Nottinghamshire County Council

Report to Health Scrutiny Committee

18 March 2025

Agenda Item 7

REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF HEALTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

OUTCOMES OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW OF SCHOOL READINESS

Purpose of the report

1. To share with the Health Scrutiny Committee the findings from the task and finish review around school readiness and to seek the endorsement of the committee for the recommendations of the review to be submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

Information

2. Following concerns raised by Members that a trend had been observed after the pandemic that some young children appeared to be less prepared with the basic skills that were necessary to start school, a presentation was received at the meeting of Health Scrutiny Committee held on 14 November 2023 on the school readiness of young children who were entering school.

3. At this meeting, members considered information regarding school readiness of Nottinghamshire's youngest students which was presented by partners at Nottingham Trent University and officers within the Council's Early Years teams. As a result of this discussion, it was agreed that a joint scrutiny task and finish review would be carried out by members of Health Scrutiny Committee and Children and Families Select Committee to examine in detail the activity being carried out by the Council and its delivery partners to ensure that as many children as possible were ready for school.

4. In accordance with the Health Scrutiny resolution of 14 November 2023, a joint scoping exercise was carried out by the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the relevant committees in consultation with the relevant officers. This scope document was developed in December 2023, with all members of the committees invited to suggest additions or amendments to the review plan. The scope was then updated in March 2024 based on the feedback received from members.

5. As outlined in the scope, the objectives of the review were:

   - To identify the issues impacting on school readiness in Nottinghamshire.

   - To examine the services which support families to get their children "school ready."

6. The key areas for examination were:

   - Characteristics of children who do not meet expected levels of development and therefore deemed as ‘not school ready’.
   - Evidence of what works to ensure children are meeting their expected outcomes.
   - Current activity in Nottinghamshire and its impact to improve children’s development from conception to school.
   - Approaches taken to address children’s speech, language and communication needs since Covid and how successful this has been.
   - Further work that could be done to support children eligible for free school meals to meet their levels of development.

7. All members of the committee were invited to express their interest in taking part in the review group or to nominate another member of their Group to take their place. The membership of the review group was:

   - Councillor Bethan Eddy (Review Chair)
   - Councillor Callum Bailey
   - Councillor Anne Callaghan
   - Councillor Mike Introna
   - Councillor Roger Jackson
   - Councillor Nigel Turner
   - Councillor Michelle Welsh MP

Links to strategic priorities

7. Scrutiny focuses on supporting the delivery of the strategic priorities of the Council and its key health partners. Many services in Nottinghamshire are delivered through a partnership approach, which means that the Council works with other organisations to provide the best services possible. The scrutiny process provides ‘critical friend’ feedback on how well policies and services are doing. Part of planning the review involved identifying the specific strategic priorities of the Council and the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care System (ICS) that the review would support.

Integrated Care Strategy 2023-2027

8. Through integration with other partner organisations, this review also supports Aim One within the Integrated Care Strategy 2023-2027 for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire which is to improve outcomes in population health and healthcare by supporting children and young people to have the best start in life with their health, development, education and preparation for adulthood. This ambition involves prioritising the first 1001 critical days of a child’s life, developing multidisciplinary family hub networks to support the holistic needs of all children and families and to equip parents to make informed decisions, as well as tackling the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children, with a particular focus on emotional health and wellbeing and school readiness, including speech and language support.

The Nottinghamshire Plan 2021 - 2031

9. The Nottinghamshire Plan 2021-31 sets out Council's strategic vision for the future of Nottinghamshire. The activity in the Nottinghamshire Plan is built around achieving a 10-year vision for a 'healthy, prosperous and greener future for everyone'. This vision is supported by the ambitions that act as a framework for all Council activity. The review scope identified that it would support the delivery of the following ambitions.

10. As part of Ambition 2, 'Supporting communities and families', the Council has pledged to strengthen relationships with the voluntary and community sector, empower people to help themselves in their own communities, make the most of community-based services to offer early help and interventions, and reduce the need for more complex and costly support later on, look at opportunities to share property with our partners to reduce our carbon footprint and deliver more joined-up services, closer to the communities we serve.

