

**County Council Meeting – 20 July 2023****Question to Councillor Mark Sutton  
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People****By Councillor Gillian Pardesi**

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**Question**

Ahead of the rollout of the Government's extension of 30 hours free childcare, how confident is the Council that it will meet the requirement when nine out of ten councils now fear that nursery closures this year will undermine capacity?

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**Reply**

In the Government's spring budget, the Chancellor announced transformative reforms to childcare for children and families. The new entitlements will be introduced in phases beginning in April 2024. From:

- April 2024, all working parents of 2-year-olds can access 15 hours funded childcare per week
- September 2024, all working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3-years-old can access 15 hours funded childcare per week
- September 2025, all working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3-years-old can access 30 hours funded childcare per week

This provides a significant challenge for local authorities due to the short timeframe from the announcement to implementation. Staffordshire are working at pace to prepare and plan for the extended entitlements, ensuring as many families as possible in Staffordshire will benefit.

The Childcare Act 2006, Section 6 places a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure there are enough childcare places available for families. The Early Years Team already work relentlessly, carrying out a variety of market management activities to ensure this statutory duty is met.

**Understanding the Childcare Market**

Our highly developed understanding of the childcare market is underpinned by the following activities:

- The Early Years Team consistently collates and analyse a range of data including places and vacancies data for each provider which is recorded by district and ward. This is used to inform future planning and priorities.
- Sufficiency monitoring provides a framework for action in each ward. For example, if a ward is identified as causing concern the team prepares actions plans to develop new provision or extend existing provision to meet demand.
- The team provides a range of consultancy support to the sector including advice regarding sustainability. This is available free of charge to all Staffordshire providers. This service is bespoke and supports settings to consider a variety of options/working models, therefore mitigating against potential closures.

This market management activity has been recognised as an example of effective practice by the Department for Education and Ofsted.

Staffordshire has seen some nursery closures, although a smaller number than originally expected following the pandemic. In a significant number of cases alternative childcare by another provider has been set up on the same sites. Where nurseries announce their intention to close, use of accurate data, the team's knowledge and excellent relationships with providers means the team respond quickly to scope out new opportunities to ensure families are able to access the places required.

### **Preparation for the Extended Offer**

In preparation for the implementation of the extended entitlements the Early Years Team have completed two pieces of work:

- A sufficiency audit to survey all Staffordshire providers who offer early education entitlements. The survey closed on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> July with a return rate of 99.5%.
- An analysis of datasets enabling estimation of the number of additional places required for two-year-olds in each district.

This information provides a firm foundation from which to develop detailed action plans to support future sufficiency planning.

The team has excellent relationships with its childcare providers; through its Early Years Reference Group and relationships, the team remains well informed about the challenges and needs of the early years sector and is supporting them to respond.