

Overview and Scrutiny Report

Children's Readiness for School

November 2020



2. Reason for the study

- 2.1 At its meeting in September 2019, the Children, Education and Skills Subcommittee agreed to review the early intervention support available for parents in North Tyneside to enable children to be ready for school and identify if any improvements could be made to the support available to ensure the outcomes were improved for their children and families.

2.2 The topic linked to the Be Ready for School Priority of the North Tyneside Plan – “Giving our children and their families the best start in life”.

3. Remit and method

3.1 At a Scoping meeting the Sub-group agreed to consult with First and Primary Schools and ask the following questions:

- What is your understanding of “being ready for school”?
- What is involved in developing children’s school readiness including for example self care, literacy, language and socialisation?
- What are the reasons for children not being ready for school?
- What is your approach to children being ready for school?
- How do you engage with parents/carers?
- Have you seen an improvement in children being ready for school?
- Who is involved in improving children’s school readiness and do you work together to achieve this aim?
- Would you be interested in providing information/speaking to the Sub Group?

3.2 The following Members volunteered to serve on the group:

- Councillor Matthew Thirlaway (Chair)
- Councillor Pat Oliver (Vice-Chair)
- Rev Michael Vine

3.3 The Sub-group felt that it was important to consult directly with schools and a questionnaire was circulated to all First and Primary Schools in North Tyneside. The Group met with officers in the Early Help Services Team and the Health Visiting and School Nurse Service to gather information on the role that the Council has in relation to Children’s Readiness for School. The Sub-group also met with staff in Private Nurseries in North Tyneside. Further consultation was deferred due to Covid restrictions.

4. Findings and evidence

4.1 Consultation with Schools

4.1.1 A number of Primary Schools reported that they were seeing an increasing number of children who were not ready for school with children not being toilet trained, the over use of dummies and nappies and children being transported in buggies, poor speech acquisition and inability to interact with others, child protection issues, poor social skills, poor language and communication skills,

children allowed unlimited access to electronic devices and children with low literacy skills and no knowledge of stories and rhymes.

- 4.1.2 A number of reasons cited were parents with a lack of skills, knowledge and vocabulary/academic ability, parents with social issues not parenting appropriately, working parents being too busy, helicopter parenting with parents doing everything for their child, lowering their child's self help skills and sense of independence
- 4.1.3 A school in Benton noted that toilet issues took staff away from teaching and they reported that they were completing more referrals for speech and language therapy which added to staff workload.
- 4.1.4 Schools had different approaches to improving children's readiness for school. One school in Howdon offered pre start toileting sessions and shared expectations and support in the school's induction pack.
- 4.1.5 Another school in Longbenton had opened up two year old provision to allow children an even earlier chance to receive care and instruction from qualified staff. They completed Early Help Assessments with families entering two year old provision as a means of identifying and offering support as quickly as possible. They employed a school nurse one day per week to support parents and offered workshops, drop ins and appointments across the whole school. However the Workshops had not been well attended despite being timetabled to coincide with school drop off and pick up times.

The children who had attended the two year old provision were much more settled on entry to nursery and children attending the nursery transition into reception class had increased communication and social skills compared to those who had not.

- 4.1.6 A school in Shiremoor with a two year old and a rising three nursery prior to nursery immersed children in vocabulary, stories, songs, experiences and development in all areas and ensured that they learned boundaries. They kept parents well-informed and engaged with parents/carers by organising lessons with the children, singing events, wellie walks, performances, visits out of school to a farm and the beach. They also tweeted books of the week and daily learning. They held book bonanza or pyjama story days and sessions to learn about how to share stories and they gave out packs with ideas for learning

The School noted that 88% of the children lived in the four most deprived areas and engagement with parents was an on-going challenge.

- 4.1.7 Another School in North Shields encouraged children to develop key attributes and attitudes and develop a sense of self as 'a positive learner' with an 'I can do' approach and involved parents to increase their own confidence. They stated that they did not have a problem with children being ready for school who had been through the 2 and 3 year old Nursery. However, there was a difference with those children who had attended other childcare providers.

