

Early Years Flexible Offer

Schools' Forum

16th October 2008

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Parish / Wards Affected: All

Purpose

- To report on the progress made in the delivery of the flexible offer for early education.

Recommendation

- Schools' Forum is requested to note the progress made with the project plan for the delivery of the flexible offer for early education and approve the selection process for the children to receive additional funding and flexibility in September 2009.

1. Reasons

- 1.1 The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) requires Local Authorities to revise their funding mechanisms for early education to ensure that they are consistent, fair and equitable across the private, voluntary and maintained sectors.
- 1.2 Parents' entitlement for funded early education will be increased from the current 12.5 hours to 15 hours.
- 1.3 This will be introduced for the 25% of children who live in the most disadvantaged areas in September 2009 and universally in September 2010. Additionally parents will have the right if they so choose to access their entitlement more flexibly rather than in two and a half hour sessions as now.
- 1.4 The duty on local authorities is to make this offer available, it does not mean that any particular setting has to offer this flexibility or the increased entitlement.

Further information on the subject of this report can be obtained from Sue Wald on (01793) 465713 or Email swald@swindon.gov.uk

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2. Detail

- 2.1 Through the ten year childcare strategy *Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children*, the Government is committed to extending the free nursery entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds from 12.5 hours per week over 38 weeks of the year, and to make access to it more flexible in response to parental demand.
- 2.2 Currently parents have an entitlement to access funded nursery education for 3 and 4 year olds in the private, voluntary or maintained sector.
- 2.3 They have an entitlement to five two and a half hour sessions, which they may take across a mixture of provision.
- 2.4 The new entitlement will both increase the number of hours funded per week to fifteen and give parents the right to request that their entitlement is taken over 3 days rather than in sessions as now.
- 2.5 The DCSF guidance issued on 31st July 2008 indicates that parents may request a maximum of 10 and a minimum of 2 hours of funding in any one day. This would usually be taken over no more than 2 providers. The guidance also states that local authorities do not have to deliver all possible variants of the entitlement but must offer a balanced set of options. Specifically it states that parents must have a genuine choice of accessing more than just a three-hour session.
- 2.6 The method of funding used across the sectors is currently different. In the maintained sector funding is per place, irrespective of the number of children attending. In the private and voluntary sector, funding is based on a head count. The rates of funding for the two sectors are currently different.
- 2.7 It was proposed to set up a cross sector working party to look both at achieving a fair and equitable system of funding and to examine the issues involved in delivering early education more flexibly. This working party met on the 11th June.
- 2.8 At this meeting the project plan was amended following discussion about timescales. A revised version is attached at Appendix A. It was agreed to implement a consultation process with parents and providers to establish demand, potential supply and barriers for providers delivering wider flexibility.
- 2.9 Consultation with parents to establish likely demand started in August. This is taking two forms. Consultation with parents who have children under 3 is being carried out through outreach work in parent and toddler

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group, parent and baby groups and children's centres. This has included groups of parents of disabled children and black and minority ethnic groups. Consultation with parents who use existing provision in the private, voluntary and maintained sectors is being carried out through questionnaires distributed by settings. In total 5000 questionnaires will be distributed.

- 2.10 Consultation with settings has started. A questionnaire has been sent to settings to establish current capacity and to explore their potential to offer longer and more flexible sessions. Face to face consultation has also started and will continue both through existing forums and specific events. This will focus on how the local authority can support schools and settings to meet the demand from parents. Full details of the communications strategy are attached at Appendix B.
- 2.11 DCSF guidance recommends that the local authorities focus first on the most disadvantaged children, as evidence shows that they have most to gain from accessing the free entitlement offer. Guidance also states that the measure used to identify these children is income deprivation, as measured through super output areas.
- 2.12 Guidance also recommends that funding be based on a setting's location rather than the home address of each child within the setting. This avoids a setting being asked to extend its hours for only a small number of children within that setting. It also avoids potential resentment from parents within that setting.
- 2.13 It is recommended that Swindon fund children who attend settings in the 25% most disadvantaged areas from September 2009.
- 2.14 The additional standards fund grant for 2009-2010 has been calculated to fund an additional two and half hours for 25% of eligible children. This equates to 900 children. Work has started to identify, based on the current numbers of children attending, which settings this would cover.
- 2.15 It is proposed that the funding allocated by Schools Forum will be used to buy in extra financial support to deliver a new funding formula. This is estimated to cost £17,000. The balance of the funding will be used to pay for the printing of questionnaires and for expenses arising from consultation events. This will include premises, catering and supply costs.
- 2.16 Funding to support the delivery of the flexible offer is available from the DCSF through Standards Fund. Swindon has been allocated £234,254 for 2009-10 and £ 979,711 for 2010 –11.

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Risk Management

Financial and Procurement Implications –

The DCSF has allocated standards fund grant of £1,213,965 to support local authorities to deliver greater flexibility. Therefore the costs relating to this report will be funded through this grant at no additional cost to the Council. There are no procurement implications.

Legal / Human Rights Implications –The provision of early education is a statutory responsibility on local authorities. Section 7 of the Childcare Act 2006 places a duty on local authorities to provide free early years provision of a prescribed description. This is the legislative basis for the government's commitment to flexibility.

Links to Corporate Plans and Policies (in particular to Swindon 2010 Promises) – Children are at the heart of the Corporate Plan and the Children & Young People's Plan. Promise 45 encapsulates the support for parents "we'll provide even more support for families to help them maintain their independence".

Consultees

The Director of Finance and the Director of Law and Democratic Services are consulted on all reports.

Background Papers and Appendices

Appendix A: Updated Project Plan

Appendix B: Communications Strategy

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