

Evaluation of York Shared Foundation Partnerships

Ensuring Continuous and Seamless Provision of Good
Quality Services for Young Children

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

York Shared Foundation Partnerships were established in 2001 to provide structural support for delivering child-care and early years education in each locality. The Local Authority has provided notional costs of administering the partnerships, a small stipend to nominated Qualified Teachers and SENCOs taking overall leadership in each partnership. The Local Authority has also provided the putative costs of training sessions (for example to deliver the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum) and development officers to enhance the quality of provision.

York Children's Services will need to respond to national policy shifts in the early years sector: budgetary constraints; removal of some ring-fencing; downgrading or requirements for Qualified Teachers and Early Years Professionals in all settings; introduction of the Single Funding Formula; emphasis on Children's Centres being managed by the Private, Voluntary and Independent sectors and focusing on vulnerable children; focus on the role of health professionals as front line monitors of vulnerable children's health, development and well-being.

However, some aspects of the York Shared Foundation Partnerships appear to be working well and impacting positively on outcomes for young children and their families in the city.

This evaluation was designed to identify positive aspects as a basis for discussion of the future role of local partnerships and their relationship to other structural and systemic changes in York children's services. The evaluation included a survey of all partnerships, review of documentation related to all partnerships and ranking of 21 partnerships on a rating scale of proficiency. From the rankings four partnerships (one rated as functioning well, two as satisfactory and one as poor) were selected for follow up visits and interviews with sixteen representative professionals about operational aspects of their partnerships. Two senior officers were also interviewed to explore strategic level thinking.

FINDINGS

Findings on partnership proficiency are discussed under six domains. The following charts summaries features of good functioning:

(1) Membership

Partnerships functioned at a good level where the following criteria were in evidence:

- a) Membership represented a range of different settings from the locality.
- b) All local registered settings were included in the partnership, including childminders.
- c) The partnership was of a manageable size with membership no more than 12.
- d) There was evidence of the head teacher or senior management teams' active support for the partnership.

(2) Functionality

Partnerships appeared to be functioning at a good level when the following criteria were met:

- a) Partnerships met on a regular basis, no less than once a term.
- b) The allocated budget was used transparently for the benefit of all partners.
- c) There was effective LA support from the early years development officers and advisory team.
- d) Agendas allocated times at meetings for each partner to share information about their settings.
- e) Action Plans were created showing an equitable distribution of action points so that all partners contributed to the function of partnerships.
- f) Brochures were available for partners and users with details of all partners, including childminder contacts.
- g) There was evidence of a range of venues being used, linked to the involvement of a broad range of partners.
- h) Meetings were timed so that everyone could attend, including childminders; or there was a rotation of meeting times.
- i) Partnership meetings showed evidence of partners confronting and resolving conflicts.

(3) Easing Transitions

Partnerships functioned at a good level where the following criteria were met:

- a) There was evidence in minutes of meetings that smooth transition between settings for all children was highlighted as an important issue.
- b) Scrutiny of agendas showed items when transitions of children were formally discussed.
- c) There was documentation setting out protocols for transitions and systems for sharing information about children at points of transition.
- d) The partnership documentation made reference to York's Transition Toolkit and how it would be used.
- e) There were regular, systematic discussions to ensure that there was joint understanding of and sharing good practice in recording observations and assessment.
- f) There were routine arrangements for staff to visit each other's settings in the term before children were due to make transitions.
- g) There were regular moderation sessions between all partners to agree the evidence required for accurate assessment of children's achievements.

(4) Identifying and Responding to Vulnerable Children

Partnerships functioned at a good level where the following criteria were in evidence:

- a) The partnership had a named SENCO.
- b) The named SENCO was an accredited SENCO.
- c) The partnership meeting agenda showed time allocated for discussion of SEN and vulnerable children.
- d) The SENCO took responsibility for sharing any Special Needs resources fairly for children with special needs and provided transition resources for children who might have been vulnerable.
- e) The SENCO co-ordinated specialist services in the best interest of the child at points of transition.

(5) Ensuring Good Early Learning Experiences

This domain refers to ensuring that the Early Years Foundation Stage is delivered at a high quality and is accessible to all children.

Partnerships functioned at a good level where the following criteria were evident:

- a) There was an identified QTS who attended each meeting.
- b) Partnership meetings always focused on EYFS including planning, assessment and observation records.
- c) Partnerships used common documentation for transition/ planning etc
- d) There were regular opportunities at partnership meetings to share good practice.
- e) There was shared /cascaded training at the partnership meetings for elements of the EYES(for example, Phonics)
- f) There was a shared understanding of young children's development, the EYFS and the needs and requirements for children deemed more vulnerable.
- g) There was evidence in the meetings of a dialogue about the curriculum by practitioners within and across settings acting as critical friends

(6) Partnership with Parents

Partnerships functioned at a good level where the following criteria were in evidence:

- a) Parents/carers were working in mutually supportive relationships within the Shared Foundation Partnerships.
- b) There was recognition that parents/carers were their children's main educators.
- c) There were leaflets to provide parents with information about the partnership.
- d) The Shared Foundation Partnership provided parents with open evenings or workshops to demonstrate how the Early Years Foundation Stage was delivered in different types of settings.
- e) Parents were surveyed on a regular basis to establish if existing partnership arrangements were meeting their childcare requirements.
- f) Parents were asked to contribute ideas about how they would like the partnerships to develop.

KEY THEMES

Key findings were that good partnership functioning was underpinned by:

1 Good Leadership

This may be the head teacher or delegated to a Foundation Stage Co-ordinator, Nursery teacher or Reception class teacher.

2 Respectful Relationships

Where respectful relationships had been nurtured across membership of the partnerships leadership from the school did not leave the PVI sector feeling

dominated by school agendas. Building respectful relationships required sensitivity from all partners over time.

3 Efficient Administration

Features of efficient administration included well structured meeting with a clear agenda recognising all stake holders' interests, clear and agreed minuting of decisions and action points, sensitivity to and clarity about the purpose, timing and venue of meetings. Local Authority financial support for this aspect of partnerships, currently £150 per year, was seen as critical.

4 Information Sharing

Working together to create shared protocols and documentation, adapted to the needs of settings and local providers, was a useful process for sharing values, working practices and beliefs. However, it was seen as useful for the Local Authority to provide guidance so that partners could benefit from what other partnerships had found useful. Information sharing supported the seamless transition of children across settings; but this was complicated by the choice of parents to take up childcare near to their workplace rather than in their own localities.

5 Shared Vision

Strategic rather than operational leadership from the Local Authority was necessary, particularly at the early stages of partnerships' histories, to establish a clear vision of the purpose and function of partnerships. Each partnership needed to develop its own version of this overall vision which was responsive to local community needs and preferences. Sharing the vision with parents was through accessible documentation and 'big events' involving professionals, parents and children enjoying them as a community.

IMPLICATIONS

In the context of national and local policy changes impacting on the structures, systems and funding of early years services, Local Authorities are compelled to think radically about how to respond to the ideological, political and budgetary changes.

It is hoped that this evaluation will provide a starting point for discussion of the shape of York local partnerships in the future, what features might be retained for the benefit of young children and families in the city and of their relationship to revised York Local Authority systems, structures, roles and responsibilities.