

Forward Plan reference number: FP/178/10/21

Report title: Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2022	
Report to: Cabinet	
Report author: Councillor Beverley Egan – Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Early Years	
Date: 24 November 2021	For: Decision
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Everyone’s Essex

- 1.1 One of the key strategic aims of ‘Everyone’s Essex’ is to ensure that Essex is a great place for children and families to grow, and it includes commitments to achieve educational excellence and high standards for all children and to level up outcomes for families.
- 1.2 The 2022 Early Years and Childcare strategy supports the Council’s Everyone’s Essex ambitions by levelling up for Children, through increasing the uptake of free entitlement funding for children from low income families, as well as focusing on economic disadvantage to help narrow the word gap in children’s education. This will include reviewing issues such as the progress of summer born children.
- 1.3 This strategy looks to enable children to make better progress and further improve their level of development at the early years stage, so that they are school ready and able to make strong progress through their school years and into good jobs as adults.
- 1.4 This strategy does not create any additional climate impacts and will help young children and their families to better understand climate change and how to live sustainably. It is therefore consistent with our net zero climate commitments.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Adopt the Essex Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2022 as appended to this report.
- 2.2 Agree that implementation of the Strategy will start in January 2022.

3 Background and Proposal

- 3.1 The previous Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2015–2018 set out the specific commissioning and operational approach that delivered the strategic direction for the Authority, and the Council's early years and childcare statutory duties.
- 3.2 This created the conditions to give all children the best possible opportunity to succeed; to thrive in school and be able to make a positive contribution throughout their lives.
- 3.3 That Strategy ended in 2018 and Essex County Council needs to publish a new strategy. A cross Council team was put together to review the Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2015–2018, understand the current landscape and to produce and implement a new version of the Strategy. The work on finalising and publishing this new Strategy has been delayed due the Covid pandemic.
- 3.4 During the Discovery phase the Project team undertook an: -
 - Analysis of the Essex Good Level of Development data.
 - Initial engagement with schools, early years settings and parents.
 - Initial review of the impact of Covid-19.
 - Horizon scanning of other Councils' strategies and outcomes.
 - A series of workshops with key Essex County Council staff
- 3.5 A draft of the new Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2022 was developed with all key stakeholders during stakeholder engagement and finalised ready for approval to publish in January 2022.
- 3.6 The new Strategy sets out a high-level overview of the different activities to achieve the Council's intentions, building on the outcomes of the previous Strategy.
- 3.7 This Strategy has been developed through engagement with a variety of people who work with children and young people in Essex. Before we produced the draft policy, we conducted a survey of parents to find out their views about childcare in Essex. We had over 1,200 responses. These responses have informed the production of the draft strategy.
- 3.8 We then undertook the drafting of the strategy. This was undertaken in stages and included engagement events with the early years sector & childcare providers. The draft strategy is consistent with the views expressed by providers during the engagement events. There is a view in the sector that the draft is aspirational and will require significant change if delivery is to be achieved. This is acknowledged by the Council and we will monitor progress and continue to engage with the sector as delivery commences. A continued cycle of engagement is intended as part of the implementation of this Strategy.
- 3.9 **The Early Years and Childcare Vision** - In Essex there will be no barriers to children achieving the best they can be and realising their full potential. To achieve this vision, we will ensure:
 - There are sufficient affordable, quality and inclusive early years and childcare places for all children in Essex

- All schools in Essex are inclusive and provide quality education for children no matter what their needs are
- All children in Essex are supported through all their transitions in Early Years
- All families are supported to be the best they can be
- Families understand the services available to them and how they can access these
- All children in Essex can express themselves in their individual way and are confident in how they communicate with others
- Essex County Council provides access to the support and expertise needed to fulfil this vision

3.10 The Strategy is comprised of the following **six aims**:

- Children and their families achieve their potential with support from an effective and connected early years system that has a clear vision, purpose, and direction
- All children have a positive journey through their early years and are well supported to transition to Reception and start Year 1
- Children who may be at risk of poor outcomes are prioritised for high quality targeted support
- Children's early learning and development is expertly supported by a strong, skilled, and knowledgeable early years and childcare system workforce
- Parents can access affordable, sufficient, high quality and fully inclusive childcare places that support early learning and Working Parents
- Families are enabled to be the best they can be

3.11 This Strategy will be translated into a more detailed five-year delivery plan (which is currently being developed), setting out the key actions required to deliver against the six aims.

3.12 Delivery of the plan will be driven by collaboration across the Education Directorate feeding into individual service plans and also working with teams across Essex County Council and with partner agencies.

3.13 This delivery plan will ensure close working with the other relevant Council strategies, plans and programmes of work such as the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Strategy, the work of the Essex Education Task Force, Educational Disadvantage Strategy, Inclusion Framework, Early Help Offer, the Levelling Up Agenda and Working Families Programme.

3.14 This Strategy seeks to build on previous success to ensure positive changes are embedded in a child's formative years to improve outcomes throughout their Education.

3.15 There will be an oversight group set up to monitor and oversee the performance of the Strategy and its delivery plan.

3.16 The year one delivery plan will focus on the following elements: -

- Continue to build on the good outcomes achieved so far in the previous Early Years and Childcare Strategy, with an ambition to further increase the percentage of children achieving Good Level of Development
- Focus on identifying those children as early as possible that will need more support, ie improved assessment at the 2 year check, focusing on the cohorts that generally do not achieve a Good Level of Development ie children born in the summer term or that have special educational needs
- Increase the take up for eligible two year olds to access a funded learning place.
- Focus on economically disadvantaged children to help narrow their word gap
- Contributing to the Levelling Up Agenda with a focus on the Strong Foundations in Early Years goal
- The impact of Covid-19 on young children's learning
- Making sure parents are as informed as they can be in order to make the right choices for their children

3.17 Once approved, this Strategy will be designed into an external facing document in line with Essex County Council branding and published in January 2022.