11. As part of Ambition 3, 'Keeping children, vulnerable adults and communities safe', the Council has pledged to work together with partners and residents to better enable people experiencing severe multiple disadvantages…to have access to…effective, integrated support services, which are co-produced by those with lived experience, so that people experiencing severe multiple disadvantage experience better health and care outcomes and have a voice in shaping services to best meet their needs.

The review process

12. Alongside senior officers from the Council's Early Childhood Services team and Public Health team, representatives from the Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (NHFT) and Nottingham Trent University (NTU) also attended the review meetings. These key partner organisations work alongside the Council's School Readiness teams to help ensure children in Nottinghamshire have the best possible start in life. Representatives from these external organisations and teams within the Council were invited to attend the review due to their role in delivering services which help families and their young children prepare for entry into school.

13. The review was carried out using a variety of methods, including desktop research and the consideration of data evidence and casework, culminating in three informal meetings where further evidence was considered, and relevant partners were consulted. The first meeting of the review group took place on 26 March 2024 where members considered Early Years data for 2023. Further meetings were held on 12 November to consider Nottinghamshire's Healthy Families Programme and Family Hubs, and on 20 November 2024 to examine childcare sufficiency in Nottinghamshire and a successful case study regarding the "Get School Ready" programme that had taken place with Oak Tree Primary School in Mansfield and their local partners.

School Readiness

16. School readiness is a measure for how well prepared a child is to succeed at school, both cognitively and socially and is also an indicator of how ready a child is for learning in a school environment. All children have the potential to become school ready when families, communities, early years providers and schools work together to support the development of children's confidence, resilience and curiosity.

Review activity and recommendations

School Readiness in Nottinghamshire

17. As part of the review process, members examined information on the assessment of young school age children in Nottinghamshire on the domains (communication skills, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, personal-social skills, and problem solving skills) that are measured by the school readiness assessment. School readiness is measured by the level of development of a child when they reach Foundation Stage (4-5 years of age) at school. A measure called the Good Level of Development (GLD) is used which forms the Early Years Foundation Stage (this is followed by Key Stages 1-5).

18. Members also considered ward level data to understand in greater detail the areas of Nottinghamshire where there was the greatest need to focus activity supporting families in making sure children were school ready. Ward-level and district-level data shows that there is a widening disparity between the areas in Nottinghamshire where children entering the reception stage of education are the most well prepared and least prepared for school. This data shows how young children in Rushcliffe are more likely to be well prepared for school, with children entering school in Ashfield and Mansfield being less likely to have good overall development and communication skills that will place them in the best possible developmental position when starting school.

19. Data shows that in 2023, 67.5% of children in Nottinghamshire achieved a GLD, compared to 66.9% who had reached this level in 2022. The number of children who achieve a GLD does however vary across Nottinghamshire, not just at District and ward level, but also by Special Education Need or Disability status, gender, ethnic origin, and of particular concern, by free school meal eligibility. In 2023 across Nottinghamshire as a whole, 52.2% of children eligible for free school meals achieved a GLD compared to 69.8% of their peers, this however varies from 46.7% of children who are eligible for free school meals achieving a GLD in Ashfield to 63.9% of children who are eligible for free school meals achieving a GLD in Rushcliffe.

20. Ensuring children are able to get the best from education is vital, with a concerning number of children starting school without the range of essential skills that they need to learn, develop and succeed. Research shows that access to high quality early learning experiences, together with a positive learning environment at home is a vital combination to ensure that children reach expected levels of development at the start of compulsory school age. However, studies have shown that children from lower income households are less likely to access childcare and early years provision and as such can miss out on the developmental opportunities that these settings provide. These children are also less likely to have a positive home learning environment. This combination of factors means that children from more deprived backgrounds may not always have the same opportunities as other children to develop and become school ready. School readiness is not an issue that needs to be addressed just prior to when a child starts school but should be an area of priority in how services are provided from conception onwards. Even though Ofsted reports that the provision of early years education is better than it has ever been, it is still not fully benefiting the most disadvantaged children in Nottinghamshire compared to their peers.

