

**Early Years Reference Group Meeting
Monday 8 January 2024**

1. Welcome and introductions

Lyssy Bolton (LB), Jane Boulton (JB), Lucy-Anne Bryant (LAB), Emma Cooke (EC), Jackie Day (JD), Emma Egan (EE), Charlotte Forester (CF), Jenny Harvey (JH) (notes), Sarah Hawkins (SH), Julia Honeywell (JHo), Kirsty Merrifield (KM), Marie Taylor (MT), Emily Wood (EW), Karen Venner (KV), Naomi Wright (NW), Kerry Yeates (KY)

2. Apologies

Debbie Muir, Emma Osmund

3. Minutes of last meeting (29 September 2023)

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

4. Matters arising

Point 6 EY supplementary grant – to be discussed as a separate agenda point in the meeting.

Point 7 – Parent Declaration form/Consent for 30 hours form. EW appreciates the duplication between these 2 documents it is duplication. New paperwork will be rolled out in April 2024 for the new financial year.

EE queried whether the forms could be changed to cover the school year. EW stated that the forms are tied to the financial year but will look into whether it could be adjusted to cover a longer period of time.

KY asked if the new form would incorporate the codes for the newly eligible 2 year olds. EW confirmed there will be a section on the form for eligibility codes covering both 2 year olds and 3&4 year olds, and that all entitlement codes will be referred to as eligibility codes.

Point 8 – Wraparound childcare and Safeguarding report. EC will be sending a slightly adjusted version out as part of the local authority's duty.

Point 9 – FACT Operational Board representation and System of Excellence group. EW confirmed that she had passed on CF's name to be part of the System of Excellence group but will follow this up as CF has not yet received any communication.

Point 10 – Chairperson role. LAB said the group needed to have a Vice Chair. JB offered, and this was approved by the group.

Point 11 – Schools Forum Early years representative - KV was unable to attend the last Schools Forum meeting but will be at the next one. MT will contact KV to organise a date for her induction.

Point 12 – Tax-free childcare. Social media has been used to promote the Tax Free Childcare scheme, and all provider representatives at the meeting were encouraged to continue sharing these with their families.

ACTION: EW to develop the Parent Declaration form

5. EY funding – update on extended EYE (LAB)

LAB confirmed there is capital funding available for EYE. A survey has gone out to the sector but there has only been a 48% response rate so far. Survey returns need to be submitted by this coming Friday in readiness for a meeting with the DfE on the 22nd which will be attended by Nicola Harris and JH.

If the sector is unable to provide additional spaces, has insufficient staff/suitably qualified staff or unsuitable buildings for expansion, then evidence is needed to feedback to central government. Providers can also lobby their local MPs to make them more aware of the recruitment and retention situation.

EC attended a Health Visitor forum attended by health visitors and nursery nurses in Wiltshire and informed them all about the different types of childcare and the Early Years Entitlement and its expansion. JB informed the group that she has already received several phone calls from health visitors wanting to have conversations about inclusion rather than referrals.

A few members of the groups were experiencing problems accessing the survey, so EW said she would resend. JHo asked what responses had been submitted from the YMCA nurseries. SH asked the same question of the TnB nurseries. EW said she would check.

LAB confirmed 7 expressions of interest for capital funding had been received so far. There is £885,000 available.

LAB confirmed a new officer will be starting on 1 March 2024 to work with and support the teams. Gemma is currently employed by a Hampshire setting.

ACTION: EW to resend surveys to group members and check submitted responses for YMCA and TnB nurseries

6. Wrap around childcare offer (LAB)

LAB confirmed the local authority is waiting for the DfE to provide the data in an Excel format so that the data can be manipulated. There is £220k capital money.

Expression of Interest forms will soon be sent as well as a SNAP survey. The funding is purely for the expansion of places and is not seeking to duplicate or cease anything currently in place. In terms of SEND children, transport funding covers the normal school day so before or after school attendance is not covered.

LB asked LAB to please remember schools with resources bases.

ACTION: None

7. SENIF (EC)

EC shared a PowerPoint presentation with the group.

