

Early Years Reference Group Meeting

Tuesday 12 January 2021

1. Welcome and introductions

Gary Binstead, Jane Boulton, Lucy-Anne Bryant, Mark Cawley, Rosemary Collard, Emma Cooke, Jenny Harvey (notes), Sarah Hawkins, Russ Martin, John Proctor, Claire Shipley, Marie Taylor, Emily Wood.

2. Apologies

Bid Lilywhite and Trudi Surman.

3. Minutes of last meeting (4 December 2020)

The group approved the minutes as a true and accurate record.

4. Matters arising

Item 4 - DSC capacity issues. This was a pre-lockdown 3 issue with pupils being held back from school and not receiving funding. LAB will look into as the issue is still ongoing.

Item 4 - Waiving of business rates. *After the meeting, MT followed up local discretion around business rates with the Director of Resources. Their view is that central government should be supporting with relief and it's not for local government to do so. This has been the case in Scottish government.*

Item 5 – Confirmation of number of children affected by bubble/provider closures. These figures as at December 2020 have since been superseded. On Monday 11th January 2021, LAB/EC reported that there were 9 bubble/provider closures that day.

Item 7 – Pupil Premium (PP) funding issue. LAB reported that this had been discussed with Paul Redford, and affected children were confirmed as meeting the criteria and therefore eligible for the funding.

ACTION: LAB to look into DSC capacity issue

5. Impact of COVID on settings (All)

New lockdown

LAB reported that bubble/provider closures are increasing. Overall, the group reported a mixed impact across the county with positive child infections in some areas having an impact on staffing levels. Some settings are full and not experiencing any fluctuating attendance levels, whilst others are operating at 50% capacity as parents are choosing not to send their children at the moment. DSCs are in the main full, with one provider experiencing reduced numbers.

Those offering out of school provision are experiencing low numbers. They opened to support key worker school provision but are running at a loss even with minimum staff levels. Some providers haven't opened up all their after-school provision, others have made the decision not to open, and others are charging 25% retainer fees for children not attending to keep the provision open. LAB has highlighted this issue with the DfE along with its effects long term as the pandemic and lockdown progress.

The issue of financial assistance for after school provision was raised as some providers have struggled to successfully apply for support from central government. This definitely appears to be the case when a provider owns and operates more than one setting.

DfE advice

The current guidance from central government is for all early years provision to remain open for all children. Wiltshire Council was in communication with the DfE and local MPs last week expressing local thoughts and views, and their response was set out in the Early Years newsletter emailed to all providers on Monday 11th January. LAB reported that whilst transmissions are generally low within the sector, Wiltshire is surrounded by a number of local authorities with very high rates of cases, so we need to be prepared.

Current government advice is that local authority funding will be calculated and paid on Spring 2021 census data. If there is a considerable drop in figures, then the DfE will work with the local authority. Where a provider has had to close in line with PHE advice, then Early Years Entitlement funding will continue to be paid. Where a provider voluntarily chooses to close with no PHE reason, then Early Years Entitlement funding will cease. Some settings across the county have voluntarily made the decision to close. Wiltshire Council and central government need to ensure the sustainability of the sector and its providers.

EW confirmed that there was no need for providers to send in copies of signed Parent Declaration forms for the census/headcount exercise this term. If a provider is unable to get a form signed by a parent, then an email from the parent expressing their intention to access funded hours (and the number per week) at the provision will be sufficient.

JP informed the group about a recent article in Nursery World by Children's Minister, Vicky Ford stating that the EY sector would be able to access the rapid lateral flow tests, and he asked when these would be available to Wiltshire providers. EC confirmed that no timescale has been released as to when this will be rolled out and there is currently no DfE guidance behind the announcement. LAB and EC confirmed the updated vaccination priority list will be published on 13th January 2021. *Post meeting note – Plans are being developed to offer testing to early years staff.*

ACTION: None

6. Funding options (MT/All)

MT informed the group about the 'COMF' grant which started in November 2020 and is available to local authorities to support the containment of Covid 19. Wiltshire Council has been given £5 million based on £2 per head of the population for each month the local authority was in Tier 2 and higher allocations since being in national lockdown. What is not clear is how long this funding will continue for.

MT successfully submitted a bid for £1 million on behalf of the Early Years sector as they have not received any national targeted support for the loss of private income since the pandemic started in 2020. The viability of the sector has been adversely affected as a result of the 2, 3 and 4 year old grant not being able to support unfunded children. The grant has been split into three suggested elements:

- A) to support providers private losses when a bubble bursts;
- B) to support settings in the event of continued staff absence;
- C) to support settings to purchase PPE and increased cleaning.

The group discussed the details of each suggestion, and GB asked the group to consider what they wanted and what would be reasonable in terms of thresholds or flexibility albeit with a limited amount of funding available. MT reiterated that providers would need to ensure they were compliant with the guidance on only accessing one government relief scheme, i.e. staff furlough scheme or access COMF funding to cover lost income.

JB queried whether DSCs would be eligible for the COMF funding as their charity funding is the same as another provider's private income. MT/GB will look into this further, but if not, a hardship route could be possible due to not being able to fund raise. JP mentioned that there are currently other grants available to charitable organisations.