Nottinghamshire Healthy Families Programme

21. The Government's Healthy Child Programme is the national evidence based universal programme for children aged 0 to 19 and is its response to the strength of the evidence about giving children the best start in life. The Healthy Child Programme provides a framework to support collaborative work and integrated delivery to promote child development, improve child health outcomes, and ensure that families at risk are identified at the earliest opportunity. The programme is universal in reach and personalised in response: it includes a universal offer for all children and families to ensure every child gets the good start they need, as well as a targeted offer, providing extra support for those at risk of poor outcomes. In Nottinghamshire, health visitors and school nurses lead the delivery of the Healthy Child Programme through the Nottinghamshire Healthy Families Programme (HFP).

22. The Nottinghamshire HFP is a public health nursing service that supports families to provide their children with the best start in life through a range of nursing and health interventions. The service promotes early intervention and prevention by identifying and delivering targeted support to families in need, supported by a programme of health and development reviews from public health nurses. As nursing professionals, they provide evidence-based interventions which are relevant and effective in supporting child development, parenting, and healthy choices, and play an important role in the identification of families in need of additional support.

23. The Healthy Child Programme highlights the importance of supporting parental mental health and strong parent/infant relationships, starting before the child is born. The Nottinghamshire HFP offers an antenatal review, from 28 weeks of pregnancy to all parents. The Nottinghamshire HFP operates on the principle that school readiness is an important outcome of children having the best start in life. The Nottinghamshire HFP acknowledges the most formative period of a child's development is the first 1001 days from a child's conception up to age two. The provision of the right support for children and families during this time is a key window of opportunity to positively influence a child's future.

24. Health visitors build relationships with parents and conduct holistic assessments with families to build on their strengths and identify any areas where they might be experiencing difficulties. Health visitors consider a range of factors including parental capacity to meet their child's needs, the impact and influence of wider family and community, and environmental circumstances. The first 1001 days are particularly important to promote sensitive, attuned parenting during the early development of a child's brain. As part of the Healthy Child Programme, every family is offered a range of screening tests, immunisations, developmental reviews, information and guidance to support parenting and healthy choices, starting in pregnancy and continuing through school years.

25. All families receive a health and development review from the Nottinghamshire HFP ten to fourteen days after a child's birth. The visit supports a parent's adjustment to life as a new parent by offering advice on feeding, safe sleeping, baby's development as well as recovery from birth. During this visit, maternal mental health and anxiety screening is completed, and there is a routine enquiry to check for parents' Adverse Childhood Experience, such as abuse or neglect. In 2023-24, 92.1% of newborns in Nottinghamshire received their assessment within ten to fourteen days, which was better than the national average. These reviews are

conducted face to face by a health visitor, and, in total across 2023-24, 99.8% of newborns received this review.

26. Six to eight weeks after birth, a further health and development review is completed. As has been long been established and most recently discussed in Ofsted's October 2024 report on Early Years education, reading with a young child is among the most beneficial early interactions with family members. During this visit, parents also receive a Bookstart Pack and are encouraged to register with their local libraries and Family Hubs. Family Hubs offer a range of help and support from pregnancy and throughout childhood into early adulthood, including preparing for a baby, child development, parenting support, health and wellbeing, relationships and communication, finances and employment. Maternal mental health assessments are also carried out during this visit, enabling any emerging needs to be identified and additional support provided. This visit is also an opportunity to observe healthy parental attachment to the baby. The reviews at six to eight weeks after birth are conducted face to face by a health visitor.

27. Across the new birth and/or six-to-eight-week reviews, a Newborn Behavioural Observation is completed. These are observations which assess how well a baby is interacting with its parents, family members and surroundings, and how well baby cues are reinforced. They provide an opportunity to share techniques and guidance that help underpin speech and language development by encouraging parents to talk and interact with the baby, and understand how babies communicate with 'cues' regarding their needs during the early phases of their development.

