



Leicestershire
County Council

Early Childhood Strategy 2020-2023

Improving outcomes for pre-school
children in Leicestershire

Introduction

This is the early childhood strategy for the Children & Family Services department. The department is committed to providing support to help ensure that young children get the best start in life and that their health, development and learning is the best it can be. The department works directly with children and families but also with key providers of universal childhood services such as early years' providers and schools. Our work seeks to ensure all children can thrive, taking a targeted approach in deploying resources, to ensure that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children are prioritised.

This strategy aims to improve the life chances of children in Leicestershire by addressing inequalities and improving the health and wellbeing for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged families living within the county.



Key Drivers

The Childcare Act 2006 sets out the duties of local Councils. The County Council has a statutory duty to improve the outcomes for all young children, reduce inequalities and ensure that there is enough high-quality, integrated early years' provision and childcare to match demand.

This obligation necessitates a joined-up approach to how we deliver services to pre-school children and their families. Young children's physical, emotional and cognitive development is inextricably linked. Early identification and assessment of emerging needs and early intervention is crucial and means our approach across the department must be aligned for the benefit of children and their parents (not services).

'If we get the early years right, we pave the way for a lifetime of achievement. If we get them wrong, we miss a unique opportunity to shape a child's future.'¹

¹ Unknown children – destined for disadvantage? Ofsted, July 2016.

Early education has the potential to 'drive social mobility and improve outcomes for the next generation'. It is clear that leaders across children's services must have a broad understanding of what it means to be disadvantaged. According to research, the odds against the poorest children catching up with their peers are stacked against them if they do not arrive in school ready to learn and able to:

- communicate effectively
- control their own feelings and impulses
- make sense of the world around them

As well as significant changes to the safeguarding and child protection system and services, **the Children and Families Act 2014** introduced a new approach to shared planning to meet children's needs. The Act places significant emphasis on the duty of the Council in relation to those children with special educational needs or disabilities. The key principles of the Act which Local Authorities must follow are to:

- consider the views, wishes and feelings of the family
- involve the family in decisions that affect them
- provide the information and support families need to be involved in decision making
- support the family to achieve the best possible outcomes for children

Purpose of Strategy

A coherent strategy is needed to ensure that all services are better able to identify young children who are vulnerable to poorer outcomes and to properly fulfil statutory duties and responsibilities. We need to offer timely and effective support to ensure that families with young children are able to access services which meet their needs. As learning, development and health are inextricably linked, we need to bring services closer together, remove barriers and unnecessary complication and better integrate our offer of support so that children benefit.

Having a shared understanding of disadvantage and how it impacts on families and communities is key if we are to enable professionals from all teams and services to identify early those potentially at risk of:

- vulnerability,
- educational underachievement and/or
- needing support in relation to parenting and the home learning environment.

Whilst we are committed to giving children a good start in life, we must also set some specific targets and actions to drive change. This strategy will do that.

The five key objectives of the strategy are to:

- Promote integrated working to improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged and join up services to make this happen. We will develop a complete package of information support and guidance for parents and carers.
- Provide greater clarity on what success looks like when children are ready for school and on how we can support schools to be ready for young children. We will use our integrated Early Help & Education performance framework with specific key performance indicators, targets and actions to monitor our progress in improving outcomes for disadvantaged children.
- Promote new ways of working and new actions we will take to tackle some of the issues of disadvantage to improve the health and wellbeing for all children in Leicestershire.
- Outline how we intend to support and develop parents' and carers' skills, knowledge and understanding of their children's needs including the benefits of early education.
- Outline out how we will support all childcare providers to offer sufficient high-quality early education places.



Understanding Disadvantage

Disadvantage is a complex issue and, left unchallenged, can have long-lasting implications for children. Poverty is often central to disadvantage and can, in some circumstances, adversely impact on parenting and the home environment that children experience growing up. Ensuring that the experiences of young children in terms of home, their health and education are positive will help to reverse the impact of poverty and disrupt the cycle of deprivation². In recent research, the link between social deprivation and families' involvement with social care services is very evident. The Child Welfare Inequalities Project found that children in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in the UK are at least 10 times more likely to be in care than children in the least deprived 10% and 24 times more likely to be subject to a child protection plan.

