Bristol’s Changing Context

The population of Bristol has grown significantly in the last decade and is becoming increasingly culturally diverse. The number of children aged birth to four has risen by 30% and almost 48% of nursery aged children now identify as ‘non-white’ British, with at least 187 countries of birth represented, 45 religions and 91 main languages spoken. This has been accompanied by a rise in child poverty with 1 in 5 children under 16 now living in low income families and 18% of children aged birth to four years in households in receipt of out of work benefits, compared to 16% nationally.

Nursery Schools and Children’s Centres

Four of Bristol’s twelve Maintained Nursery Schools are responsible for the leadership and management of a network of area based Children’s Centres. Working in partnership with the early years and play sector, (including childminders, PVI settings, nursery and primary schools), Health and Social Care, the Nursery Schools coordinate a universal Children’s Centre offer of integrated early education, health and family support services tailored to the needs of each community. In 2019, 25,000 children under four years of age were registered with a Bristol Children’s Centre and the majority of these families regularly engaged with Children’s Centre services - 77% of children overall, rising to 83% in the 10% most disadvantaged SOA’s. As evidenced in a 2018 survey, Bristol Children’s Centres have a critical role in improving family well-being and mental health, combatting social isolation and loneliness, particularly in the early years of parenthood. The Children’s Centres also make an important contribution to the fight against child poverty and inequality through the provision of inclusive and accessible services that are non-stigmatising and make sense to families.

Food Insecurity

In recent years, the Children’s Centre Family Support Leaders have been becoming increasingly concerned at the numbers of hungry children attending their provision, aware that many young families were experiencing food insecurity, unable to access or afford healthy, nutritious food. Public Health data confirmed this, with evidence that food insecurity could be affecting over 26,000 children in Bristol and neighbouring authorities, equating to approximately 50% of children in the most disadvantaged wards, compared to 0.5% in the most advantaged. The subsequent inequalities in mental and physical health outcomes are stark, with a sixteen year gap in life expectancy between the most and least advantaged wards and a threefold greater incidence of obesity in the most disadvantaged communities. Increasing dependency on food banks can also be demonstrated with 14,500 regular users in the greater Bristol area, including those in work, again leading to high levels of mental anguish.
A more, positive alternative for these families was then sought. The Children’s Centres were already working in close partnership with FareShare and Feeding Bristol (a local charitable organisation) and through their research became aware of an exciting initiative, Food Clubs (Food on our Doorstep), led by the national charity, Family Action. A visit to Manchester then followed in Spring 2019, to observe the Food Clubs in action which led to creative discussions with Family Action about developing the model in Bristol.

The model had been carefully designed by Family Action to be financially self sustaining through partnership working with FareShare. Families pay £1 to become a member and then £3.50 a week for the food, for which they receive approximately £20 of healthy groceries, carefully selected by FareShare South West. The food is delivered to the Children’s Centres by FareShare South West on a weekly basis and volunteers organise it into bags for collection by eligible families. Many of the volunteers are local family members who are able to gain accredited qualifications in Food Hygiene and Volunteering, a valuable step towards employment. In addition, volunteers are reporting an increase in their confidence and sense of agency as responsible and trusted members of their communities.

A Food Club Coordinator and Assistant were recruited by Family Action to oversee the safe management of the clubs with key support from the Children’s Centre staff.

In Bristol it was agreed that families eligible for the Free Early Education Entitlement for two year olds or working with a Family Support Worker would initially be invited to join the Food Clubs. 1,808 two year olds meet this criteria and approximately 70% access the Early Education offer.

Food Club families are able to access a range of linked learning opportunities, including healthy cookery courses, managing family budgets and community fruit and vegetable growing projects - all aimed at empowering families to develop their confidence and skills, independence and community.

The Children’s Kitchen, run by a local award winning chef in partnership with the Early Years Service and Feeding Bristol, is working with children, early years practitioners and families in early years settings to raise awareness of healthy food and growing. This complements the Food Clubs and ensures that staff in Children’s Centres and early years settings have the skills and support needed to give every child a healthy start in life, particularly those experiencing the greatest challenges.

Impact

The first two Food Clubs opened at Children’s Centres in Bristol in the Summer of 2019 and, due to their popularity and success, there are now four across the city with an aspiration for eight more to follow in 2020. Currently approximately two hundred families are active Food Club members and the positive difference that this is making to families’ lives can be seen weekly. Families are engaging in lively conversations about healthy recipes and cooking and one family found that they had been able to turn on their heating for the first time as they were now able to feed the whole family.

It is early days, but it is hoped that gradually the Food Clubs and linked family learning opportunities will help to move families out of food insecurity by strengthening access to healthy, affordable food and improving food knowledge and skills while building resilient, sustainable communities.