28. A three-month review is also done with families where areas for extra support have been identified during the six-to-eight-week-reviews. The three-month review reinforces key messages about interaction and play and promotes positive parenting to support a child's early development. This review also provides an opportunity to discuss topics with emerging relevance to parents as their baby develops, such as baby-led weaning. The three-month review is in the process of being rolled out to all first-time parents and will become part of the core, ongoing offer from the Nottinghamshire HFP.

29. As part of the HFP, all children also receive a review at eight to twelve months of age which includes the Ages and Stages Questionnaire that is used to assess development across five domains: communication skills, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, personal-social skills, and problem-solving skills. These domains create an overall picture of a child's development by measuring how well a child interacts with others, controls movements of their large muscle groups and coordinates their smaller muscles, as well as social skills for getting along well with others and cognitive reasoning skills. A quantitative scoring system is used in addition to practitioners' professional observations of how each child is achieving key milestones and also covers maternal mental health and attachment. If concerns are raised at this review, additional support can be delivered through the Family Hub, which provides a wide range of additional and targeted interventions, or, via referral, support from other health services for any medical concerns or developmental delay.

30. When a child is between two and two and a half years old, the Ages and Stages Questionnaire is used to assess whether a child is meeting development targets across all domains. A two-year language tool is also completed as part of this process, which includes a speech and language referral checklist. At this review, there are professional observations and reporting

of key milestones as well as review of parents' wellbeing. At this stage, there is advice given on toilet training.

31. Members of the review group agreed that the services that were provided to children and families, both by the Healthy Families Programme and through Family Hubs, provided a sound foundation of support for families in making sure children were ready to start school. Members however acknowledged that for some families, particularly families from more deprived areas that further activity was needed to increase awareness of the need for children to be as well prepared as possible for starting school.

32. Members acknowledged that within communities there was a great deal of knowledge that could potentially be harnessed to raise awareness of and promote activities that would support school readiness. Members agreed that this knowledge and engagement provided an opportunity to support existing activities within communities to provide a really supportive environment for a child's development. Members noted how family members, such as grandparents, as well as members of a child's wider community, whose parenting knowledge and support could provide an important resource for parents, should play a wider role in the work around how health advice and communal knowledge could work together in communities to enable more children to be ready for school.

33. Members agreed that these conversations on raising awareness of the need to support children to be school ready should have sensitivity to differences in language and culture across families and communities. Members acknowledged that whilst the advice of health visitors was intended to apply universally across cultures and communities, how it was delivered could benefit from more personal tailoring in some cases to meet the different needs of the diverse communities across Nottinghamshire. Whilst members noted the excellent support provided by the Nottinghamshire HFP, it was acknowledged that some parents needed additional support on how they could best help their children be school ready. As such, working out how to harness the wider support that is available in families and communities has the potential to have a beneficial impact on supporting more children to be school ready.

Recommendation One

That further work is carried out in engaging with families and community leaders to promote awareness of the importance of children's early years.

34. Members welcomed Nottinghamshire's new Best Start for Life offer, which communicates to parents-to-be and new parents what services and support are available to them. Members agreed that parents would find it beneficial if access to the full range of information and advice that is available online to help them support their children to be school ready was brought together into a single online resource hub for parents. A central resource (that could be similar in format to the NottAlone resource that provides a central and accessible resource for children and young people on mental health support) would help ensure parents had a single point of access to the full range of support and activities that is available. Members acknowledged that whilst the resources that are available on the Council's website are useful, agreed that it would be helpful for families if this resource could be further expanded to include additional information and links to other useful resources of information, guidance and support. Members also suggested an increased use of social media to promote local information sources and campaigns and suggested that members also had a role to play in sharing information through their own social media accounts and local Facebook groups.

Recommendation Two

That a multi-media library of information relevant to parents and families with young children is hosted in a resource hub on the Council's website.

35. As part of the review process, members learned that some of the support that is in place in Nottinghamshire around ensuring as many children as possible were school ready had been recognised by other authorities as examples of best practice. Examples of this had included the importance of incorporating learning from people with disabilities and their family members in informing service design. To help facilitate access for people with disabilities and their families, SEND Coordinators and visual and sign language resources were in use within the Nottinghamshire HFP. Work had also been carried out with neighbouring providers, and a regional Best Start for Life group and members expressed support for continued sharing of best practice.