4 Links to our Strategic Ambitions

4.1 This report links to the following aims in the Essex Vision: -

- Enjoy life into old age
- Provide an equal foundation for every child
- Strengthen communities through participation
- Develop our County sustainably
- Connect us to each other and the world
- Share prosperity with everyone

4.2 This report links to the following strategic priorities in the emerging Organisational Strategy 'Everyone's Essex': -

4.3 A strong, inclusive and sustainable economy

The Strategy will: -

- support the sustainability and development of the Essex Early Years and Childcare Sector
- enable parents to work and train by supporting them to access high quality, affordable and accessible childcare options
- work across the system to deliver good early years outcomes for children which will enable them to have successful educational journeys and go on to access fulfilling employment opportunities and contribute to the growth of the Essex economy

4.4 A High-Quality Environment

The Strategy will: -

- support the early years sector in educating young children about the world and environment and how they can protect this, promoting the use of outdoor learning and environmentally friendly resources
- encourage retro fitting of early years settings where possible and deliver net zero buildings for new capital projects
- encourage providers, through our Early Years Charter, to adopt environmentally sustainable practices
- support parents to make ethical and environmentally friendly choices, for example upcycling baby and children's resources and encourage active travel.

4.5 Health, wellbeing and independence for all ages

The Strategy will: -

- provide and facilitate the availability of information, advice, guidance, and support for parents which enables them to be physically and emotionally healthy – including working across the system to ensure expectant parents make positive choices regarding diet, exercise and substance use and working together to identify and support parents who may be at risk of mental ill health and social isolation
- support providers to educate young children about their health and wellbeing and how best to promote this, setting positive foundations for good health outcomes in later life

4.6 A Good Place for Children and Families to Grow

The Strategy will: -

- work across the system to deliver good early years outcomes for all children, with a specific focus on improving outcomes for our most vulnerable groups
- promote the importance of relationship and attachments across families and family networks and work across the system to support families to develop these
- seek to lessen the demands and strains on working families which can threaten family security and stability
- work across the system to deliver a range of family support services from early help through to those most in need of support
- work with communities to expand the range of opportunities in Essex for families to spend time together including more play space for young children

4.7 Service Excellence

The Strategy will: -

- ensure the earliest identification of children that need additional support, contributing to addressing the causes that drive demand.
- strengthen the Early Years system to improve partnership working leading to more effective collaborating between agencies
- Invest in early intervention for the youngest children creating the conditions to give all children the best possible opportunity to succeed; to thrive in school and be able to make a positive contribution throughout their lives.
- ensure continued focus on delivering the best outcomes for our youngest children

4.8 Equalities and Levelling Up

The Strategy will: -

- contribute to the Strong Foundations in Early Year Levelling Up goal
- focus on providing the right level of support at the right time for families and their children that most need it
- develop solutions and responses which take account of the needs of all and enable improved equality of opportunity and outcomes

5 Options

- 5.1 Option 1 - Approve the new Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2022 which will be published in January 2022 - Recommended option
- 5.2 Option 2 – Do not approve the Strategy and continue without a current Early Years and Childcare Strategy. This option will not allow the Council to formally set out its priorities to support the work to improve outcomes for children and their families

6 Issues for consideration

6.1 Financial implications

- 6.1.1 The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) is made up of four blocks that fund different components of the age 3-16 Education system, one of which is the Early Years block which provides funding for two, three and four year old education.
- 6.1.2 For 2021/22, the funding for the Early Years block is £85.3m. The block is currently £4.7m in surplus, and is forecast to remain in that position, funding for any new one off, short term projects or activity could therefore be supported by this block.
- 6.1.3 In addition to the DSG budget, there is also just over £1m of Non DSG which funds core costs and the sufficiency and sustainability team.

6.2 Legal implications

- 6.2.1 Essex County Council provides leadership to the Early Years System and has specific statutory responsibilities to do the following:
- Ensure there is sufficient childcare available in Essex
 - Secure sufficient children's centres that are accessible to all families with young children, and targeted evidence-based interventions for those families in greatest need of support (Family Hubs in Essex)
 - Provide information, advice, and assistance to families (which we do through our Families Information Service)
 - Secure information, advice, guidance, and training for childcare providers
 - Support improvement in the quality of childcare

- Ensure that all children have access to up to six terms of high-quality nursery provision, as reflected in the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, from the term after their third birthday
- Ensure sufficient and high-quality childcare is available for all 2-year-olds eligible for 'Free Early Education Entitlement funding'
- Meet the childcare needs of families with children over the age of five through out of school care and provision for children and young people up to the age of 14 (or to 25 for children with disabilities)
- Safeguard and promote the welfare of all children throughout all aspects of the work of Early Years and Childcare with specific regard to ensuring that early years and childcare providers understand their responsibilities and are accountable for their practice
- Ensure that all providers delivering funded early education places meet the needs of children with Special Educational Needs and / or Disabilities in accordance with the Special Educational Needs and / or Disabilities Code of Practice 2015
- Participate in the identification and planning for the needs of children with Special Educational Needs and / or Disabilities, including coordinating joint commissioning arrangements across Education, Health and Social Care and in other legal duties related to Education, Health and Care Plans and Preparing for Adulthood

6.2.2 The new Early Years and Childcare Strategy supports the delivery against all of the Council's statutory duties listed above.

7 Equality and Diversity Considerations

7.2 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:

- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
- (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

7.3 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).

7.4 The equality impact assessment indicates that the proposals in this report will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic.

8 List of Appendices

- The Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2022
- Early Years and Childcare Strategy 2022 Equality Impact Assessment

9 List of Background papers

None