

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE – 4 JUNE 2024

QUESTIONS ASKED BY AN ELECTED MEMBER UNDER
STANDING ORDER 7

Question asked by Mrs. S. Jordan:

“I understand that the County Council has a duty to secure sufficient high-quality childcare provision which supports parents back into work or study, which is one of the vital responsibilities of the Childrens and Family Services Department.

However, I understand that the law will be changing from September 2024, to extend the “free” childcare offered by the Government, to enable nine months to three-year-old children 15 hours of childcare, from September.

That is why, I am concerned as to whether the Department is going to be able to absorb this, as a recent House of Commons Library research commissioned by the Liberal Democrats has shown that since 2019 there has been a 407 fall in the number of childcare places in Leicestershire. What is the Council going to do to provide the extra spaces needed and will it be able to do this to meet the demand in September?”

Reply by the Chairman:

COVID 19 had an impact on the sustainability of Early Years provisions compounded by increasing costs for rent, pension contributions and the increase of national minimum wage alongside the rising cost of living for fuel and food over the last few months.

However, the Early Years Inclusion and Childcare Service has worked with the Private Voluntary and Independent Sector to secure sufficient childcare for the first phase of the expansion of childcare. The sector is agile in responding to the parental needs and are flexible in their delivery of their childcare offer. Following the model of three- and four-year-olds, from April 2024, working parents of two-year-olds can access 15 hours of free childcare. Children can receive their funded childcare place the term after their second birthday. Parents are required to check their eligibility through HMRC website every three months to receive a valid code. In the first term, 4167 codes were issued to Leicestershire parents. 90% have taken up a place in their nursery in the summer period.

The Service has been working with the sector to see what capacity there is to offer the expansion of childcare places. A focus group has been developed with the National Day Nursery Association (NDNA) and links made with Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY). Questionnaires have been sent to find out about childcare spaces and waiting lists, building space and opportunities for expansion, recruitment, and opening times.

Leicestershire has received a Childcare Expansion Capital Grant totalling £1,177,525 to support the expansion of childcare places. 80% for early childcare funded places and 20% for wraparound places.

To ascertain where this funding is most needed a further survey has been sent to localities where the Service has identified there is less sufficient childcare places. The funding available will then be prioritised for expansion in these areas.