ISF was taken over by EC approximately 1 year ago, and it has now been moved over to the LiquidLogic system to enable more detailed data and expenditure analysis.

All applications go through a robust process and are assessed by a panel; Spring 2024 applications are currently being finalised. Applications have tended to be higher in the west of the county than in the east.

Applications appear to 'peak' in the year before a child goes to school, with the majority showing within the 3-4 years old age range. However, there are increasing numbers coming in for 2 year olds, and it is expected there will be an increase in the under 2 year olds because of the expanded entitlements.

The budget is £358,000 plus a further £180,000 to provide 15 hours only for 3&4 year olds. EC stated that they are trying to be accountable and recoup unused funding from early years providers for children who move from settings.

Charlotte Forester joined the meeting at 1.40pm.

EC confirmed data analysis will continue to be shared with the group as it evolves, and EC is looking to bring SENIF into budget.

EW asked if there was any difference between ISF and SENIF; EC confirmed they were the same thing. Nationally it is referred to as Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF), in Wiltshire it is called Inclusion Support Fund (ISF).

EC and LAB both apologised for the delays in all the payments that have recently been made to early years providers such as ISF and Early Years Entitlement. There have been issues with the rollout of the new Oracle system which have been beyond the control of the team. MT was thanked for pushing through the payments.

KV expressed frustration at not receiving BACS remittances as she is unable to reconcile her accounts. MT informed the group that providers should now be receiving BACS remittances. MT suggested that the payment spreadsheet could be adapted by someone with macro experience to send out the payment schedule with an email at the end of the year. EW said she will look to see what is possible with the payment spreadsheet. MT will have a chat with Accounts Payable to see if anything can be done.

JH confirmed that Christmas 2023 FSM holiday support payments have still not been received by early years providers. These have been chased with Accounts Payable but there has been no response.

ACTION: MT and EW to look into back BACS remittances
MT and EW to look at the payment spreadsheet with a view to creating a payment schedule and email at the end of the year for early years providers
EC to keep providing up to date analysis to the group

8. Budget monitoring (MT)

MT reported that she was forecasting an underspend based on take up data. Any underspend will transfer to the reserve at year end.

In terms of 3&4 year olds, there are 374 fewer children attending than budgeted (based on census), whilst for 2 year olds, there are 720 instead of the budgeted 664 which is good news

There is currently an underspend on the supplementary rates. MT is unsure why this is exactly as the funding has been passported in full to early years providers. MT will investigate.

ISF has overspent significantly based on demand increasing.

If there is a small underspend on EYPP and/or DAF, this will be recouped by the DfE next year (ringfenced grant).

There is an underspend on Early Years central expenditure due to vacancies within the team.

Whilst the budget is underspent, MT reassured the group that there is nothing to be concerned about.

ACTION: MT to investigate supplementary rates underspend

9. Annual consultation on 2024/25 EY Entitlement rates for providers (MT)

MT informed the group that there will be a larger group of children eligible for funding moving forwards.

In 2023/24, the budget is £32 million, whilst in 2024/25, the budget will be £53 million. The DfE will update the 24/25 indicative allocation next year and the local authority will not find out about any budget changes until May/June 2024.

MT has gone through all the changes to the guidance from 1 April 2024. SENIF is being extended to all eligible groups as is EYPP and DAF, and the DfE have consulted about the centrally retained percentage. MT thought this would have been reduced, but the DfE have decided to maintain this figure at 95%.

MT shared her options workings with the group. There are a lot more funding rate options this year, although not all are affordable.

There hasn't been as much of a pull on the deprivation and rurality supplements this year so the budgets for these have been reduced for 2024/25.

The budgets for EY commissioning, Finance, Early Years Entitlement and Equality teams have increased because of 2 staff pay awards and staff requirements to roll out the new entitlements and statutory duties to the larger cohort of children.

The ISF budget has increased due to rising numbers of children with additional needs. EC said data on these needs being addressed in EY settings will be available to MT when she needs this.

EYPP and DAF are based on actual numbers and are to be set at DfE levels.

