

Early Years Reference Group Meeting

Friday 4 December 2020

1. Welcome and introductions

Jane Boulton, Lucy-Anne Bryant, Mark Cawley, Emma Cooke, Jenny Harvey (notes), Russ Martin, John Proctor, Marie Taylor

2. Apologies

Rosemary Collard, Sarah Hawkins, Bid Lilywhite, Debbie Muir, Jane Provis, Claire Shipley, Trudi Surman, Emily Wood

3. Minutes of last meeting (4 November 2020)

The group approved the minutes (those including the addendum) as a true and accurate record.

4. Matters arising

Item 4 – JP confirmed he has still not received any response from MP John Glen. LAB and MT informed the group that Helean Hughes, Director of Education & Skills is meeting with him today to discuss a range of issues including lack of funding to specifically support the EY sector through the pandemic.

Item 5 – LAB and EC confirmed they are continuing to work on the DSC capacity issue with the EY cell.

Item 6 – MT confirmed she has received no response to date relating to her query on waiving of business rates for EY providers but will follow up.

Item 6 – MT confirmed that the remodelling has been completed and will discuss under item 6 of these minutes.

Item 8 – MT forwarded contact details to JB regarding EY representation on the FACT board. JB confirmed she has emailed but has not heard anything back to date.

**ACTION: LAB and EC to continue progressing DSC capacity issue
MT to follow up waiving of business rates for EY sector**

5. Impact of COVID on settings (All)

MT stated that F40 have been meeting with the DfE and have raised the issue of loss of private income for EY providers.

The DfE are now planning regular meetings with local authorities. MT, LAB and Gary Binstead, Head of Commissioning Families & Children recently met with Sharon Muir, DfE representative and relayed their frustration about the lack of additional funding for the EY sector as well as seeking confirmation on Spring 2021 payments and possible funding reductions as a result of fewer numbers.

EC confirmed there had been 5 complete closures this week as a result of Covid-19, and that 59 providers have had a closure of some sort since 1 September 2020. Not all of these 59 have been as a result of a positive case within the provision; a lot are linked to families or members of staff having to self-isolate as an identified person through the track and trace system.

MC queried how many permanent setting closures there had been since 1 September 2020 and EC confirmed there had been 3 - 1 due to planned retirement and 2 as a result of declining numbers over the last few years. EC and LAB confirmed these closures have had little impact on sufficiency in the area.

MT asked the group about the cost pressures associated with a whole provision or bubble closure. All confirmed that the main pressure is loss of private income, costs linked with cancelling food orders at short notice and food wastage, and staff sickness costs. MT asked how a setting would cover a staff member who had to self-isolate and the group confirmed bank staff would be used along with moving other staff members around where possible.

ACTION: EC to confirm the number of children affected by bubble/provider closures

6. Funding Autumn 2020 – paper to Schools Forum (LAB/MT/All)

MT informed the group that a report has been drafted for the next Schools Forum meeting.

MC queried if providers would receive an increase in their hourly rates in 2021/22 due to Wiltshire Council receiving a proportion of £66 million next year as well as a proportion of an additional £44 million discussed by central government last week. MT said funding figures would be confirmed by the DfE around 18-24 December resulting in further remodelling, but she would passport as much funding to EY providers as she possibly could. However, the DfE will need to offer reassurance on funding reductions or minimum funding levels which could impact available funding levels.

LAB confirmed that the Autumn 2020 headcount is in its final stages, and that the local authority will be reviewing the remaining budget and look to redistribute amongst those settings who have had fewer children in Autumn 2020 than in Autumn 2019.

The group discussed a number of possible grant funding options available to providers including the LA Discretionary Grant Fund. JP confirmed this has now been replaced by the ARG fund which the local authority has the discretion to distribute. MT believes this grant would have to last 18 months. MT will update when she has more info.

ACTION: MT to inform the group of business grant funding options when more detail is available.

7. Supporting vulnerable families over Christmas (£15 per child per week)

MT confirmed the funding is an additional £1.1 million grant from central government and has just become available for spending between now and April 2021. 80% of the funding is to be spent on families with the remaining 20% for vulnerable adults.

JP stated that he is aware of a number of providers who do not wish to be involved with distributing this additional funding to vulnerable families. LAB confirmed an additional SNAP survey is being sent out to providers today informing them of the numbers of eligible children they have and the amount of funding that they could receive, and ask if they are happy to distribute the funding via a range of options to the identified families. Providers will be able to opt out if they wish. She confirmed that a large number of providers have already expressed their support in helping their most vulnerable families where possible.

Following discussion with charity accountants, JB expressed concern about the distribution of the funding and queried the legality of it as there is no agreement in place between the Local Authority and providers on handling funds in this way. The group discussed evidence required by the local authority that the funding had been distributed and the potential for fraud. MT and LAB confirmed that there is a huge element of trust and faith involved but that providers will need to indicate their agreement to passport the funding via the survey. They had hoped that

the funding could have been given in food vouchers but this could have precluded some families from being able to access the funding if they didn't have a particular named supermarket in their area. This route ensures the funding goes to the right families and providers could buy food vouchers for a supermarket local to a family.

MT confirmed the £15 per week is based on the free school meals funding that schools receive, and projected numbers have been used to calculate this weekly amount. The grant needs to be fully spent by 31 March 2021, with funding being paid to providers next week (week commencing 7 December 2020), which ideally will be passported out to identified families by the end of the following week (18 December 2020), this is based on schools term times. If a provider is unable to contact a family within the set timescale, i.e. due to self-isolation, then providers are to get the funding to the family at the next available opportunity.

JB asked about the alternative options in the event of funding not being distributed to families via EY providers. MT confirmed that the Revenues and Benefits Team operate a local welfare provision fund, and this route could be used to distribute the funding to a smaller number of families. The local authority will know those providers able to distribute the funding and those who aren't by Monday 6th December and will then look at how the funding can get to the families in areas not covered by EY providers.

The issue of fuel payments was raised, and LAB and MT confirmed that this will be reviewed in January 2021.

MC asked for a list of Wiltshire foodbanks to be added to the next EY newsletter. RM confirmed he has this list and will forward to LAB. LAB also reminded the group that Healthy Start Vouchers are also available via an online application form, and currently no Health Visitor sign off is required as a result of Covid-19.

JB raised the issue of some eligible Pupil Premium (PP) children who have stayed on at Springboard due to Covid-19, but only schools are entitled to this funding. The children also don't qualify for the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP). LAB will raise this issue with Paul Redford as it was felt that as the children were in attendance at Springboard then they should be eligible for EYPP.

RM informed the group that Spurgeons are offering a £25 food delivery (main meals for a family of 4) from Asda or Tesco to referred struggling families with a child aged 0-5 years old. In addition, as Spurgeons have been unable to deliver group sessions, they are offering assistance to families in accessing health and safety home equipment such as stair gates.

ACTION: RM to forward list of Wiltshire foodbanks to LAB for inclusion in next EY newsletter.

LAB to raise PP funding issue with Paul Redford

8. AOB

JP and MC raised the issue that they have been told to remain open over the Christmas break. EC and LAB confirmed that they do not want people working through the whole period. It is simply to have a member of staff check emails once a day (once a setting has closed for the break) to see if a Covid-19 notification has been received from PHE. The main concern is around the few days after a setting has closed (and maybe a few days before reopening) during which time a PH or family notification might be received, and the setting would need to confirm close contacts and to be aware that this could affect staffing in the new year.

ACTION: None

9. Next meeting.

The next meeting will be scheduled for Tuesday 12th January 1pm – 2.30pm. A Microsoft Teams meeting request will be emailed out.