36. Members expressed hopes that further collaboration with other partners such as maternity services, would be possible to further promote child development discussions as part of the antenatal and postnatal support offer. This kind of collaboration aligns closely with Aim One of the Integrated Care Strategy and could also be helpful in raising the number of antenatal referrals into Family Hubs. Increasing the number of antenatal referrals would also help shift the timing of engagement with parents closer to the start of the most crucial 1001 days of a child's development. Members agreed that this approach would assist in the long term support of school readiness because the earlier support is provided, the more opportunity there is for it to have a positive impact for children and families.

37. Members agreed that, in addition to its work with partners, the Council should also review its communications with parents that take place during the first 1001 days to identify any additional opportunities to deliver earlier messaging that promotes awareness of the importance of school readiness. For example, there is an opportunity to make every contact count by including links to resources regarding school readiness on communications sent to parents, such as in emails regarding school places. There are also opportunities to maximise contacts with parents that happen even earlier in a child's development. This emphasis on making every contact with parents and families within the first 1001 days of a child's development count towards school readiness also closely aligns with the Ambitions in the Council Plan and Aims in the Integrated Care Strategy.

Recommendation Three

That consideration be given to how existing communications with parents at key moments of their child's development can best provide the support that will help families equip children with the skills that they need to be as ready as possible for school,

and

that the Council continues to investigate how these communications can be delivered earlier.

Family Hub Networks

38. Family Hub teams are part of the Council's Early Years and Family Hubs Service, they are responsible for providing a range of services from dedicated Family Hub buildings, family homes and access points in the community, Each Family Hub Network is made up of a range of organisations that provide joined up local services for children and families, providing a "front door" so that families can access the help that they need in when they need it. Services are also provided virtually to help increase access for some families. Family Hub Networks are for families from conception to 18 years, however 'best start of life' is at their core.

39. Family Hub Networks are led by the Council and delivered in partnership with a range of organisations including Nottinghamshire Healthcare Trust and maternity services. The provision of best start for life services operate from the evidence-based principle that the first two years of life are the most crucial window for a child's development to set them up for success in school. Data and research have shown that gaps widen after two years old between the children who are more prepared and those who are less prepared with the skills they need to do well at school.

40. Family Hubs teams work by building trusting relationships with families, with the view that it is everybody's business to raise children. Key to building rapport with families is having universal services that are open to all families to access (such as services provided through the Healthy Families Programme). This way of service delivery increases public awareness of the service offer and reduces the perceived stigma that some families might feel around accessing support services. The coordination of the delivery of universal services, with other support services makes it easier for families who receive referrals for more specialised services to access this additional support because the services are often co-located within the same building. Families may attend for a service and then additional support needs may be identified and supported. To improve this experience for families, coordination work has been done to reduce the number of times a family has to tell their story as part of the referral process.

41. The Council's Family Hubs teams have also coordinated service delivery with midwifery service on antenatal referrals which has received positive feedback from received from families and delivery partners. Family Hub teams have introduced new interventions to support families during pregnancy, including "Antenatal PEEP" and "Antenatal Babes" courses. Both courses have received high take-up from families. There has also been a focus in coordinating the delivery of antenatal services through the Family Hubs alongside midwifery services. The collaboration had led to 26 families being referred to Family Hubs in six months, with 21 of these participating at full engagement. It was the view of members that this collaboration with midwifery offered a potential additional means of engaging positively with families at an early stage which could have a positive impact on preparing children for school.

42. Members of the review group agreed that given the positive impact that the alignment of service delivery with partners could have in supporting children and families around school readiness, that the opportunities that partnership working and collaboration offered for promoting activity that would have a positive impact on school readiness should be further explored.

Recommendation Four

That the Council continues to look for further ways to work with partners who have contact with parents-to-be and families with very young children.

