



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 20/21

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

24TH FEBRUARY 2021

UPDATE POSITION OF RCT CHILDCARE SECTOR

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION & INCLUSION SERVICES

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To provide Members with an update on the current position of the childcare sector in RCT and the support that has been offered by Education and Inclusion Services.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Acknowledge the contents of this report.
2.2 Consider if any further information is required.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To provide the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee with an update on the pressures the childcare sector in Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) is currently facing.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 Section 22 of the Childcare Act 2006 (the 2006 Act) places a duty on the Council to secure '*as far as is reasonably practicable*' sufficient childcare to meet the requirements of parents in its area who require childcare to enable them to take up, or remain in, work, or to undertake education or training which could reasonably be expected to assist them to obtain work.

- 4.2 In order to execute this duty, the Council has a dedicated childcare development team to support all childcare settings in RCT. This support includes offering advice and guidance on statutory regulations, business planning and marketing, as well as offering training and CPD opportunities, administering a grant scheme and acting as a link between the sector and other council departments.
- 4.3 The universal childcare development team currently consists of two FTE posts. These posts transferred from Children's Services to Education & Inclusion Services in November 2018, joining officers who administer the Welsh Government Childcare Offer for Wales. This has enabled the Council to create a unified universal childcare development team. Another full-time post has been created and this officer is due to join the team at the end of February 2021.

5. UPDATE

- 5.1 The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been incredibly challenging for the childcare sector in RCT. Data from Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) suggests that 18 registered settings permanently closed in RCT during the last year, the vast majority of these being childminders. Those that remain have adapted their settings physically to comply with protective measures and have adapted their workforce and working practices to ensure that they are as COVID-compliant as possible. They have continued to put the needs of the children at the fore of their practice and have supported both children and their families during this time.
- 5.2 In response to the national lockdown last March, Welsh Government instructed all childcare settings in Wales to close for all children, other than for those who were deemed vulnerable, or of critical workers. To support these parents, WG established the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS). This provided eligible children, aged from birth to four years, with fully funded childcare if there were no other caring options available to the families. The Education and Inclusion Service's childcare team took the lead with this scheme, with support from colleagues in Resilient Families Service. In total, 717 children accessed the scheme from March to August 2020, including 95 vulnerable children. 102 childcare settings participated in the scheme at various points throughout the period, including three of the council run Flying Start settings.
- 5.3 Below is a summary of the support that the childcare development team has offered to the sector over the last twelve months:
- 5.4 **Guidance and support**
The team has relayed Welsh Government, Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and Social Care Wales messages to the sector, offering further advice and guidance where necessary. During March 2020, the situation was continually changing at pace due to infection rates and the childcare team found that

providing up to date relevant information was incredibly challenging with various childcare settings, with some settings being more digitally competent. This was particularly the case in the week leading up to the schools closing and the instruction that the childcare sector was only to remain open for vulnerable children and those of critical workers.

Welsh Government advised that settings could start to reopen from June 2020 and issued a guidance document to support this - "Protective Measures in Childcare Settings: keep childcare safe". The RCT childcare team produced its own guidance document for the sector, summarising the protective measures guidance and including RCT relevant information and contact details. Version 1 of this local document was distributed in June 2020 and has been regularly updated since, as the situation and guidance has evolved. Version 6 of the guidance is currently being reviewed and will be distributed to the sector shortly.

As well as the RCT guidance document, the childcare team have created a Facebook closed group for providers in RCT. This has been well received and we currently have 104 members. This is now one of our main communication channels to advise providers of upcoming training and engagement events, as well as information about the Childcare Offer for Wales and umbrella organisation events. We supplement this communication with emails and telephone conversations, as no face to face visits are currently permitted.

Since September 2020, the childcare team have been able to restart a training programme. Prior to the start of the pandemic, the childcare team had established a training programme for the statutory training required by settings – Safeguarding, Paediatric First Aid and Food Hygiene. These were face to face training sessions, but are now online, with only the practical elements requiring a face to face session. As well as these three statutory courses, we have also been able to offer supplementary courses, such as Managing Challenging Behaviour, Manual Handling and Leadership & Management. Further courses are planned for 2021/22 based on feedback from the sector.

The Council's engagement calendar with the sector has also had to be rearranged from face to face sessions to online engagement. The second joint childcare and play conference, planned for October 2020, was cancelled. We hope to hold a rearranged conference this autumn, but this will be led by the rate of infection and the COVID restrictions in place at that time. The first online childcare engagement event, open to all childcare settings in RCT, is due to take place in February 2021. These will be scheduled to take place regularly throughout the year and will be led by the needs of, and feedback from, the sector.

5.5 Stakeholder feedback from the sector

A provider survey was undertaken in October 2020 to receive feedback and challenges from the sector and to ask what support would be helpful from the Council's childcare team. The results of the feedback included:

- When asked how concerned they were at the present time about their financial position, 53% responded that they were “somewhat concerned”, whilst 25% responded that they were “very concerned”.
- Concerns were a reduction in the number of children attending as more parents are working from home, or parents reducing the number of hours/days that they require. A reduction in numbers due to settings trying to maintain bubbles and limit contacts was also a factor.
- An increase in expenses, such as cleaning materials, uniform and general resources was also cited as a reason for the concern, as was the financial impact of positive cases in the setting.
- The final question asked what support they require from the childcare team, responses ranged from PPE/cleaning supplies, resources, support with increased overhead costs to networking forums and support with promotion. Many of these things were already in place at the time of the survey, and the other comments are being acted upon currently.

