

Committee: **Executive Committee**

Date of meeting: **14th September 2022**

Report Subject: **Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2022**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor Haydn Trollope, Executive Member
People and Social Services**

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| Reporting Pathway | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------|----------------------|
| Directorate Management Team | Corporate Leadership Team | Portfolio Holder / Chair | Audit Committee | Democratic Services Committee | Scrutiny Committee | Executive Committee | Council | Other (please state) |
| 12.07.22 | 14.07.22 | 07.09.22 | | | | 14.09.22 | | |

1. **Purpose of the Report**
To receive the Blaenau Gwent Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) and Action Plan 2022-2027.
2. **Scope and Background**
 - 2.1 **The Assessment Process**
Under the Childcare Act 2006 Local Authorities have a statutory duty to secure sufficient childcare for the needs of working parents/carers in their area for children up to 1st September after they turn 14 years, or until they reach the age of 18 in the case of children with a disability.
 - 2.1.1 Under new guidance, Local Authorities are required to conduct a Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) every five years to assess a range of factors including supply, demand, costs, workforce and the views of a range of stakeholders about the local childcare market. Previously CSA's were conducted every three years and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has produced them in 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2017. The CSA provides the information required to enable the Early Years, Childcare and Play team and partners to identify gaps in provision and identify areas for development. An Action Plan is then developed to monitor actions that need attention. The CSA and Action Plan 2022 – 2027 is attached to this report. The progress of the Action Plan will be reported annually in June and the Action Plan will be updated.
 - 2.1.2 The Early Years, Childcare and Play (EYCP) team conducted the assessment, using various methods, from July 2021 to April 2022, collecting a range of data from;
 - Parents/carers
 - Children
 - Childcare Providers
 - Local Employers

- Schools
- Further Education College
- Umbrella organisations

2.1.3 Collection of data presented a number of challenges to the team and there were some issues again with the data provided by childcare providers. Some of these issues with provider data were resolved locally by using local data systems to identify gaps and fill in missing information. The assessment process is designed to take a snapshot of the childcare market at a given point in time, July/August 2021, in this case. The assessment does take account of developments that have happened since though and a full account of the impact of Covid is also presented in the assessment.

2.1.4 The parent survey was undertaken at an All Wales level, with Local Authorities promoting the survey in their localities. Despite heavy promotion on social media and visits to play and leisure sessions in October half term 2021 to directly target parents, there was a disappointing response with only 233 parents/carers completing the survey. The response rates for all Local Authorities in Wales were similarly disappointing.

2.1.5 The assessment process is designed to take account of both current and future demand to assist in the planning and development of childcare for the next 5 years. Whilst parental demand data can be derived from parental questionnaires where there is a good sample size, it can also be derived by looking at trends and developments that can impact on childcare uptake. The EYCP team were only able to draw general observations from the parental survey due to the low sample size, but have accounted for developments that could/will impact on childcare demand in the assessment document and action plan.

2.1.6 Unfortunately, the timing of this assessment has not allowed for updated Census data to be used and so this will be accounted for in the Progress Report and Updated Action Plan for 2023, if there is any meaningful change.

2.1.7 The assessment of supply and demand has been considered in relation to Community Planning Areas this year as per the 2017 assessment, they are; Sirhowy, Ebbw Fawr, North Ebbw Fach and South Ebbw Fach.

2.2 **Findings**

The population in Blaenau Gwent, especially the 0 to 15-year-old group has been in decline for several years and is projected to remain in decline up to the end of this decade. In itself that could suggest the need for childcare is likely to decline. However, there are other factors outlined in the report that are expected to impact on the childcare sector. These include current growth in the housing market in Blaenau Gwent, potential growth in the employment sector and the expansion of key Welsh Government programmes (Childcare Offer and Flying Start).

2.3 **Parent/Carer Survey**

In common with all previous assessments the most common form of childcare used in Blaenau Gwent was still informal care through family and friends.