4.2 Meeting with **Early Help Services**

- 4.2.1 At the service based at Riverside, the staff worked with parents to assist them to prepare children for school as schools in the Riverside area had raised that this was a problem. Family Partners in the Early Help Service undertook one to one work, early help assessments and whole family partnership work.
- 4.2.2 Health Visitors and School nurses would go out to families if health was an issue and issues would be picked up by Health Visitors at clinics to support parents.
- 4.2.3 Schools who had raised readiness for school as an issue could log with the early help pathway and start early help assessments.
- 4.2.4 Early Help had an approach to engage with families with ready for school workshops and they undertook door knocking to encourage parents to take up the 2 year old offer. The Service also organised stay and play drop ins. The approach was to encourage parents to participate and not be judgemental. At these sessions, the team discussed the importance of morning and bed time routines and story time and song time and reinforcing positive messages. Some parents used ipads instead of traditional toys and intensive work was undertaken to involve families in learning and fun days and the importance of talking to children. A Parenting course had been held at a School in North Shields which had been well attended and the intention was to run another course.

The Early Help Service worked with the Children, Adolescent and Mental Health Services Team and families were referred to Early Help to see what level of support they needed and to upskill and the Team supported the parents in the family home.

- 4.2.5 Members asked how many early years children there were in the Borough who were not ready for school and where there were development issues and neglect was raised as an issue. The Team said that the neglect referrals they received were not solely down to children not being ready for school, as the neglect category covered a much broader remit/range of issues.
- 4.2.6 In terms of hotspot areas where there were higher numbers of children who were not ready for school these were mainly in areas of multiple deprivation.
- 4.2.7 The tables below show the percentage number of parents who accessed the 2 year old offer and 3 and 4 year old offer in 2019:

Take up of 2 Year Old entitlement – Early Years Census

	2019
North Tyneside	84%
North East	82%

National	68%
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There was a very high take up, and those who did not take up the offer at 2 years, did by 3 years

Take up of 3 and 4 Year old entitlement – Early Years Census

	2019
North Tyneside	101%
North East	99%
National	94%

The take up was 101% as children from other Local Authorities accessed the provision also

The Sub-Group recognised the work that was being done in North Tyneside to achieve the high take up of the Early Years offer.

4.3 Health Visiting and School Nurses Service

4.3.1 The Service provided support to parents. Readiness for school started very early and the Service supported mums during the ante natal period and all women were offered an ante natal contact and a very early health needs assessment. Dads were encouraged to be present so the Team could build up a relationship with the family. The mums who did not engage were either still at work or had to cancel their appointment which was re arranged or mums were contacted by telephone to go through ante natal information and information was sent out in the post.

4.3.2 All families had universal contact including ante natal contact, new baby visit, assessment at 6-8 weeks, one year old assessment and 24-28 month assessment. There was 98% compliance within North Tyneside for the new birth visit by Health Visitors to families and non compliance was usually due to baby being in special care.

Under the Healthy Child Programme children had a development review at two years however the Service offered advice up until the age of five years. The National Child Measurement Programme was for children in reception class.

4.3.3 The Service had seen a rise in children who had not been toilet trained as using nappies was convenient and it was not always a priority for parents. The Service had offered a drop in session to help with toilet training at a Primary school in North Shields in April 2019 in order for children to be trained before the beginning of the school term in September, however the take up for the session had been low. Engagement with parents was sometimes difficult, and the Service had recruited community nursery nurses and it was hoped they could assist in readiness for school support.

4.3.4 There were higher levels of children not meeting assessment thresholds in the Riverside and Howdon areas and the vulnerable parent pathway pilot would

target resources to parents in these areas and then be introduced to other areas where there were pockets of deprivation.
Social media would be used more regularly to promote health messages to parents and young people.

