

Innovative web-based support for blended childcare incorporating the 30 hour extended entitlement and early education including the 2 Year Old offer

Top Practice Tips

- Work with the Family Information Service (FIS), using its database as the basis of a simple web-based widget
- Agree key information that would be of immediate use to parents and how they could obtain more detailed advice if needed
- Use an information widget as a benefit to local providers and as a way of building a hub brand
- Carry out regular surveys with parents and providers to understand demand and supply in the local market
- Stay small scale at first to assess the capacity and resources implications for the FIS before rolling it out across the authority

Background

One of the goals of Early Learning and Childcare Partnership Hubs is to support parents with their working patterns by offering blended childcare and early education, including the extended 30 hour entitlement and 2YO offer and another is supporting the provision of new childcare places.

The City of York Strategic Hub is taking an innovative approach to meeting both of these goals, through the development of an information widget, a standalone application that can be embedded in third party websites. Information about local demand and possible gaps is a vital tool when it comes to influencing the development of the childcare market and meeting demand through sustainable provision.

HOW

ACTION FOR CHILDREN

WORKS

What was the thinking behind the development of the widget?

“It quickly became clear when looking at availability and flexibility of childcare that parents have difficulty in getting that information at the local level, even if you have a good Family Information Service,” says Barbara Mands, Head of Childcare Strategy at York Council, and Lead of the City of York Strategic Hub. The widget was developed in response to this gap, with the support of the then FIS manager.

What does the widget do?

It is hosted on school and early years provider websites, and allows parents to click on a drop down menu to find childcare in the local area. The menu lists nurseries, playgroups and childminders, gives contact details, and shows if there are any vacancies.

Parents can ring the provider directly or contact the FIS to check the information, and get advice if they have any questions about available options. They can also check what the overall or hourly costs are likely to be.

What are the key benefits of the widget?

“The benefit of the widget is that parents can instantly access key local information,” says Ms Mands. “It is clear and simple to use. In addition, neither the school nor provider has the burden of managing or updating the widget. York FIS manages and updates the underlying data links, and all providers have to do is host it on their website.”

How does the widget help Hubs meet their goals?

“All the Hubs are able to support parents to put blended childcare together using the widget,” says Ms Mands. “In the future it will also help us identify if we have gaps in available provision for parents in the local area of the Hub.”

As well as promoting local childcare businesses, the widget allows providers to develop a relationship with parents, showing the range of childcare options available. “Given the new initiatives for childcare such as the 30 hours entitlement, demand is on the rise, so providers are not going to lose out,” says Ms Mands. “As the widget becomes more well-known we find that providers seek to update information rather than be chased by the FIS.”



Hubs are able to feed local information gathered via the widget back into the FIS, enabling the local authority to have a more robust and holistic understanding of the market as a whole. “But it also supports the goals of the Hubs because they can keep an eye on sufficiency, and do regular surveys of parents’ views on childcare – we have a template they can use to do this,” explains Ms Mands. “This enables them to identify a gap in the supply of places, or limited flexibility, so that can help stimulate additional places.”

Out-of-school club and playgroup Funfishers, for example, assessed parental demand in the area, talked to Hub partners, looked at the waiting lists held by providers and identified a need for two-year-old places. “Because of this, they expanded their two-year-old provision through making use of a mezzanine floor, and now they are full, through meeting an identified need,” says Ms Mands.

What challenges did the Hub face when developing the widget?

The FIS has to maintain the capacity to hold the core information used by the widgets, as well as having someone on hand with the necessary IT skills to support and service them. “The widget links are straightforward to support but these skills are necessary to keep things working,” says Ms Mands. “It is also a constant challenge to get providers to keep occupancy data up to date.”

How can the widget be expanded in the future?

“We are an authority-wide early implementer for the 30 hours, and we want the childcare information widget in every one of the 31 partnerships in the city,” says Ms Mands. “We just have to prioritise FIS resources to support the roll-out, as well as ensure that the FIS can continue to support the information necessary to make local childcare information widgets work.”

