

Early Years Reference Group Meeting

Tuesday 23 February 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, Jane Provis, Marie Taylor, Emily Wood

2. Apologies

Bid Lilywhite, Debbie Muir, Trudy Surman, Claire Shipley

3. Minutes of last meeting (12 January 2021)

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

4. Matters arising

Matters arising Item 4 - DCS capacity issue – This has been discussed with Matt Look, Senior Commissioner for Special Schools and various solutions are being looked into. The bottleneck appears to be around resource bases places. Some children are outgrowing DSC provision as they should be in school now, and all agreed that lessons needed to be learnt from this situation.

Matters arising Item 4 – JP referred to MT's post-meeting update regarding the Director of Resources response to business rate waiving. He felt that this was just the view of the Director of Resources rather than fact. JP and MC said that previous government guidance has been that local government were to take the decision on waiving business rates for nurseries.

ACTION: None

5. Impact of COVID on settings (All)

Routemap out

Wiltshire's peak was in January 2021, and the number of cases since then are in decline.

EC informed the group that testing is part of a wider toolbox to reduce community transmission, and it is the local authority's hope that early years settings will be included in testing plans, but confirmation is still awaited. EC confirmed there is currently 1 setting closure. LAB confirmed early years settings are not transmitting the virus, it is coming in from local communities. JP queried his Wilton site closure details, but EC knew nothing about it.

DfE advice

Government updates will be ongoing for the immediate term. All settings are to continue to remain open, testing and vaccination information have been updated, and an update on wrap around care is expected in the coming days.

The group asked about merging of bubbles in wrap around care, and EC advised that the guidance is still very much to remain within bubbles. These can be within the same school, so mixed age groups, but they shouldn't be mixed across different schools and early years settings.

LAB informed the group that both the sector and local authority are starting to prep for the Easter holidays. There has been 1 formal complaint received by the council about the lack of childcare. A childminder solution was offered to this parent. However, the parent wanted

provision on their school site but as very few parents had requested the provision, there was no financial justification for the childcare provider to operate. All agreed that there appeared to be an issue with parental expectation about provision.

MC confirmed he received a reply to his correspondence with Michelle Donelan and an online meeting was arranged just before the February half term break to discuss holiday provision on behalf of the sector. MC said that providers wanted to deliver holiday care but financially weren't able to. LAB informed the group that she had fed back in last week's DfE survey that this part of the sector needed funding support. GB, LAB and EC are meeting with DfE next week to discuss this area.

MT and LAB confirmed that the COMF funding scheme will be impacted by provider closures as a result of increased testing. Consequently, they have discussed the current parameters of the scheme and will be adjusting slightly. There will also be a Contingency/Hardship funding element available, and LAB will confirm further details.

There have been 36 applications to date for Lost Private Income, although LAB confirmed that at least a further 30 are expected before the application closing date of 22 March 2021. Funding will then be calculated and distributed to all eligible early years providers by the end of March. This is also the same with the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable staff applications.

MT asked the group if the scheme needed to be adapted at all to accommodate the possible surge in closures as a result of increased testing. MT confirmed £5 million had been received by Wiltshire Council as a whole, although it had been hoped there would be more funding arriving. MT reiterated that the funding still needs to be spent under the terms and conditions of the grant. All agreed that it would be prudent to wait until end of financial year for applications, and then the available funding could be allocated to applicants, prioritising first bubble/ setting closures if all were unaffordable within the estimate.

SH shared that from her personal experience with her group of settings, it would be better to find out whether someone is positive to reduce the number of setting closures.

RC asked how would a provider go about claiming for long term sick members of staff, LAB advised to email into the EY inbox (earlyyears@wiltshire.gov.uk) and LAB would email an application form.

**ACTION: JP to email Wilton site closure details to EC to take forward
RC to email EY inbox for Long Term Sick Employees application form**

6. Testing (All)

EC confirmed that community asymptomatic testing centres (rapid lateral flow testing) opened in Devizes last week, Salisbury this week, and Trowbridge and Chippenham will be opening shortly.

Home testing kits will be rolled out to PVI settings, although the DfE have confirmed that this doesn't include childminders. LAB and EC are contacting DfE to find out why this is the case, and how we can get childminders included in the testing rollout. No formal start date for the rollout has been confirmed as yet, and Public Health have been contacted to find out how the rollout will be implemented. Guidance is being emailed to the sector today, and training is currently being developed on how to use the testing kits. The rapid lateral flow kits are not as reliable as the PCR kits with a large margin of error. However, they are just one tool within a larger toolkit.

EC confirmed that some schools have independently chosen to give their on-site nursery provision access to testing kits they have received, but EC confirmed that the local authority is unable to regulate this distribution.

EC reiterated to the group that testing is voluntary, and members of staff cannot be forced to take a test and need to be made aware of this. Everyone needs to be informed that these are home tests and it important that they are carried out at home, not on site. Providers will have to trust their staff to carry out the tests and be truthful about their results.

JB raised the possibility that some staff might want remuneration for carrying out a work task in their own time. EC advised setting management to have the testing conversation with all their staff and that the tests themselves only take a few minutes to perform.

ACTION: None

7. DAF funding (All)

In an email to the group prior to the meeting, JB raised the issue of the changing of Term's 1 and 2 scheduled DAF payments. EW confirmed that the rollout of the EYES Establishment Portal had been a little challenging and that setting up access for Springboard had been difficult, and only resolved just before the Autumn 2020 headcount window closed. Therefore, JH manually entered the Springboard headcount.

JB pointed out that DSCs need to ensure that when putting packages together for children, they know what funding will be in place for them. Also, some DLA applications are incredibly lengthy and are works in progress; changing timescales can be problematic for providers. JB confirmed that discussion with all other DSC's highlighted they had experienced similar situations.

**ACTION: EW to call JB to discuss DAF funding situation for Springboard
EW to relook at DAF funding for all DSCs**

8. EYPP and Better 2Gether Funding Holiday Support

In an email to the group prior to the meeting, JB raised the issue of the recent February half term support funding and late confirmation of eligible EYPP. LAB appreciated that at the time of the Christmas and February half term holiday support rollout, the local authority didn't have the names of eligible children for providers. Providers were requested to count the number of vulnerable children who were possibly eligible for EYPP. If this caused problems, a provider can opt out of any future funding distribution. Currently, Easter 2021 will be last term this funding will be available. Providers will be sent a list with eligible names week commencing 15 March in readiness for the Easter holiday funding rollout. Some EYPP applications under the Universal Credit criteria will require additional proof to be provided by the parent.

JB enquired about funding for those school aged children who aren't currently in school so don't qualify for PP, but then due to their age also don't qualify for EYPP.

ACTION: JB to send names of school aged children to LAB for checking

9. AOB

JP fed back to the group about a job centre work scheme he is currently involved with getting people into the Early Years sector. 11 potential names were forwarded to him, and 8 have booked on an induction course. The next step is for all candidates to be interviewed; JP knows nothing about the individuals and candidate quality will be known after interview. A review meeting will be held on 17th March, and a possible communications strategy will be put in place if the whole process is deemed successful.

ACTION: LAB to put item in next newsletter promoting scheme.

10. Next meeting

The next meeting will be scheduled for 27 April 2021, 1-2.30pm. A Microsoft Teams meeting request will be emailed out.