- 4.3.5 Baby clinics were held in libraries and leisure centres and Bounce and Rhythm and Stay and Play sessions were promoted together with peer support sessions for breast feeding.
Parents in the coastal area had set up a social media group to offer support and continued to meet to support each other.
- 4.3.6 In families where there was a drug or alcohol problem and a chaotic lifestyle there was an impact on the development of a child and any safeguarding concerns would be escalated and parental support offered.
- 4.3.7 The School nurse team was small and undertook a whole system approach. A pilot was being undertaken by school nurses to give out a toothbrush and toothpaste kit to parents to roll out the cleaning teeth public health message. A chat health online forum had been introduced for young people to email questions to a school nurse and young people were signposted or referred for support.
- A safety equipment pilot had been introduced in the North Shields locality to reduce childhood accidents and the impact would be shared with other wards in the Borough.
- 4.3.8 The move from the NHS to the Council's Public Health Team had enabled the Team to improve links with the Special Educational Needs Team and to provide advice to parents whose children had special educational needs and a market place event at the Parks had enabled the Team to build links and partnerships with the community and voluntary sector.
- 4.3.9 During discussions with the Health Visiting Service the Sub-Group asked if schools flagged the issue of children not being toilet trained with the Service and it was noted that few cases had been reported to the Service.
The Sub-Group noted that in schools, there was an impact on the child and other children in the class.
The Sub-Group recognised the need to strengthen communication between Schools and the Health Visiting Service and acknowledged that it was the responsibility of many services for children's readiness for school.

4.4 **Private Nurseries**

- 4.4.1 The Sub-Group met with representatives from private nursery providers in Tynemouth, Wallsend and North Shields
- 4.4.2 The representative from the Nursery in Tynemouth discussed how the Nursery had a Pre School Room and how they supported the childrens' social and emotional development and prepared children for transition to school and learning.
- 4.4.3 The representative from Wallsend stated that some children were not emotionally or socially ready for school and an example was highlighted

where some children at the Wallsend Nursery could not sit still at the table at meal times. The Nursery had children with toileting and behaviour problems and had applied for Leaps funding.

- 4.4.4 The representative from North Shields advised that the Nursery worked with children from deprived areas whose parents were out of work and also with children whose parents had busy working lifestyles who did not invest time with their children.

In Wallsend the deprivation issues were related to parenting and some unemployed parents did not appreciate the value of early education and it was about cultural change.

- 4.4.5 Links with reception classes

The representative from Tynemouth Nursery confirmed that the links with the reception classes and Nursery schools were very positive in North Tyneside.

- 4.4.6 Readiness for school Initiatives

It was acknowledged that preventative measures undertaken by Sure Start were a big miss such as free childcare courses undertaken by the Adult Learning Alliance which built a relationship with the community and were not seen as a threat.

Families had engaged with projects which included cooking and reading with children and clothes exchanges and the children flourished.

The Nurseries stated that they offered elements from Sure Start such as “Stay and Play” for parents but funding was tight.

- 4.4.7 The representative from North Shields stated that they used the Solihull Parenting Programme “Cool for Schools” where parents were trained to be buddies and which included useful activities.

- 4.4.8 The North Shields representative stated that the Nursery had invested in an online learning journal to send out tips and relevant literature and this was a useful way to engage parents.

- 4.4.9 The Tynemouth representative noted that the online learning book was a useful way to engage with parents and presentations to parents at a parents evening were beneficial.

- 4.4.10 The Nursery in Tynemouth undertook some home visits.

- 4.4.11 The Wallsend representative noted that the Nursery had previously given out written newsletters but they now used Facebook to engage with parents and post information and this was a useful platform to use for the community.

- 4.4.12 The Nursery representatives discussed the support offered from the Council.

The representatives noted that additional support for an individual child via Early Years Inclusive Funding or Leaps funding involved a huge amount of paperwork which was time consuming and difficult to navigate.

