

Written evidence submitted by Devon County Council

The EYCC service in Devon provides a range of statutory and support services for early years and childcare providers in Devon including PVI, School provision, childminders, out of school care and maintained nursery schools. We manage the funding allocations and entitlements process, monitor sufficiency and act where there is a lack of provision, support all early years providers to maintain quality including meeting welfare requirements, safeguarding responsibilities and high-quality teaching and learning. We try to minimise the amount of early years funding we retain to manage and deliver services and this currently 3% of the total budget. We also manage the inclusion services for early years including Portage and the ASENDCo role.

We are submitting this evidence as we are pleased to see the focus being given to early years and childcare and we want to ensure that as a large rural local authority our perspective is represented but more than our service perspective we believe we represent the views of our providers through our work with them and our ongoing approach to engagement and feedback including through networks, visits, surveys, and regular 'dialogue' events where settings practitioners can raise concerns and challenges and we can review our delivery to meet their needs.

We have considered our response linked to the terms of reference with a short introduction focussing on the key benefits of the early years and childcare sector and some of the key misconceptions that have developed in relation to this sector

Key Benefits of Early Years and Childcare to consider and why this makes it a holistic intervention

Early Years education has a direct and positive impact on outcomes for all children and is particularly beneficial for those children who are already disadvantaged because of the family characteristics they are born into – the challenge here is ensuring it is high quality and available to all children

Early Years education and childcare (this needs to include school age children) positively contributes to the economy of the country by increasing the number of people available in the work force including the large number of people who are actually employed in the sector – the challenge here is to ensure that it is available and affordable

Early Years education and childcare supports reductions in the reliance on welfare provision and benefits by supporting families to be financially independent, needing less state support and subsequently providing good role models for their children in relation to contributions to society and taking responsibility for yourself. - the challenge here is supporting families to access the early years provision and make the funding entitlements sufficient

Key Misconceptions in Early Years and Childcare that need to be addressed:

Early Years provision is expensive in the UK. Early Years (and school age childcare) is provided on a shoestring in this country. The reason it is expensive to parents compared to other countries is the level of funding allocated to early years and childcare from the government (or taxpayers ultimately) and not the cost of what is being delivered. We have low qualifications, low wages and often poor quality make do environments – village halls, large houses in city centres converted to provide day care, and other buildings that are made to fit the needs rather than purpose built or developed places. We have a mixture of delivery models – charities and small committee run pre-

schools, small businesses particularly offering full day care, school run nurseries or pre-schools and Nursery Schools.

The sufficiency duty that sits with the local authority guarantees that there will be enough early years and childcare. There is no requirement to provide these services sitting with service provider. It is not like schools where there is a statutory right to attend school. These providers are private businesses and charitable organisations if they want to close or must close due to financial issues they can, and no-one can stop them. Until this is understood then the risk to childcare provision will continue because the expectations on the sector are so high and the reward for this effort is very low.

The way it is regulated means there is consistency in delivery. The oversight of the quality and meeting the statutory requirements of the EYFS and the childcare provision sits with Ofsted, this has a significant impact on the availability of places where settings are judged Requires Improvement or Inadequate as funding must be suspended. The management of the distribution of the funding entitlements sits with the Local Authority who monitor hours attended, EYPP allocations Inclusion funding etc this is based on a national formula and minimises the ability to offer appropriate funding, but Local Authorities must endeavour to keep settings open and support quality to ensure there is sufficiency. It is a vicious cycle.

Terms of reference:

Childcare Entitlements

- How affordable and easy to understand is the current provision of childcare in England and what steps, if any, could be taken to improve it, especially in relation to families living within the most deprived areas in England?

It is not clear - parents/carers do not always know where to go for advice. They only 'know what they know' and if they are families in deprived areas, they may not have access to the best advice and guidance e.g., Childcare Choices (HM Government site). Whilst this is easily accessible site, parents/carers may need to be signposted to it.

There needs to be a greater focus on joined up working with services working with children who are under 2 to ensure that families are provided with clear and simple advice around the options for early years education. This includes health services and early help provision and would be a good focus for family hubs building on current children centre provision which is still available in our local area.