Child Care Sufficiency and Early Years Education

43. Members then reviewed Nottinghamshire's Childcare Sufficiency Assessment which is coordinated and administered by the Council. The Childcare Act 2006 currently states that Local Authorities must secure funded places offering 570 hours of Early Education and Childcare a year. This provision is to be made available over no fewer than 38 weeks of the year and up to 52 weeks of the year for every eligible 2-year-old child in their area, and for all three and four-year-olds. In accordance with Section 11 of the Childcare Act 2006, the Local Authority produces an annual sufficiency report on the availability and sufficiency of childcare in their area. This duty has been expanded to include funded childcare entitlements for children from 9 months of age who are from working households.

44. At the time of the review, there were 1,014 Ofsted Registered Childcare Providers in Nottinghamshire. 87% of providers were registered to deliver funded childcare places for working parents and supported two-year-olds. There were also 426 childminders, 162 day nurseries, 67 pre-schools, and 215 schools in Nottinghamshire. There has been a 6% decrease in the number of registered childcare providers over the last year, which is comparable to national and regional trends.

45. For funded children ages 2 to 4 years across Nottinghamshire settings varied. 42% attended day nursery, 5% attended a Childminder agency, 10% attended a preschool, 1% attended an independent setting, and 42% attended a school. Of the 89% of inspected Early Years provision in Nottinghamshire, 660 were rated Good, 56 were Outstanding, 22 Required Improvement, and six were rated as Inadequate. A total of 108 had not yet been inspected at the time of the review. Vacancy rates for childcare were also considered which range from over 40% in some areas to less than 10% in other areas. In areas that border on other counties and regions, there was demand from residents of other counties which contributed to this.

46. Work has been done to increase take-up rates of the fifteen hours of funded care available for vulnerable two-year-olds. This promotional work has included publicity campaigns through Notts Help Yourself and the Families Information Service. Families were also contacted directly by email and text messaging, and any families who had applied but not yet taken up a place received follow up contact from the Family Hubs Team. Despite this work, recent data shows a decline in the take up of funded childcare for vulnerable two-year-olds; this is due to several factors including some early years providers prioritising places for children from 9 months to 4 years from working households.

47. Attending early years provision is beneficial for children in their overall development and getting school ready, as such participation in Early Years settings by vulnerable children in receipt of supplementary funding is closely monitored. Some of these children also receive SEND funding if they had an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or Disability Access Fund (DAF) Inclusion. Additional funding is also available through Deprivation Fund Communication and Language payments. Education and early years settings are able apply for funding to purchase extra resources to help children address communication and language issues. In Ashfield and Mansfield this funding is accessed more than in other areas of Nottinghamshire due to these areas having the highest number of children with communication and language difficulties.

48. In considering Early Years provision and childcare sufficiency in Nottinghamshire, members received assurances that there are enough high quality settings available support young

children's development throughout Nottinghamshire. Members also saw evidence that there is adequate monitoring and support from the Council to ensure that there continues to be sufficient availability of settings throughout Nottinghamshire, including settings that cater to the most vulnerable children and children with additional needs.

The importance of accessing Early Childhood Provision in supporting school readiness

49. Family Hub teams play an important role in facilitating positive early learning experiences. A positive learning environment at home is also vital in order to help a child reach a good level of development by the time that they start school. Family Hub teams provide a range of structured interventions including programmes to equip families to provide positive home learning such as Antenatal Babes, Baby Massage, Sleep clinic, 'Now I am Two' groups, Toileting Workshop, Forest School, and Creches. During the Covid-19 pandemic, hybrid services and new services were put in place. These changes to how services have been delivered have enabled them to reach additional audiences, for example, Antenatal Babes has seen more involvement with dads after more courses began being delivered online.

50. Parents of vulnerable two-year-olds are actively encouraged to take up their two-year entitlement to a childcare place; however, it is a parental choice whether to place a two-year-old is in an education setting. Creches and universal groups, in particular, cater for parents whose children are just beginning to participate in group activities. Statistically, boys and children who have difficulty being still in educational settings thrive in Forest School Programmes. A Little Talkers programme is also available for families with children under 3.5 years of age to improve speech, language and communication skills. To cultivate effective home learning environments, parents also receive information on how to create home learning opportunities.