- 4.4.13 The North Shields Representative noted that the Council's ready for school offer was very useful and a mock Ofsted and checking of Policies and Procedures was undertaken but sometimes disheartening when the recommendations were not always affordable. The Nursery had a service level agreement with the Council for training. It was noted that this training was optional for Nurseries to buy into and that unless the Nursery had a child with special needs there would be very little communication with the Early Years team. They stated that the early help assessment was a lengthy process in order to coordinate speech and language, physiotherapy and childcare specialisms.
- 4.4.14 It was acknowledged that the training sessions undertaken by the Council's Commissioning Team were very worthwhile.
- 4.4.15 During discussions with Private Nurseries it was highlighted that the early help assessment process was very lengthy and bureaucratic and applying for additional support for an individual child via Early Years Inclusion or Leaps funding involved a huge amount of paperwork which was time consuming and difficult to navigate.
The Sub-Group felt that the Local Authority should consider simplifying the early help assessment process.
Nursery Representatives commented that further support from Health Visitors on toilet training would be beneficial.

4.5 **Consideration by Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee**

The Report was considered by the Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee on 2 February 2021 and the Committee agreed to refer the Report to Cabinet

The Committee were concerned about the lack of engagement from schools and nurseries, which obstructed the ability to scrutinise fully.

They acknowledged the full engagement from council officers and proposed an alternative approach to schools to gain greater engagement through Head Teacher briefings which might gain greater engagement.

5 **Conclusion**

When we came to the end of our evidence gathering for this piece of investigatory work, the coronavirus outbreak was only just in its infancy. Words like "lockdown" and "social distancing" were not yet a part of our vocabulary. Ironically, this piece of work focuses on an issue that can only have been worsened by the pandemic. Ensuring young children are ready for school is vital to their development and has an impact throughout their life.

During this piece of work, we were adamant in our belief that parents and carers are, first and foremost, responsible for ensuring their child is ready for school. We acknowledged, however, that most parents will want or need additional support. North Tyneside Council, and other agencies, therefore,

have an important role in supporting parents and carers so that all children in the borough have a good start in life. The Council also has a distinct duty towards our looked after children.

Concerns were raised at several meetings of the Children, Education, and Skills Sub-Committee about reports in the national media about children not being ready for school because of issues such as poor language development and the lack of toilet training. The Sub-Committee established an investigation into the size of the problem in North Tyneside.

The Sub-Group began by sending a questionnaire to all First and Primary Schools in North Tyneside about their experiences, however, we received a very small return. While the feedback was consistent the Sub-Group felt the amount of evidence prevented us from drawing any conclusions about the size of the problem in North Tyneside. We, therefore, believe it is crucial that the Council consults with parents, schools, and private nurseries about children being ready for school with a focus on the size and distribution of the problem in North Tyneside.

The Sub-Group also met with staff from private nursery providers, council officers, and health workers. It became clear during these meetings that there was a problem with some children not being ready for school. While we were impressed with the support available to parents and carers, the Sub-Group agreed on a number of important recommendations.

We would like to thank all those people who assisted us during this piece of work as well as those Council staff who help, support, and protect children in North Tyneside on a daily basis throughout the year.

6 Recommendations

The Sub-Group makes the following recommendations:

6.1 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services considers improving communication between the Council, schools, and private nurseries in relation to early help and being ready for school.

6.2 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests the Director of Children's and Adult Services to consider simplifying the early help assessment process, so it is less time consuming and bureaucratic for schools and private nurseries or provides adequate help to schools and private nurseries in completing the early help assessment process.

6.3 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services provides more help to schools and private nurseries for toilet training, including for children without special needs.

6.4 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services provides more help and encouragement for parents and carers in accessing early help information and services, including help for toilet training, language development, and accessing online educational material for children.

6.5 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Director of Children's and Adult Services consults with parents, schools, and private nurseries about early help and being ready for school, including a focus on the size and distribution of any problems in North Tyneside. The findings of this consultation are to be shared with Cabinet and all Elected Members.

6.6 Recommendation :

Cabinet requests that the Elected Mayor writes to the Secretary of State for Education asking for more funding and resources for local government for early help to ensure all children are ready for school.

7.0 Acknowledgements

The Sub Group would like to place on record its thanks and appreciation to those officers and representatives of external organisations for their assistance in providing the evidence on which this report is based. A full list of all those individuals who helped the Sub Group with its work is set out in Appendix 1.

8.0 Background Information

Our North Tyneside Plan