If you consider the three areas of benefit then this is a key aspect to ensuring we maximise those opportunities – clear structures around funding, appropriate funding for entitlements so that settings do not need to create complicated additional charging structures for snacks, meals, sundries i.e., sun cream etc. Parents are not getting a fully funded offer, and this will impact on the ability for parents from more disadvantaged backgrounds to access their entitlements because providers are being forced to find ways to make up the shortfalls in costs. One example of this is where children entitled to the 2-year-old funding are required to book 2 full days Parents must book a minimum of two full days 8:00 – 18:00 which means that to access the fully funded 15 hours the parent must pay for five hours or half a day. These are the adverse consequences of the fact that funding entitlement payments do not cover the costs of delivering high quality childcare

and subsequently impacts on our most vulnerable families by not making childcare accessible or affordable.

Finally stop talking about free childcare – it should not be free, and it is clearly not free. Using the terms government funded means everyone understands that there is a contribution that everybody makes to this sector because there is national and individual benefit to doing this.

- Are the current entitlements providing parents/carers with sufficient childcare, and to what extent are childcare costs affecting parents/carers from returning to work full-time?

The funding is not sufficient to provide high quality childcare. Let us consider the workforce who provide the childcare – what if we paid them more, they did not need to rely on top up benefits, they paid more tax and qualifications could increase and the professionalism of the sector can be developed. The impact on children's outcomes, particularly in disadvantaged areas, is improved because the workforce is more qualified. Many staff who work in early years provision in disadvantaged areas are parents who live locally, why cannot early years and childcare sector be used to lift some of these families out of poverty – this could be a key strategy for the levelling up agenda. Further on there are less issues for children's needs as they move into school and they achieve well and engage in their education.

The Government needs to decide what the cost benefits of having a higher paid workforce within the sector are. Whether they are committed to 'free' early years provision or whether they are happy for parents to have to pay top up fees. The costs for additional hours could also be reduced if the hourly rate is increased – a cap on these hours could be introduced so that parents have access to sufficient provision while they work, most people work 37 hours per week, and they need to travel to the workplace or to the childcare setting and home again if home is the workplace. You could argue that settings will just put up their rates and make exorbitant profits – that is the challenge of having a financially unregulated sector but currently we are not even close to breaking even let alone making a profit.

An additional offer should be considered for parents/carers of children aged 0-2 year as this is more costly when parents/carers return to work. Salaries often only cover the childcare costs. This has more impact on women who do not wish to lose their professional status and skills.

Additional resource for children who are currently not accessing education entitlements but have SEND because there is no funding expectation for additional resource for adults, equipment etc – like Early Years Inclusion funding should apply across all types of provision funded or not

- Whether the current Tax-Free Childcare scheme, and support for childcare from the benefits and tax credit system, is working effectively or whether these subsidies could be better used within other childcare subsidies.

The Tax-Free Childcare system can be difficult to navigate for parents/carers but once set up works fine.

The benefit and tax credit system should not be changed. It is important that funding is paid direct to the childcare provider otherwise if it is paid direct to the parent/carer it may not be used for the purposes it was intended.

In terms of wider childcare for school age children more clarity on the tax-free elements would help as this continues to be a further challenge or something like the 30 hours codes so families with school age children can access funding for childcare

- What challenges do early years providers face in terms of workforce, including recruiting, and retaining qualified staff, and the barriers faced by individuals joining the profession? To what extent has the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated workforce challenges?

The workforce is depleted, exhausted and “on their knees”

Low pay (caused by low funding) and long hours of work. High levels of responsibility equivalent to schools where you have levels of leadership that are not available in settings. We have recently run sessions with our setting leaders who have indicated that the expectations on EYs in relation to Safeguarding, SEND, Ofsted inspections, managing the financial challenges, governance structures, are becoming too much.

Feeling undervalued by Government and parents/carers. Many settings report that parental challenge and expectations. The one of the unintended consequences of a low paid workforce is there is low respect for the professionalism of what the settings do. They are seen as babysitters, or they are held accountable in ways that are unreasonable. Social media is a significant issue for setting providers who are often members of their local community

Since Covid 19 children are returning to provision with higher levels of behavioural issues e.g., PSED (Personal Social Emotional Development), Communication and Language, which is impacting on staff’s emotional wellbeing and thereby the retention of staff. One area of concern is the level of staff mental health not only linked to the job but to the wider societal impact of COVID. A proportion of the workforce are young – post 16, and this group are particularly impacted and need high levels of support from more senior staff to cope with the expectations of the role and their own emotional needs. This means the senior staff are managing a wide range of mental health needs across the whole setting – children, parents, and staff team.

