusion rates as well as outcomes for children and costs to the council. A particular focus should be placed on school engagement in the Dingley's programme as greater inclusion support was found in the private, voluntary and independent sector through the review. Improving a basic understanding of inclusion in the school sector would also support the sufficiency of early years places. Again, ensuring coordinated support across the whole sector, and supporting children up until the end of year one could impact positively on transitions and exclusions from school.

#### Securing Effective and Accessible Information

- 3.11 Whilst a good range of information exists locally, from a family's perspective it tends to describe services, as opposed to their needs. A single information service for all things family related would simplify and improve access to information and self-help for families, particularly those new to the sector, while potentially creating income generation opportunities from the sector and related services.

#### Managing Childcare Sufficiency

- 3.12 In the light of the national childcare expansion, a key priority around continuing to effectively manage childcare sufficiency, in particular market expansion and development, will be essential to meet new priorities and compliance.

#### Celebrating Diversity and Tackling Discrimination

- 3.13 Slough have already begun to measure the extent to which ethnic minority groups are impacted by disadvantage. This work could include a systemic review and plan to address inequalities.

#### Next Steps

- 3.14 If the Early Years Strategy is agreed by Cabinet, this will create a framework supporting legal compliance around a needs-led approach specifically designed for Slough. The next stage of the process will be to consult again with key stakeholders and partners on the details of the Strategy.

In addition Slough have identified they would benefit from the following actions to maintain the momentum achieved so far whilst structural changes continue internally:

- To devise a new approach to early years commissioning, children centres, family hubs and information.
- To ensure that the new approach aligns to the new SEND and Inclusion Strategy.
- To conduct a thorough review of roles and responsibilities across the sector.
- If necessary, to establish service level agreements for the key delivery of children's centres, family hubs, childcare provision and any additional services.
- A facilitated session bringing together data and service leads to begin work on the needs analysis and performance management framework.
- A facilitated session for operational leads to consider the Family Hubs Locality Model and consider reach across the whole service
- A peer network conversation with two other local authorities who have been through the process already to ensure support as the LGA programme comes to an end
- Once agreed, to launch the new approach through action planning sessions with the operational leads for the priorities in the Strategy.



## **4 Implications of the Recommendation**

### **4.1 Financial implications**

The recommendations of the report are to approve the Early Years Strategy and to note the findings of the LGA Mini Peer Review that informed the Strategy. As such there are no specific financial proposals to validate. Funding in this area is provided by the Council through its support for Children's centres and through the Early Years block of the Dedicated Schools Grant which is received on a participation basis and mainly passed through to providers. Any reduction in the central element of the DSG will need to be reflected in the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy

The report references the need to ensure there is an increase in early years places and a focus on developing SEND provision, inclusion and integration with schools. Should proposals for increased sufficiency require capital investment, these will need to be submitted to the Capital Board for review and appropriate governance.

### **4.2 Legal implications**

The Education Act 1996 places a duty on local authorities to secure efficient primary, secondary and further education are available to meet the needs of the population of their area. The Act also requires local authorities to:

ensure that their functions are exercised with a view of promoting high standards, ensuring fair access to opportunity for education and training and promoting fulfilment of learning potential for children and young people in its area

and

secure sufficient schools and sufficient is defined by reference to number, character and equipment to provide appropriate education based on age, ability and aptitude, as well as ensuring diversity of provision.

These duties are overarching duties and apply regardless of whether schools are maintained by the local authority or independent of local authority support.

The Children and Families Act 2014 together with The Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014 set out the requirements in respect of the provision of Education Health and Care Plans.

The Childcare Act 2006, makes provision relating to its general duties to improve the well-being young children and reduce inequalities between young children in their area ; and specific duty to make arrangements to secure that early childhood services in their area are provided in an integrated manner which is calculated to – a) facilitate access to those services, and b) maximise the benefit of those services to parents, prospective parents and young people .

### 4.3 **Risk management implications**

#### 4.3.1

	<b>Risks</b>	<b>Potential Impact</b>	<b>Mitigating Actions</b>
1	The annual Early Years Sufficiency Assessment has identified that more early years places will be required due to the recent changes in early education entitlements.	SBC has a statutory duty to ensure sufficient early education and childcare for families who are entitled to or require a place. Failure to do so has significant reputational risks and legal challenge.	There is a Place Planning Board and a working party that looks particularly at early years. Area Boards are being introduced in 2024/25 to ensure that overall planning is broken down by areas and brings together intelligence from stakeholders and partners.
2	There is evidence of a significant increase in the number of children in Early Years settings with complex SEND needs. This has implications for the quality of education and outcomes.	Currently all LAs are seeing an increased demand for SEND in Early Years. Failure to provide an effective service would mean that children do not receive the right support early enough. There is a reputational risk of a poor local area inspection as well as a financial risk if we fail to achieve the targets in our Safety Valve Agreement.	There is a separate Risk Register that addresses the specific areas of risk within the SEND area. This sets out the individual mitigations that have been put in place to address these risks. The Early Years Strategy was drafted by an expert in Early Years inclusion so it does seek to address this pressure.
3	The recruitment and retention of Early Years education practitioners and childminders, is a concern nationally.	The early years sector report that appointing qualified practitioners is often difficult. This is due to other opportunities offering higher salaries or reduced workloads.	SBC will track staffing levels in our nurseries and a Workforce and Retention Strategy is being drafted that will focus on best practice nationally.
4	A number of SBC Education teams are funded from the Early Years grant which is renewed year on year. The percentage that SBC can retain was 5% but is expected to reduce to 3% by 2026/27.	A number of statutory services are funded by central governments and so, any reduction in funding, will affect budgets. Also the need to address the SBC budget issue as a whole has implications for individual service budgets.	A restructure of Education teams is being carried out to align services to budgets more accurately. The government has indicated that public services will not be subject to similar funding cuts that have previously been seen.

### 4.4 **Environmental implications**

4.4.1 There are no known environmental implications arising from this report.

#### **4.5 *Equality implications***

- 4.5.1 The Early Years Strategy stresses the need for an improved data dashboard and governance arrangements for the Early Years sector. A particular benefit of this will be that there can be greater evaluation of the performance of key groups of children in the future.

#### **4.6 *Corporate Parenting Implications***

- 4.6.1 The majority of Children Looked After [CLA] by local authorities have SEND and will often have suffered instability in their education. CLA children and young people are nine times more likely to have an EHC plan than their peers but also likely to not have had their needs accurately assessed as early due to these gaps in schooling. Putting an inclusive approach at the heart of the Early Years Strategy and the delivery of early education and childcare will have an obvious positive impact on the CLA cohort in terms of early identification and support for those with SEND.
- 4.6.2. Although the Early Years Strategy is for children up to age five, the move towards Family Hubs expanding the reach of the Children's Centres up to age 18 (25 for young people with SEND) will support work to prepare CLA pupils for moving away from school and into positive adult pathways. This includes post 16 education and training places, support for employability, independence training and supported internships.

### **3. Background Papers**

None