2.3.1 A significant majority of parent/carers reported being either very or quite satisfied with their current childcare provider (95%).

2.3.2 For those not happy with their childcare, the following improvements were suggested in order of most prevalent;

- Become more affordable
- Extend their opening hours/More hours available
- Offer more flexible sessions
- Better quality provision
- Different location
- Childcare better at meeting child's additional needs
- Offer overnight and evening care

2.3.3 Parents were asked specifically about barriers to accessing Welsh medium childcare and reasons given included: distance to provision, availability, insufficient opening hours and cost.

2.3.4 Parents were asked why they didn't use childcare and in common with the last assessment, the primary reason given was affordability of childcare. Over half of parents surveyed were using informal childcare through family and friends, although some of those were using formal childcare too.

2.3.5 Comments from parents evidenced there is still a strong feeling about the perceived 'unfairness's' of the limited and geographical nature of the Flying Start programme and thus the free childcare for 2 year olds.

2.3.6 As noted earlier in the report the low number of respondents makes it difficult to use findings to help plan for future childcare needs, but they represent a good snapshot of views about the sector.

2.3.7 In terms of future demand, the survey indicated most parents expected to use more childcare in future or their needs would stay the same. Types of childcare required demonstrated a continued reliance on informal childcare, followed by a need for breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and full day nursery places.

2.4 **Supply**

At the time the data was collected in July 2021, there were 56 providers in Blaenau Gwent, an increase of one provider since the assessment in 2017. However, there have been providers that have closed since Summer 2021 (one after-school club and four childminders), so the current total now stands at 51 providers. Since 2017 there are now more providers registered to offer full day care, with an increase from ten to sixteen providers. Some providers changed their registration from sessional to full day care to

support the Childcare Offer pilot and others to assist with the Covid-19 response. This is positive as it offers parents more flexibility with childcare hours offered, but it has resulted in a small decline in overall registered childcare places. (Sessional childcare having been counted previously by the number of both afternoon and morning places).

- 2.4.1 There are concerns at the loss of childminders and after-school provision, echoed by the Umbrella Organisations that support those sectors but this could be because demand has reduced as more parents are working from home they are tending to carry out the school run and after school care themselves.

2.5 **Covid Impact**

This latest assessment was required to include a section on the impact of Covid. The assessment notes the efforts made by the sector from the earliest days of the pandemic to support key worker families and vulnerable families. Blaenau Gwent had one of the lowest setting closure rates in Wales, with over 65% of providers remaining open. Supporting the sector to remain open was a priority for the EYCP team who worked around the clock to support providers with answers to queries and reassurance, PPE packs, model risk assessments and extra funding opportunities.

- 2.5.1 Whilst there has been an undoubted impact on all providers, the impact has been most acutely felt by the after-school sector, with stand-alone clubs based at schools remaining closed until Summer term 2021. Many clubs have not reopened since due to concerns around sustainability and difficulties with recruitment as some staff moved on to other jobs when the clubs were closed.
- 2.5.2 The huge number of grant schemes provided by Welsh Government to support settings needs to be acknowledged and no doubt played a big part in the largely positive outlook of the sector with regard to their future sustainability. There remains concern regarding the impact of the pandemic on quality and safety, financial stability, recruitment and retention but most providers indicated they expected to be in business for a year or longer.

2.6 **Gap Analysis**

Taking account of all the information gathered, gaps in the following areas were identified;

- Childcare for parents working atypical hours
- Welsh medium provision
- Provision suitable to meet the needs of children with Additional Learning Needs
- Childminder provision in Sirhowy and Ebbw Fach
- Childcare for older children (after-school and holiday provision)

However, further feasibility will need to be undertaken, to ensure the development of any new services does not cause displacement or sustainability issues for existing providers.