Practitioners having to have a GCSE in Maths and English – although this is a positive aspiration as it is an indicator of ability for the staff this is currently impacting on ability to recruit.

Clarity around what are full and relevant qualifications and opportunities to utilise experience for example as school HLTA as supporting evidence

- Whether the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system is meeting the needs of pupils with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND), and the improvements that could be made to better support young children with SEND within early years provisions.

The early years sector is one of the most inclusive parts of the system. On low wages and less qualified staff (although often more experienced) they manage some of the most complex children prior to them being assessed and transition to special school provision. They also support children with a wide range of emerging needs both that will be ongoing into school and which have been

exacerbated by environmental factors including COVID. The responsibility to identify, assess learning needs, implement interventions and strategies, support parents through the process of understanding that their child has ongoing needs and navigating the wider system to ensure that these needs will be met when they move into school.

There is a lack of specialist health services and waiting times for more formal assessments mean children are waiting more than half their lifetime to see someone to provide a formal diagnosis.

The ASENDCo role is working with more settings who have a greater number of children with increasingly complex needs but the system at school level leaves early years unable to respond to these needs due to resource having to be channelled to school age children.

Create an EY High Needs Block so that funding can be allocated to the more complex needs within the context of the EY's services so these children can be prioritised. Continue to support early years children to access their education entitlement within their community settings whilst allowing specialist support to be available to them directly rather than having to compete with school demand. This will enable the early years system to ensure that on transition to school the right provision is identified including special school, EHCP's are requested for the right children and most children will have their needs met within the mainstream system.

- To what extent does the early years system adequately prepare young children for their transition into primary education, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) Statutory Framework

Ensure that the term School Readiness is clarified to mean the end of Reception / EYFS framework and that children are moving to national curriculum and Yr1 and not at the point of transition to reception class. School readiness has different meanings to different services particularly Health and this creates a barrier to improving outcomes for children.

Promote the continuity of the EYFS to the end of reception and ensure that the impact of transition to reception is reduced through a seamless service provision around the child and family to this end point.

EYFS Reforms rationale – to improve outcomes in communication language and literacy especially for disadvantaged children.

Delivery of EYFS Educational programmes through high quality early education with a new focus on early language and developing, extending, and embedding children's vocabulary from an early age should contribute to breaking the 'cycle of disadvantage.'

Crucial role **all** early years settings play in making life chances more equal for everyone through delivery of the EYFS curriculum.

Benefits of accessing high-quality education through:

- 2-year-old funding
- 15-30 hours funding plus EYPP (Early Years Pupil Premium)
- Reception

PSED- Disadvantaged children are more likely to be exposed to adverse childhood experiences compared with their more advantaged peers.

Accessing high quality early education and forming strong, warm relationships and attachments with their key person and staff enable children to become more resilient and negative experiences can be overturned. Effective EYFS practice prepares children to be socially and emotionally ready for primary education as they cross the bridge from EYFS into KS1.

Current cohorts can be described as atypical due to the impact of COVID during their formative years.

Too early to provide evidence of the impact of the new EYFS Statutory Framework on children's outcomes

The current Early Years Covid 19 Recovery Programme should provide training that upskill practitioners leading to improve outcomes for children – long term.

- The extent to which the reduction of Sure Start Children's Centres has affected children and families, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the role of Family Hubs.

The primary purposes of Children's Centres were to promote the positive child and family development for the 0–5-year-olds. This integrated approach supported the important phase of the early years /child development. Due to the holistic nature of the services offered parents could attend activities which were not seen to be 'stigmatised' and allowed for the development of positive relationships with a family. They were often the first place where serious issues were identified which could then lead to targeted support being offered in a 'non-threatening' way.

With the reduction of funding the balance was shifted to a more 'targeted' approach which has seen a decline in the number of parents accessing a Children's Centre and nowhere to go to re 'low-level' issues which for some could escalate to a higher level of need. This means that families that need early intervention are slipping through the net due to lack of a universal offer. This means we are seeing an increased number of families ending up at Level 4 because things are not identified until at crisis point

Family Hubs are a step forward if they build on the Children's Centre model and offer early help, health services etc and offer universal and targeted services.

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