51. Members noted how they had observed some parents in their communities who were sometimes hesitant for their children to participate in early years settings and may not be aware of the benefits of their child taking part in the available activities and Early Years provision. Members agreed that many of the developmental measures for children can be difficult for parents to assess themselves, and such if children weren't attending these settings, then it may to be immediately clear that a child was not meeting the expected level of development for their age. Audits that have been carried out in the past through the Healthy Families Programme have shown that some families are less likely to take up the offer, particularly for their second or third child, or if their child is already in early years setting and doing well. Members agreed that the range of early years activities and support that were available across Nottinghamshire were of good quality but agreed that further work could be done to with families to emphasise the importance for their child's development of attending early years provision and to provide assurance and confidence on the benefits for their child in attending to parents who have not yet engaged with the offer.

Recommendation Five

That consideration be given to how the Council's communications and engagement work might further publicise child-friendly activities that promote the importance of children's early years and promote the take-up of childcare entitlements for vulnerable children.

A Case Study: "Getting School Ready" with Oak Tree Primary School, Mansfield.

52. As part of the review process, members considered a case study of activities that had been carried out to improve school readiness at the community level, presented by the team leads of Nottingham Trent University's school readiness programme, Luke Parmenter and Kimberley Simms.

53. The Getting School Ready initiative had brought together cross-sector partners, parents and carers from an under-served community in Mansfield to co-produce a plan to address the persistent issue of high numbers of pupils requiring significant extra support to thrive and be ready for school. The case study described the collective impact of the project which had been a structured collaboration focussing on a common agenda to improve school readiness outcomes.

54. This School Readiness programme had built on examples of good practice seen in Liverpool and Blackpool in a Nottinghamshire context, embarking on an extensive listening exercise from March to October 2022. The listening was conducted through coffee mornings with partners, interviews with practitioners and leaders from education, health and wellbeing services. This feedback was then analysed from a systems change modelling perspective based on the significant energy that was evident within the community to support and lead on improved school readiness for local children. The listening that had been carried out had shown that there was a collective willingness in the local area to engage with services, shape the support provided by services, deliver per support, and invest additional time in improving the system around school readiness for the benefit of the community as a whole.

55. The listening exercise enabled the Programme to take into account the challenges experienced by families and service providers in the local area. There had been a lack trust between families and services because of perceptions of judgement and social stigma as well as feelings that the availability of public transport made accessing services difficult for families. The residual impact of isolation associated with lockdowns and home learning environments were also felt to have created challenges for families, because there was less face-to-face support available. Furthermore, the referral process for services, having become more involved and less sensitive to the needs of families also presented a barrier to families' accessing support.

56. Services also faced challenges which had impacted on the support available for school readiness. Tightening budgets had reduced the time resource available for collaboration which eroded important connections between services and hampered opportunities to develop cross-sector partner networks. To address these challenges, partners working collectively on the Oak Tree "Getting School Ready" Programme rallied to strengthen partnership working among services, access to support, relationships between services and families, system leadership capacity, and a more connected and resilient community.

57. To measure effectiveness of the programme, a shared measurement system was developed which was informed by Early Learning Goals, parent and partner surveys, and service uptake information. Good practice was also reinforced through a "Roots to Readiness" scheme, delivered in partnership with the local Family Hub to deliver adult and family education. The programme was governed through steering group meetings and continuous communication with education and health networks facilitated through SharePoint. There was also foundational support for the programme from key delivery partners which supported the collecting and monitoring of data and the identifying and winning of additional funding for the

project. It was also important to bring the leadership of system partners into the conversations between parents and education settings to help give parents access to the support and resources that they needed to support their child to become school ready.

58. Learning from the case study showed that improving school readiness requires making the most of the existing appetite for change and for collaboration within communities. This involves seeking out and including multiple perspectives in all discussions and plans around school readiness support to ensure that the pressures on various stakeholders are fully understood. This approach helps achieve mutual commitment to a common goal. In the case of school readiness support, the common goal is a structured approach to developing strong working relationships that meaningfully involve parents, carers and professionals.