Discussion points raised for each of the three suggested elements were:

- Ai) If a bubble burst, then this element would fund the bubble/setting closure duration for all affected children and their normal attended hours.
- Aii) £15 per session for an OOSC session was considered quite high, so MT will remodel at £10.
- Aiii) Perhaps match what the providers would normally charge rather than a flat rate for each provider; most fees, on the whole, are slightly lower than those suggested for each age range.
- Aiv) Limit the number of applications a provider can submit.
- Av) Consider retrospective payments by dividing the funding into phases to deal with increasing numbers of closures post-Christmas, i.e. Nov-Dec, Jan-Feb, Feb-Mar. The actual number of applications will be known at the end of the phase and the funding could be shared ensuring everyone receives an amount.
- Avi) There could be significant demand on this element in the coming weeks if cases continue to increase. No one knows what future bubbles will burst and what the size of those bubbles will be.
- Bi) All agreed that strict caveats linked to Covid 19 would need to be applied to this element.
- Bii) Fund the gap between the furloughed amount and the 100% costs of employing that person (not to be passed onto individual employees).
- Biii) The call on element A (bubble bursts) could impact this element, as well as the impact of 'long Covid'.
- Ci) All agreed this payment should be based on the total number of children registered to attend the provision at a particular point in time. It is to be available to **all** early years and childcare providers.
- Cii) All agreed that the number of children thresholds should be changed to 1-8, 9-30 and 31+ attracting the same scaled amounts as detailed. JB felt that from a SEND perspective the numbers basis was quite harsh, and that DSCs should receive the top amount.
- Ciii) LAB confirmed there would be a question in tomorrow's survey (Wednesday 13th January) to capture this data from providers

ACTION: MT to remodel the COMF grant funding based on points raised by the group – this will then be rolled out and the PPE/cleaning payments made ASAP

7. Budget 2021/2022 and funding rates (MT)

MT had circulated her Early Years Block 21-22 update report January 2021 (along with Appendices 1, 2 and 3) to the group prior to the meeting. MT explained that whilst nationally the rates were increased for 2-year olds by 8p and 3&4-year olds by 6p, it was not quite possible to pass this on in full to the sector. MT consulted with JP and MC over the Christmas break, and the recommended proposal of passporting the full 8p for 2-year olds (increase to £5.48 per hour) and 5p for 3&4 year olds (increase to £4.25 per hour) was agreed by the group.

MC queried when the sector would benefit from the national 8p increase award from 2019/2020. MT confirmed that 2p of this increase had been passed on to the sector, but the rest was unaffordable.

ACTION: None

8. Charging for mealtimes – 2-year olds (MC/All)

The group discussed the issue of charging, and all agreed that there should be consistency across the sector. The DfE guidance allows a provider to charge for a lunch, however there is no obligation for a parent to pay for a lunch when only Early Years Entitlement hours are being accessed (this is the same guidance for 3&4 year olds). Providers should use their discretion when charging the more economically vulnerable children and families. Parents should be allowed to provide their child with a healthy lunch box.

ACTION: None

9. AOB

Ofsted visits - JP stated that Ofsted will be starting assurance visits from 18 January 2021. As current DfE guidance states no visitors, JP asked what the advice for providers would be. EC/LAB confirmed that in the inspector phone call the day before, providers should go through and question risk assessment and control systems. EC confirmed that they would be non-graded visits, and Ofsted would want copies of the provider's risk assessment. LAB to put item in next newsletter reflecting this.

Funding Spring 2021 - LAB confirmed the guidance. If a provider voluntarily closes, Early Years Entitlement funding will cease. If a provider closes on PHE instruction, Early Years Entitlement funding will be paid for all children for their registered funded hours. If a provider is open and operating at full capacity for all children, but parents choose not to attend in the current circumstances, Early Years Entitlement will be paid for these children for their registered funded hours. If a provider voluntarily reduces their capacity to keyworker/vulnerable children only, Early Years Entitlement will only be paid for actual children attending. There is an issue where some EY setting staff are preferring to keep their children and home and are therefore not coming to work. EC confirmed this would be an internal setting HR issue. JP stated this had been known and understood by the sector for some time and opening / closing decisions should have taken this into account.

DAF funding - JB asked when the next opportunity would be for providers to claim this funding and when would it be paid. LAB confirmed that this would be shortly, and she will progress after the meeting.

EYPP funding - JH confirmed that Autumn 2020 EYPP funding is in the process of being recalculated, and any further payments due to providers will be made by end of January 2021.

Establishment Portal - JH confirmed that the all year round option in the new Establishment Portal is still not operational.

Children's Centres - RM informed the group that Children's Centres are still offering online delivery of services and activities if families require them. Some are also trialling first aid

online for children and accidents; spaces are limited but anyone can contact their local Children's Centre.

ACTION: LAB to put Ofsted visit item in next newsletter

LAB to look into DAF funding for Spring 2021

LAB to share information about first aid activities being offered by Children's Centres with Social Care

10. Next meeting

The next meeting will be scheduled for 2nd February 2021, 1-2.30pm. A Microsoft Teams meeting request will be emailed out.