

**Open Report on behalf of Heather Sandy, Executive Director –  
Children’s Services**

Report to:	<b>Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee</b>
Date:	<b>04 September 2020</b>
Subject:	<b>Early Childhood Strategy</b>

**Summary:**

This report presents the draft Early Childhood Strategy. This document sets out the approach taken in Lincolnshire to support parents in their journey through pregnancy and the earliest years of their child's life. It sets out the pathway for parents to enable them to provide the best start for their child. All of which contributes to a good level of development being achieved by the end of the foundation stage.

**Actions Required:**

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee is invited to review and provide feedback on the draft Early Childhood Strategy for Lincolnshire.

## **1. Background**

Lincolnshire strives to ensure the best outcomes for all of the children and families across the county. There is much evidence to support early intervention to enable children to reach their potential. The Early Childhood Strategy sets out the approach for Lincolnshire to achieve our ambitions to improve educational outcomes for our youngest children.

There are a range of services available to Lincolnshire families in their journey through parenthood; our children's centres are at the heart of this early intervention work. However, the educational outcomes for many of our children are less than we would hope. From 2013-2016, Lincolnshire's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) outcomes were above the national average. From 2016 Lincolnshire's outcomes plateaued and the results of other areas increased. This resulted in lower outcomes at the end of the EYFS for Lincolnshire children, in comparison to our statistical neighbours and also the national average.

By 2018 the focus on the early years had increased as the pattern continued. As a county we looked to work with a wider range of partners, in order to identify ways in which we could improve the educational outcomes for our children. It was acknowledged that during the period of 2013 to 2018 many service areas had

made changes and so had our commissioning partnerships. As a result of this, it was felt that the development of a strategy could help bring together in one place the work that was happening across the county.

It was agreed that following the development of a draft strategy, a Local Government Association (LGA) peer challenge would provide us with an opportunity to gain external perspective of the work we do. This would also provide us with an insight into any gaps that there may be across the system. The draft strategy was developed in 2019 prior to the peer review and it was agreed that this would remain a draft until the peer review had been completed which took place in November 2019.

The outcome of the peer review was very positive with five recommendations:

- Strengthen the focus on 'Ready Families' domain of the School Readiness Plan on a Page.
- Strengthen shared accountability and governance across the system to deliver the Early Childhood Strategy.
- Engage with those outside Children's Services and develop a shared understanding of vision, goals and key terminology such as early childhood, school readiness and the home learning environment.
- Re-balance the focus for Early Years delivery between the children's centre and the wider community assets.
- Develop a plan to build capacity of the workforce, maximising skills and experience.

This feedback was well received across the wider partnership that had participated in the peer challenge process. Following the publication of the final report, there was agreement to take the next steps to finalising the strategy. In addition, a group of representatives would be identified from the wider system to take strategic responsibility to drive forward this work.

In order to begin to address the recommendations set out, it was agreed that the early years team would address the first recommendation and update the school readiness on a page document as part of the strategy. This was completed involving wider partners. The updated version has been included in the strategy. A group of 16 representatives were invited to attend a meeting at the end of January 2020. Their initial task was to take the draft strategy to their associated teams, networks and organisations for additions and contributions. This would ensure the document was robust and representative of the whole system. The group agreed to reconvene at the end of March to review the feedback and to set out how, we as a collective would achieve the three remaining recommendations from the peer challenge.

Following this a number of information sharing events took place with a range of partners, including representatives of the early years sector, schools and wider partners. The draft strategy was very well received with positive engagement and feedback. These events took place in February and the early part of March 2020, with a view to presenting the outcomes and strategy to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee in April.

Unfortunately in the middle of March 2020, the Covid-19 outbreak was declared a national pandemic and the focus turned to that as a priority. On this basis the second meeting of the 16 representatives due to take place at end of March was cancelled and so was the Committee meeting in April. This was in line with the national lockdown measures put in place at the time, and prevented any further work being progressed during the summer of this year.

However, now lockdown measures are reduced and we are again in a position to be able to present the draft strategy to the Committee, we wanted to do so, as this will ensure all of the work prior to the outbreak is not lost.

The strategy sets out the national and local context. Throughout the document there are a number of hyperlinks to relevant information and tools, to support professionals to better understand how their work fits in to the wider journey of children. This approach emphasises the crucial part we have in enabling all children to access the right support, at the right time, from pre-birth to the end of their reception year to ensure their needs are met. This will increase the opportunities for all children to reach the expected level of development at the end of the foundation stage.

The aims within the strategy are felt to represent the whole system, and provide children with the opportunity to develop and thrive during their early childhood.

## **2. Conclusion**

The impact and outcome of the lockdown and the Covid-19 outbreak on children and families is still not yet fully understood.

We do know that the pandemic has placed unprecedented pressure on the system including early year's education providers and schools. It is felt that this strategy is even more relevant than ever before; feedback received at the information events held earlier in the year has been taken in to consideration and reflected in the final document. However, we would ask the Committee to be mindful that the next steps set out at the end of the document may be subject to change as we begin the recovery phase following the pandemic. The next steps will be reviewed in consultation with partners through the early childhood services partnership group at their second meeting which we propose to now reschedule as a virtual event for the autumn term. This will provide a foundation on which to further build relationships and a shared understanding of the gaps and priorities we have across the system. This will enable us to reflect, to better connect the services available and to collectively support our children and their families on their journey through the early stages of parenthood.

As there has been a delay in presenting the strategy for 2020-2022 due to the Covid outbreak, it is important to also acknowledge there are other influencing factors that may change the priorities in this area of work going forward. This includes the changes to the Early Years Foundation Stage profile that have been recently announced by the Department for Education (DfE) for 2021/22. In addition, the report, Best Beginnings in the early years, was released in July 2020 by the Children's Commissioner which supports closer working relationships across the

professionals that work with children. This very much supports the approach set out for Lincolnshire in this strategy.

**3. Consultation**

**a) Have Risks and Impact Analysis been carried out?**

No

**b) Risks and Impact Analysis**

Not Applicable

**4. Appendices**

These are listed below and attached at the back of the report	
Appendix A	Early Childhood Strategy 2020-2022

**5. Background Papers**

No background papers within Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972 were used in the preparation of this report.

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