2.7 **The Action Plan**

The action plan seeks to address gaps identified in the assessment and builds on the previous action plan for 2021-22. It acknowledges that some of the gaps identified were already known and plans to close the gaps were already in place, largely through Capital Programme projects. Actions include;

- Delivery of all capital projects (Swffryd Flying Start hub, Glyncoed Full Day Care, Blaina ICC extension, Welsh medium seedling school)
- Work to attract new childminders to set up in Sirhowy and Ebbw Fawr
- Work to establish feasibility of After-School/Holiday Clubs at primary schools
- Development of a Full Day Care Capital scheme in Brynmawr
- Improve inclusion in settings
- Promote Welsh language use and learning within existing settings
- To attract new Welsh language providers to take up tender opportunities in Blaenau Gwent
- To develop more robust data capture from parents/carers with issues
- To develop a new workforce development plan addressing recruitment and retention concerns

- 2.7.1 The draft assessment and action plan and Executive Summary were submitted to Welsh Government on 30th June as required by regulation.

Following approval by Corporate Leadership Team the document went out for a public consultation period that ended July/August and scheduled for approval by the Executive, by 30th September 2022.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 **Option 1**

Approve the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment and Action Plan 2022 and agree that it be submitted to Welsh Government

3.2 **Option 2:**

To request further information and additions/amendments are made to the CSA and Action Plan, prior to submission to Welsh Government.

3.3 **Organisational Development comments**

Not applicable

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

Links to Council Priorities within the Corporate Plan -

4.1 **Social Services**

- To intervene early to prevent problems from becoming greater
- To promote and facilitate new ways of delivering health and social care involving key partners and our communities.
- To develop a partnership approach to reducing and alleviating the impacts of poverty.

Good quality childcare and play opportunities have a significant impact on the development of children. Children attending childcare are supported to reach their developmental milestones and are encouraged to take up healthy habits in terms of social relationships, physical activity, approaches to learning, meals, drinks and snacks. Childcare staff often act as an 'early warning system' for families and children experiencing problems. All settings undergo Safeguarding training and have the option of additional training in domestic abuse, neglect and online safety. Many of our settings have received awareness training of the Families First programme and know how and when to refer struggling families. They also often help support the early identification of children with emerging additional needs and act appropriately to refer and signpost families to support.

A partnership approach towards working with the childcare sector is vital to ensuring the sustainability of the sector and a maintained focus on quality improvement.

4.2 **Education**

- To improve pupil outcomes, progress and wellbeing, particularly for our more able and our most vulnerable

We have three non-maintained early years education settings in Blaenau Gwent and all support pupils to progress at a good rate whilst attending and work is geared to individual children's developmental levels.

Children attending pre-school settings are supported to learn through their play and develop cognitive skills, physical abilities, new vocabulary, social skills, literacy etc. Unstructured free play not only offers benefits that protect against the harmful effects of stress, but play also gives children unlimited opportunities to discover their own interests and competencies. Play allows them to use their creativity while developing imagination, dexterity, and physical and emotional strength.

Our pre-school settings track and support the development of children attending to ensure they are school ready by the age of 3 years. The EYCP team has a transition process in place to ensure as smooth as possible a transition is had between the pre-school and Foundation Phase Nursery settings.

4.3 **Strong and Environmentally Smart Communities**

All childcare settings are encouraged to sign up to the Healthy and Sustainable Pre-School Scheme. The environment section of the scheme is concerned with the promotion of a safe, stimulating environment which

reflects the importance of the people within it with an emphasis on caring for the environment within and outside of the setting.

We encourage settings to take a creative approach in the design of activities and resources promoting re-use and recycling wherever possible.

4.4 Economic Development and Regeneration

- To work with partners to provide effective employment support and access to skills development.

There have been some notable successes in attracting new people into the childcare sector by offering introductory and Level 2 CCLD training. Coleg Gwent have worked with the EYCP to secure funding for and promote a Level 3 CCLD qualification.

The EYCP annual training programme allows staff and volunteers in all of our settings to access both mandatory training and CPD opportunities.