² Ofsted July 2016

The quality of the child's early education experience, their health and early development all impact on later educational attainment and consequently future life outcomes. All the research suggests that the pre-school years of a child's life, particularly the first three years (1,001 days), are crucial to establishing the ways they think, learn and behave. Children who experience persistent disadvantage are significantly less likely to develop the language needed for learning than those who never experience disadvantage. However, it is entirely possible to break the link between language difficulties and disadvantage with the right support at home, in early education and in school.³ For these reasons, tackling disadvantage and ensuring greater equity of opportunity must be well understood across the workforce, regardless of where professionals work within the department.

Vulnerability and Disadvantage

The Early Years Inclusion and Childcare Service recognises the term 'disadvantage' is most usually linked to a family's economic income or in relation to an impoverished home environment. However, a wider definition of the term that takes into account the child's vulnerability in the context of their wider family, group or community is more useful. For example, we know the impact on children of living in a home where there is domestic violence, when a parent has poor mental health or when they use drugs or alcohol. Similarly, we know that children who have special educational needs and /or a disability, children who are newly arrived in the county, children who speak English as an additional language or those who are born in the summer, may also be at some disadvantage compared with their peers.

It is clear that a good understanding of a locality and its communities is key. Professionals in education, early help and social care services and in health should all have a thorough understanding of the locality in which they work; they should know the distinctive features of their local area if they are to be properly responsive to the needs of the vulnerable children living there.



³ *Talking About a Generation: Current Policy evidence and practice for speech, language and communication.* 2017 M.Gascoigne; J. Gross (The Communication Trust).

Services Overview

There are a number of teams and services within the department that are engaged in improving outcomes for pre-school children and their families. Currently these are:

- Early Years Inclusion and Child Care Service
- Children Family and Wellbeing Service
- Education Psychology Service
- Health
- Schools
- Early Years providers

We aim to join up the way in which these services report on performance so that we can develop a more coherent understanding of our progress and where we need to improve. These services report into the Children Family Partnership board and the priorities identified.

Over and above these services, there are a number of departmental teams that contribute to improving life chances for the most disadvantaged, including Social Care and Early Help.

In addition, the delivery of the 'Healthy Child Programme', commissioned by Public Health and delivered locally by Leicestershire Partnership Trust, is a key partner in early assessment and intervention for pre-school children at risk of delay.

Partners in health, education and in the voluntary and private sector are all stakeholders and providers of crucial services. Collaboration and cooperation with others are therefore essential pre-requisites in the delivery of this strategy. This strategy will provide a guide to our approach with all our partners and stakeholders.

The vision for young children

Our departmental plan states that we want every child in Leicestershire to get the best possible start in life. To do this, we will work collaboratively with our partners so that all pre-school children are safe, healthy, sociable and curious about the world. We want young children to be emotionally resilient and able to reach their potential when they get to school. This strategy sets out how we will deliver on these goals.



Summary of the current challenges

We know from our analysis that there are four areas needing improvement for this age group; these need to be addressed to avoid significant adverse impact on a range of outcomes including relationships and education:

1. The gap between vulnerable children and others is too wide. Many vulnerable children are deemed not 'ready for school' and often display poor language and communication skills. The 2019 Early Years Foundation Stage profile results reveal 13% of children in Leicestershire are working below the expected levels of development for speaking by the time they leave Reception.
2. We do not systematically use the tools we already have in place to identify early the children currently at risk of delay. We are missing opportunities for early intervention and to help these children get back on track quickly.
3. There is a lack of early intervention available for children with additional needs or disabilities. This is contributing to the escalation of need with disproportionate numbers of children labelled as having special educational needs/disabilities.
4. Inconsistent responses to early parenting problems are increasing the number of children presenting with emotional and behavioural difficulties later in childhood. Too frequently, there is a failure to understand the root causes of behaviours (including domestic violence, the quality of attachment in infancy for example).
5. Although the vast majority of childcare provision in Leicestershire is of good or better quality, it is still not benefiting those children from poorer homes /those who are seen as disadvantaged