59. Members of the review group agreed that the Oak Tree "Getting School Ready" programme had shown that a concerted approach which maintains a neutral, flexible and responsive attitude, informed by empathy rather than judgement, facilitates better access and use of information can work to effectively contribute to improving school readiness. This approach enables parents to participate by developing trusting relationships and engaging parents in meaningful co-production. Co-production of school readiness training involves demonstrating how feedback from parents continues to inform the offer, creating a positive cycle of parental empowerment.

60. Currently, there are opportunities to continue the commitment of the school readiness programme in Oak Tree whilst also incorporating additional learning from best practice elsewhere and expanding "Getting School Ready" to a wider geographical area. Members noted that the significant value of NTU's position as a neutral coordinating partner had contributed to excellent community engagement in the programme. Replicating the success seen in Oak Tree in other locations and communities was felt to be dependent on supporting and mobilising the intrinsic motivation within schools and communities.

61. Members agreed that it was important to work with communities where there is a collective desire to improve school readiness, good connectivity between services, and good transport links to facilitate attendance at appointments and activities. Members also agreed that the asset-based approach that had been put into place had provided the necessary conditions for successful expansion of future collaborations.

62. An asset-based approach is a way of working that builds on the existing strengths of people and communities to address challenges. This involves recognising the skills, knowledge, connections and potential that already exist within a community. Asset-based approaches to community development harness the internal motivation within a community to tackle challenges and achieve aspirations through community involvement in projects and decisions. In terms of school readiness, asset-based work supports communities to recognise their strengths and put them into use to help children within the community develop the skills they need to prepare them well for school.

Recommendation Six

That consideration be given to how best to further incorporate asset-based approaches into the Council's work to promote school readiness in Nottinghamshire by partnering with local community groups, services and local area coordinators.

63. **Summary of recommendations**

	Recommendation
1	That further work is carried out in engaging with families and community leaders to promote awareness of the importance of children's early years.
2	That a multi-media library of information relevant to parents and families with young children be hosted in a resource hub on the Council's website.
3	That consideration be given to how existing communications with parents at key moments of their child's development provide support that will help families equip children with the skills they need to be as ready as possible for school, and that the Council continues to investigate how these communications can be delivered earlier.
4	That the Council continues to look for further ways to work with partners who have contact with parents-to-be and families with very young children.
5	That consideration be given to how the Council's communications and engagement work might further publicise child-friendly activities that promote the importance of children's early years and promote the take-up of childcare entitlements for vulnerable children.
6	That consideration be given to how best to further incorporate asset-based approaches into the Council's work to promote school readiness in Nottinghamshire by partnering with local community groups, services and local area coordinators.

Acknowledgments

64. The Chairman and members of the review group would like to record their thanks to Irene Kakoullis, Helena Cripps, Mandy Stratford, Sally Penn, and Noel McMenamin for their contributions and insights during the review process. The Chairman and Members are also grateful to Sherrel Dudley who presented valuable information to the review group on behalf of Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, and to Luke Parmenter and Kimberley Simms of Nottingham Trent University for attending and providing valuable information in support of this review.

Other Options Considered

65. None. In accordance with the Constitution of the Council, the recommendations will be submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

66. To comply with the requirements of the Constitution, the findings of a scrutiny review are submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

Statutory and Policy Implications

67. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

68. There are no direct financial implications relating to the recommendations of the report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) That the report be noted.

2) That the recommendations from the scrutiny review of school readiness, as set out in the report, be endorsed and referred to Cabinet for consideration.

Councillor Roger Jackson
Chairman, Place Select Committee

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Constitutional Comments (CM 24/02/2025)

69. The report falls within the terms of reference of the Place Select Committee.

Financial Comments (PAA 06/03/2025)

70. There are no specific financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Minutes of Health Scrutiny Committee Meeting 14 November 2023

Early years and school readiness (2019) - Nottinghamshire Insight

1001 days: From conception to age 2 (2019) - Nottinghamshire Insight

Kindred-Squared-School-Readiness-Report.pdf (kindredsquared.org.uk)

Early Years and Childcare Sector in Nottinghamshire

Integrated Care Strategy 2023_27

Best start in life part 3: the 4 specific areas of learning - GOV.UK

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

- All