4.5 Links to priorities within the Blaenau Gwent Wellbeing Plan;-

4.5.1 Objective 1 - The Best Start In Life For Everyone

Quality childcare benefits children, families and the economy. The EPPSE (The Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education project) research (2014) shows a child attending high quality childcare has more chance of getting better exam results leading to higher earnings, more chance of holding down a job and commit fewer crimes than those who did not attend high quality early years childcare. The EYCP team is committed to improving the quality of childcare across Blaenau Gwent to ensure our children have the best possible experience from our settings.

4.5.2 Objective 2 – Safer and Friendly Communities

Childcare creates a central safe haven for little ones of society to attend, creates jobs in local communities and are places where parents get to know each other from their child's early days.

4.5.3 Objective 3 – To Look After and Protect the Environment

See 4.3 above.

4.5.4 Objective 4 - To Forge New Pathways to Prosperity By Creating Extra Job Opportunities

The childcare sector in Blaenau Gwent has grown at a significant rate over the last 15 years. As a result, there are more small childcare businesses growing in our communities, with more jobs being created. Affordable childcare acts as a spur to economic growth and the Childcare Offer is supporting some families to use childcare for the first time or to increase the amount of childcare they currently receive. The Flying Start expansion to be rolled out from September is highly likely to encourage use of childcare by families that do not currently use childcare. This is enabling parents to access work and to increase their working hours, improving economic activity rates. For parents receiving funded childcare the additional money

saved could be money that is spent within our communities on other goods or services, creating a further economic benefit.

4.5.5 **Objective 5 - To Encourage People To Make Healthy Lifestyle Choices**

Childcare settings in Blaenau Gwent are encouraged to sign up to Blaenau Gwent Healthy and Sustainable Preschool Scheme which encourages our little ones to make healthy choices from a very young age promoting, protecting and embedding the physical, mental and social health and wellbeing as they grow up. In Blaenau Gwent we have Full Day Care Nurseries, Sessional Childcare, Playgroups and all Flying Start Child Care Settings signed up to the award. The award covers seven health topics: Nutrition and Oral Health, Physical Activity/Active Play, Mental and Emotional Health, Wellbeing and Relationships, Environment, Safety, Hygiene and Workplace Health and Wellbeing.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

Not applicable.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

There is a statutory duty for the Local Authority to submit a Childcare Sufficiency Assessment every five years.

5.3 ***Legal***

No legal issues identified.

5.4 ***Human Resources***

As outlined above.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

Performance and progress of the action plan are monitored by the Service Manager, Early Years Childcare and Play Manager and through the Early Years Development, Childcare and Play Partnership.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

In addressing actions set out in the action plan, parents and carers can expect that there will be a sufficiency of childcare in Blaenau Gwent to meet most needs, offering choices around childcare type and language offered.

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

As part of the assessment process the Local Authority has sought the views of a range of stakeholders, including parents/carers, children, childcare providers, umbrella organisations, schools, employers and employment organisations.

The assessment has also been subject to a 28 day public consultation.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

The assessment and action plan acknowledge that the delivery of additional childcare schemes takes time and there are likely to be factors that influence demand for childcare that are as yet unquantifiable. There is a need to have a clear longer term plan for extensions and improvements to the childcare sector, whilst recognising there needs to be flexibility in responding to changing circumstances.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

As outlined in Section 4 above.

6.6 ***Integration (across service areas)***

The Early Years, Childcare and Play team works collaboratively with Flying Start, Families First, Education, Health services, childcare and play providers and other key stakeholders through the Early Years Development Childcare and Play Partnership (EYDCPP) and through day-to-day contact.

6.7 ***EqlA(screening and identifying if full impact assessment is needed)***

N/A

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 Progress will be monitored by the Service Manager and through EYDCPP meetings.

Background Documents / Electronic Links

Appendix 1 – Childcare Sufficiency Assessment and Action Plan 2022-27

Appendix 2 – Childcare Sufficiency Assessment Executive Summary