This strategy must ensure that different teams and services working with pre-school children and their families are working in more integrated and collaborative ways to tackle root causes of problems and build capacity in families, settings and communities. We must have a shared understanding of the outcomes we need to deliver and deploy available resources more effectively.

This strategy is built on our departmental priorities and is set out in four parts:

- An overview of early childhood research and best practice
- Principles that underpin the strategy
- The outcomes we want to deliver
- High level priorities and the first actions we will take.

An overview of the current evidence base

A brief summary of the national research is provided below and covers those issues which are most relevant to a child's early development and life experience including:

- Poverty
- Neglect
- Parenting support
- Special educational needs and disability.

We must ensure that the messages from this research are widely understood and used to inform practice.

- The antenatal period and the first three years of a child's life are vitally important. This is the time that a child's brain grows and changes rapidly⁴. This makes young children particularly sensitive to environmental influences.
- Exposure to parental mental ill-health, abuse, neglect and trauma significantly increases the risk of a number of poorer mental and physical health outcomes in later life.⁵ Such experiences can alter the way the brain develops and functions and can lead to depression, anxiety, behavioural disorders, substance misuse, cardiovascular disease and cancers in later life.⁶
- NHS England report that giving every child the best start in life is crucial in reducing health and education inequalities across the life course⁷ and in improving the future life chances of children. (The Public Health Outcomes Framework reflects this with outcome indicators linked to school readiness).⁸
- Population-based samples show an increased risk for behaviour problems in children with learning disabilities, compared to other children, by the time they are 3 years of age⁹.
- Current data published in 2018/19 suggests that 7.5% of 2-year-olds in England are not developing as expected in terms of personal and social skills (as measured by the Ages and Stages Questionnaire).
- National analysis of the 2019 Early Years Foundation Stage Profile scores found 12% of children lack the skills associated with good personal social and emotional development¹⁰. In Leicestershire 11% were found to lack the skills associated with good personal social and emotional development.
- The study into Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) 2004 found evidence of a strong correlation between a Good Level of Development and outcomes achieved at KS4.

⁴ Wave Trust 2014:

⁵ *An Unfair sentence - All Babies Count (2015) NSPCC*

⁶ *An Unfair sentence - All Babies Count (2015) NSPCC*

⁷ *NHS England & PHE Child and maternal health intelligence network*

⁸ *Public Health Outcomes Framework 3013-16*

⁹ *Totsika, V., Hastings, R.P., Emerson, E., Berridge, D. M., & Lancaster, G.A. (2011). Behaviour problems at five years of age and maternal mental health in autism and intellectual disability. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 39, 1137-1147.*

- Living in poverty has been shown to have a serious impact on children's lives, negatively affecting their development, educational attainment and wellbeing¹⁰.
- Analysis from the Early Intervention Foundation indicates that one in four children, particularly those from poor backgrounds, start school without the necessary language and communication skills. The adverse impact of this on outcomes for young people later in life is now well understood.
- Being poor at both nine months and three years is associated with increased likelihood of poor behavioural, learning and health outcomes at age five.¹¹
- By the age of four, a development gap of more than a year and a half can be seen between the most disadvantaged and most advantaged children.¹² If a baby's development falls behind the norm in the first year of life, it is then much more likely to fall even further behind in subsequent years than to catch up with those who had a better start.
- There is strong evidence that attending early years provision can help disadvantaged children catch up with their peers.¹³
- The NSPCC research (All Babies Count, 2015) on infancy concludes that the key elements for a safe and healthy start in life require:
 - A healthy pregnancy
 - Healthy early relationships
 - Effective care and support for the care-givers
 - A safe and stimulating environment.
- A recent report ¹⁴ 'Starting out right: early education and looked after children', warns that Looked After Children are falling well behind children in the general population before they get to primary school. It cites the missed opportunities in the early years due to so many Looked After Children not receiving good quality early education places.
- National research tells us that Looked After Children are four times more likely to have a special educational need than children in the general population; they are ten times more likely to have an education, health and care plan (DfE 2016).
- Locally, Looked After Children are working below age related expectations when they start school - 72% are below age related expectations for Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) and 78% are below in Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL).