5.6 **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

Childcare settings have told us that the added cost of ensuring their staff have sufficient PPE and cleaning products has been a concern to them. To support settings, the childcare development team has offered settings packs of PPE and cleaning products. These packs have included hand sanitiser, blue roll, Milton, facemasks, aprons, gloves, and face visors. The first round of packs was distributed in June 2020 for those settings that were open and providing emergency care. This was repeated in October 2020 once all childcare settings had reopened. A third round has just closed to applications. In total, we have provided 180 packs of PPE to settings in RCT so far. This support will continue into 2021/22 if providers tell us that the support is still required.

5.7 **Financial support**

The previous year has been very challenging for the childcare sector. Even for those that stayed open to provide emergency care, their income was substantially reduced compared to previous years. Welsh Government recognises this and is keen to support the sector to survive the current restrictions on their businesses. RCT has offered financial support via direct Welsh Government funding and the WG Children and Communities grant (childcare and play element). The Council has supported settings by:

- Administering a Welsh Government Childcare Provider Grant in the autumn of 2020. The criteria for this grant scheme was descriptive and was designed to support settings that saw a net reduction in income between April and June 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. RCT was allocated £197,015.00. Of this, we were able to approve 7 applications, totalling £26,997.00. Three further applications were unsuccessful, as the applicants were unable to provide all the required evidence.

- In November 2020, WG made available further funding to support the sustainability of childcare settings via the Children and Communities Grant. RCT was allocated a further £165,312.00 on top of the childcare and play allocation for 2020/21. In RCT, the grant scheme has three sections that settings can apply for:
 - Support for settings that have full or partial closures due to positive COVID-19 cases.
 - Increased costs as a direct result of COVID-19, such as increased heating and cleaning costs. This section also supports settings that have been unable to open or run at full capacity due to issues with their venues (such as running from a community building and not having permission from the building committee to reopen).
 - Severe financial hardship due to reasons not covered in the first two sections and where no other public funding is available.

This grant scheme has been open for applications since December 2020 and to date, we have received 29 applications. 17 have been successful and a total of £52,762.40 has been awarded. Six have been unsuccessful and five are awaiting further information.

WG has indicated that there may be further funding available in this financial year to support sustainability of the sector. This has not been confirmed yet. The team are currently looking at other support packages they can put in place if this funding is received, such as resources packs, and support to purchase specialist cleaning equipment.

5.8 **Positive COVID-19 cases – impact on settings**

Most childcare settings started to reopen in June 2020. All settings are required to inform Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) of any positive COVID-19 cases amongst their staff or children attending, and to engage with Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) officers to identify close contacts. There were few of these instances during the summer, but from September onwards we saw a rise in positive cases in childcare settings. There is no legal obligation for childcare settings to inform the childcare team of positive cases, or of temporary partial/full closures. However, to assist the settings and the TTP team we created an online form that asks for the name of the setting, the date of the confirmed case, whether it was a member of staff or child, and the impact on the setting (partial or full closure, or no action). Settings are asked to complete this form and return to the childcare team. Details of the setting and the impact on the setting is shared with TTP, Flying Start and Resilient Families. No identifying information is collected, other than the name of the childcare setting. Despite there being no legal requirement for childcare providers to inform the childcare team, the form has been well received and the majority of positive cases are being reported. When a report is received, the childcare team contact the setting to offer support if required.

As of 22nd January 2021, the team have been notified of 53 positive cases. Of these, 34 were concerning staff members and 19 concerned children who attended the settings. These positive cases resulted in a full closure of the setting for a period of self-isolation in 23 cases, partial closures in 18 cases, and in 12 cases, only the positive case was required to self-isolate. Since January 2021, the number of positive cases being reported has reduced.

5.9 **Attendance of children at childcare settings**

Settings have reported that attendance has generally been lower since September 2020. This is the case particularly amongst after school childcare settings. The increase in parents working from home has been the main reason cited for this decrease. The out of school childcare sector has been particularly affected by the current situation, with several of our after school clubs not able to reopen at all due to restrictions on access to their venues (most after school clubs use community venues such as school halls or community/church centres).

There has been a reduction in the number of applications received by the Childcare Offer for Wales team this academic year, compared to the previous year. In September 2019, we received 290 applications; in September 2020 we received 221. In January 2020, we received 287 applications; in January 2021, we have received 227 so far. We cannot state that this is as a direct result of the pandemic. It may be indicative of parental concerns about using childcare, or it may simply be a reduction in the birth rate for this cohort.

6. **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 There are no negative or adverse equality or diversity implications associated with this report.

7. **CONSULTATION**

- 7.1 There are no consultation implications aligned to this report.

8. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)**

- 8.1 There are no financial implications aligned to this report.

9. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED**

- 9.1 There are no legal implications that are relevant to this report.

10. **LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.**

- 10.1 The Council's Corporate Plan 2020–2024 highlights the Council's commitment to delivering three main priorities, namely:
- Ensuring People: *are independent, healthy and successful;*

- *Creating Places: where people are proud to live, work and play;*
- *Enabling Prosperity: creating the opportunity for people and businesses to be innovative; be entrepreneurial; and fulfil their potential and prosper.*

10.2 This report is linked to ensuring that the childcare sector in RCT is prosperous and fulfils its potential, and that we support children and their families to be independent, healthy and successful.

11. CONCLUSION

11.1 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the childcare sector across Wales has been significant. The Council is incredibly proud of all childcare providers in RCT who have continued to deliver safe, quality care for children and their families throughout the last year in a professional and compassionate manner.

11.2 The pandemic has required the Council's childcare development team to find new ways of engaging and supporting the sector. These have been well received and have ensured that we are well placed to continue this support in the future, regardless of any ongoing or future pressures.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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