

TITLE	Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) Childcare Sufficiency Strategy 2017
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on 28 September 2017
WARD	None specific
DIRECTOR	Judith Ramsden, Director Peoples Services Graham Ebers, Director Corporate Services
LEAD MEMBER	Mark Ashwell, Executive Member for Children’s Services

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

That sufficient childcare places are available to meet the needs of the Wokingham community.

RECOMMENDATION

That Executive approve the Wokingham Borough Council Childcare Sufficiency Strategy 2017.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The attached Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) Childcare Sufficiency Strategy 2017 (Appendix A) considers both the current sufficiency and satisfaction with childcare services across the borough and the readiness of providers to meet the new additional 15 hour free early years childcare for the children of working parents entitlement.

The current position (from a survey in 2016) is that parents are generally satisfied (94%) with childcare provided, but that they would like more flexible provision outside 9am to 5pm, more provision in school holidays and better facilities.

The key areas for development were flexibility and quality including the quality of childcare for those children with additional needs.

As far as the additional 15 hours (to make a full 30 hours entitlement) is concerned there are good grounds for optimism. Parents have indicated that they may wish to increase their worked hours because of the additional support. Providers are responding positively to the new entitlement. Most are developing their offers to enable parents to secure additional childcare in a way that is sustainable and enables parents to procure all the childcare they need, using the 30 Free hours. No childcare provider has indicated that the new arrangements threaten their viability. Our Early Years team continues to provide information, advice and guidance to help providers respond positively. Where we have opportunities to secure additional places as part of WBC funded works or through a DfE capital grant programme we have taken this up.

Background

Local Authorities have duties to secure sufficient childcare under the Childcare Act 2006 and to publish a Child Care Sufficiency Assessment. This is worked into the attached sufficiency strategy.

Childcare is for children of all ages, but there is necessarily a particular focus on children in the pre-school age range (or “Early Years”). The Childcare Act 2006 was amended by the Children and Families Act 2014, to reduce the administrative burdens, but not to fundamentally re-write the local authority duty to secure sufficient childcare.

Local authorities have a universal duty, to ensure there is sufficient childcare provision and as part of this to ensure there is sufficient free provision (universal for 3-4 year olds and to disadvantaged 2 year olds).

The Childcare Act 2016 introduced a new duty to provide an additional 15 hours free child care to working families (a near universal entitlement to working parents). This is 15 hours for 38 weeks or the equivalent number of hours that can be used flexibly across the year.

This comes into force in September 2017 and has been subject to extensive consultation and development. Wokingham Borough has only relatively recently (February 2017) been able to confirm the funding rates for all providers. Providers need this to finalise their business plans. Most providers will provide a service that combines the free hours and extra services (such as lunches) to create sustainable provision that meets the needs of working parents across the year.

Analysis of Issues

On current sufficiency

The sufficiency analysis indicates that overall the childcare system works. This is not to say that it does not face challenges, as a number of smaller providers (often providing limited hours in “pack away” provision in church halls and similar venues) can find the challenges of maintaining a sustainable service to be overwhelming and be compelled to close.

94% of those parents that took part in the consultation said they were at least satisfied with the provision on offer. 32.9% of participants (the highest cohort represented) said they were completely satisfied and 26% of participants (the second highest cohort score) were very happy with the provision.

The main criticism of provision was:

- the desire for flexible childcare outside 09.00 to 17.00 (260 responses) 25%;
- more provision required in school holidays (241 responses) 23%, and
- better facilities were called for (214 responses) 20%

In addition, 98 respondents required easier access and 141 wanted provision in schools.

A particular issue with parent dissatisfaction was identified in south east Wokingham Borough was identified and this will be the subject of further investigation.

On future provision

The Childcare Act 2016 duty to provide 30 free hours per week for 38 weeks to the children of working parents have caused concern nationally and locally. Extensive consultation with providers and parents indicated that while parent led demand was likely to increase significantly, providers were initially unable to make plans to respond to this until they could be confident of funding levels and their ability to craft sustainable business plans. However, the confirmed Wokingham Borough funding rate is higher than was expected and the provider response has been positive so there are good grounds to think that sufficient places will be made available.

While the major lever, per child funding rates, is in the hand of central government, Wokingham Borough is using such powers as it does have to increase supply. In particular:

Additional early years space is planned into the Highwood Primary School expansion project.

In addition WBC has three capital projects, (supported by ring fenced funding awarded after a bidding process by DfE) underway to increase provision which will be completed by September

- Waingel's College to convert the caretaker's bungalow to a day nursery for children aged 0-5 years
- Woodley Pre-School - to erect a log cabin-building on land near to Woodford Park Leisure Centre
- Acorns Under Fives Pre-School (Crowthorne) In the grounds of Oaklands Infant School- extension to current terrapin building

The potential impact can be met by the private, voluntary and independent sector providers increasing supply, and (in the absence of national capital funding stream apart from the programme noted above) means they must be able to amortise capital costs within fees and other income, including WBC funding.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

The current 10 year vision includes annual budgets to continue school capacity expansion after the completion of the Bohunt School. This is a prudent provision reflecting the likelihood of additional capacity being required within and after the strategy period.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Nil	N/A	Revenue and Capital
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Nil	N/A	Revenue and Capital
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Nil	N/A	Revenue and Capital

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
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The revenue impact of any growth in free provision will be on the DSG.
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Cross-Council Implications

None

List of Background Papers

None

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Appendix A – Wokingham Borough Council Childcare Sufficiency Strategy 2017