¹⁰ Dickerson & Popli 2012

¹¹ Magnuson 2013

¹² Sutton Trust 2012

¹³ Sylva et al 2010

¹⁴ by the University of Oxford and Family and Childcare Trust's (2016),

Principles

The strategy is underpinned by the following principles:

- A collaborative approach with settings, schools and services which work with pre-school children and their families to ensure equity of access to high-quality provision. This collaborative approach across the sector is key for children in care.
- Providing high-quality childcare and early education that is fully inclusive and accessible, particularly for our most vulnerable children.
- Supporting parents and families to build on their existing knowledge and understanding of children's needs so that they are able to get their children off to a good start.
- Evidenced-based interventions with well-defined goals and robust evaluation of impact.
- There should be a consistent emphasis on emotional wellbeing, supporting secure attachment and high-quality training for the workforce to ensure this is embedded in practice.
- A strong focus on those families who are at greatest disadvantage. For the purpose of this strategy, "disadvantaged children" includes those who:
 - Live in poverty or have a poor home environment
 - Are disabled or are at risk of developmental delay
 - Live in homes where parenting capacity is compromised
 - Do not have English as a first language
 - Are 'looked after'
 - Who have poor language and communication skills



Fulfilling our corporate parenting role for young children

Compared to statistical neighbours, Leicestershire has fewer children in its care.

Nevertheless, children in our care have significantly poorer educational outcomes than their peers. It is imperative that this picture is addressed and the gap closed. We know that this gap exists well before primary school and widens as children mature.

Accessing the Free Early Education Entitlement (FEEE) and the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) can both help to narrow this attainment gap and improve educational outcomes for children who are looked after. Additionally, we know that the quality, consistency and stability of the care environment (within a family and in education settings) will play a critical role for our children's later outcomes.

The case for early intervention to address likely gaps or deficits is clear. Research points to the key areas which offer opportunities for targeted intervention:

- Attachment – securely attached children do better across a range of domains
- Language and communication development
- Social and emotional skills
- Self-regulation
- Physical Health
- The Environment (and role of carers and educators in shaping this)

