



Report to Council

Meeting Date: 6 March 2024

Public/Private*: Public

Title: **Lifelong Learning and Development Portfolio Holder**

Report of: Councillor Elaine Lynch

To follow the finance theme this meeting, I wanted to report on a recent decision I took to deliver on the expansion of childcare and the wraparound programme.

This follows the Government's spring budget announcement in 2023 of up to £289m of start-up funding, over two academic years, to support local authorities and providers to expand wraparound care for children. This care will be for children from reception age to year 6, with free provision from 8am to 6pm unless local demand is for different hours.

This sounds great, and no doubt parents will be eagerly awaiting this provision popping up - but the biggest risk to delivery is the availability of staff to deliver this care. We already know that the recruitment and retention of early years practitioners and school support staff is challenging, and this is an additional call on their time and our hard-pressed schools.

The announcement of this scheme was at the same time as the announcement of the expanded early years nursery provision – with a staggered roll out, this will ultimately provide 30 hours per week of free childcare for working parents for children under 5.

Again this sounds great, but those childcare spaces rely on the staff being available to provide that care, and on nurseries being available, and where parents need them. The promise of all this free childcare to support parents to return to work is fantastic in theory, but it just isn't backed up by the solid finances needed to deliver on it.

I was astonished to discover that the funding provided per hour to nurseries to provide this care is not the same area to area, it is based on yet another formula that gives nurseries in Cumberland less than nurseries elsewhere in the country. Why is the provision of nursery care in Cumberland believed to be cheaper than that in Nottingham or Buckinghamshire or Southampton. We are overall the sixth lowest funded in the whole country.

Even when you disregard the different rates of funding, the money paid by Government to 'fund' free childcare does not cover the costs incurred by nurseries. As it is many nurseries use the hours that parents pay for outside of the free entitlement to subsidise their actual costs, and many nurseries have to charge additional top-ups to cover costs for anything from meals to nappies.

When this scheme is rolled out in full, unless the Government significantly increases the funding provided to cover the free entitlement – already struggling nurseries are going to be closing up and down the country, unable to cover their own costs to provide the care needed. Without vital nurseries, how many of our staff will have to leave work to stay at home.

The early years sector is vital for our future – the care and support we provide to any individual between birth and the age of five is crucial for lifelong outcomes. I don't believe you can make a better investment – we have to pay them fairly for the work that they do, we must invest in this workforce and these businesses.