The outcomes we want to deliver

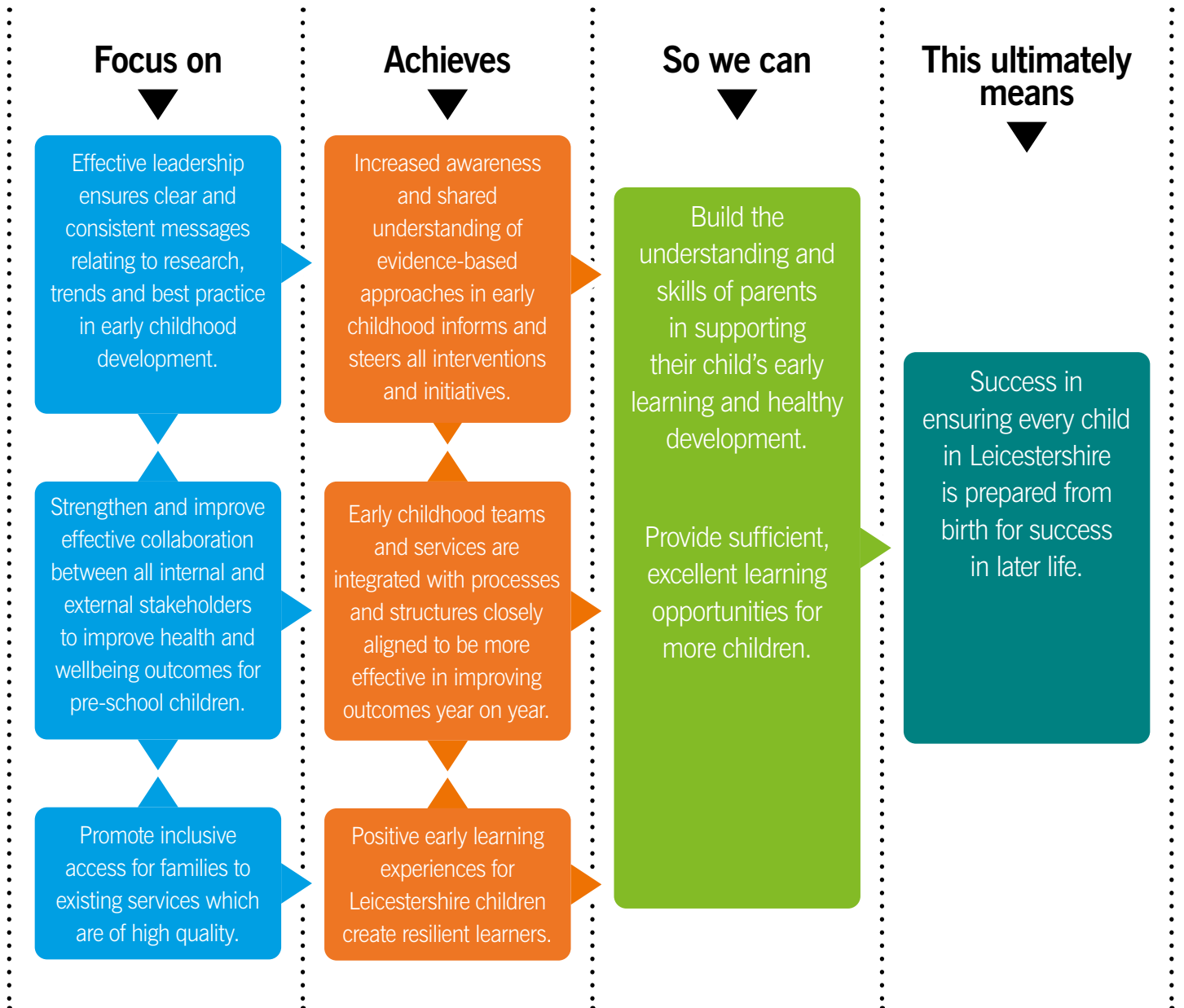
The outcomes this strategy must deliver for pre-school children living in Leicestershire are:

- Improved health, wellbeing and life chances
- Young children achieve their potential

The key performance indicators which will be used to monitor the progress of the strategy now need to be developed.

Priorities and actions we will take

The diagram below summarises the key priorities linked to the outcomes we aim to deliver.



The high-level priorities we have identified in the Children and Family Partnership Plan are:

Ensure the best start in life

To develop an integrated Early Years Pathway to ensure the needs of vulnerable children are identified

To develop a shared understanding of the importance of the first 1001 Critical Days and school readiness

Early Years Inclusion and Childcare priorities

Priority 1: Effective leadership to ensure clear and consistent messages relating to disadvantage and vulnerability impacting on the life chances of young children are understood.

Priority 2: Strengthened and improved collaboration between all internal and external partners to improve the early education, health and wellbeing outcomes for all pre-school children to ensure children are ready for school.

Priority 3: Inclusive access for families to existing services which are of high quality

Priority 4: To ensure children access their early years entitlements from health and education.

Accountability & Governance

Outcomes towards the strategy are reported to the Children and Family Partnership board each quarter.

The Head of Service, as champion for early years provision, will further report on the progress of the strategy and delivery of the outcomes to the appropriate partnership governance forums.