The majority of early years provider income comes from the 3&4 year olds so MT has tried to protect this hourly rate and bring other age ranges down. However, the local authority is bound by the DfE's 95% ruling for each individual funding stream.

Of all the options, options 10, 11, 12, and 13 offer a balanced budget with a reasonable contingency (£50k). MT welcomed feedback on the different options from the group and asked if any of the rates in options 10, 11, 12 or 13 were unreasonable.

Some members stated the rate for 3&4 year old funding was lower than expected and was not financially viable, whilst others felt the rate was higher than anticipated and therefore doable. Most members agreed that protecting the 3&4 year old funding rate was important.

MT confirmed that the supplementary grant was a one off, and that rates would be going down after the 6 month period. 42 local authorities are in this position, including Wiltshire. Something was used in the funding formula that made Wiltshire not score highly enough.

CF queried what could be done with 'excess' funding in setting where the rate paid the local authority is higher than that charged to parents. MT advised to look at staff costs for existing and new staff and look at training / resources budgets as the authority is not expecting providers to increase parent rates. LB and KV supported the point about not attaching salary increases to a particular age group/room; it would be better to attach any increase to specific roles, responsibilities, and qualifications.

A few of the group raised concerns about increasing costs and the pressures faced by providers such as the 10% increase in living wage, increases to business rates, better wages available elsewhere, staff recruitment and retention. They felt it was a bleak and worrying time ahead. LAB and MT both said they appreciated that everyone had financial challenges with cost of living increases as well as the minimum and/or living wage increases.

Several of the group queried the higher rate being allocated to the under 2s and asked if this money could be moved. MT advised that the local authority could apply to the Secretary of State for a disapplication. However, she felt that this could send the wrong message.

EE queried if the under 2 year old rate is higher than what is generally charged, and the rates for 2 year olds and 3&4 year olds is under what is charged, could the funding be allocated to the older age groups? MT confirmed the DfE 95% ruling. EC commented that whatever option is chosen, some providers who will be happy and others who will be unhappy. EE asked if providers had the choice of whether to offer the 2 year old entitlement or not? EW confirmed it was provider choice.

LB suggested that government is recognising the vulnerability of settings looking after lower age ranges and thought it would be wrong to spread the budget through all age ranges.

CF requested clarity on additional charges that providers can make as different local authorities have different approaches. EW confirmed that these charges are completely at a provider's discretion but must be optional for parents. CF asked if this would force higher increases in the middle of the day. EW and EC stated that lots of different business models are being developed.

The DfE wording is slightly ambiguous, but it must be a voluntary charge. The local authority could be called to account by the Ombudsman as the funding should be free at the point of delivery and the charges could be viewed as unreasonable with the local authority being told it isn't adhering to the national guidance. LAB advised that there are those parents who are currently paying for a place who will soon get it funded and we suspect they will be happy to pay extra legitimate charges. EW said transparency of charges is key so parent contracts must reflect this, so they are aware of what they are signing up to. Again, this is a topic that providers can lobby their MPs about.

LB commented about the perception of a pause by Ofsted offered to schools but not EY settings. If others felt the same about the EY sector being treated differently, then she would be happy to make representation. CF asked if EY inspectors had received mental health training as this was the main issue. EC felt that this was more targeted at schools, and that her team always supported the wellbeing of practitioners. She advised that her team welcomed open conversations with providers. KV shared the fact that her experience with Ofsted has not been positive and felt that there was no duty of care to settings, and they were hypocritical. It was felt that this pause should apply to EY settings as well as schools.

JHo raised the issue of business rates and queried if Wiltshire Council would be prepared to look at renegotiating leases – business rates. MT confirmed providers would need to approach Property Services for initial discussion.

KY commented that business rates do crucify settings as they have a huge impact on budgets. She felt that EY settings are penalised and there is no relief available. MT advised that there is nothing to stop early years providers lobbying local MPs especially as Wales and Scotland have reduced rates for EY settings. LAB confirmed this topic had been fed back to government.

After discussion about all the different options, LAB asked the group whether the recommended option 13 is the one MT will present to Schools Forum on Thursday 18th January 2024. The majority of group members present agreed.

ACTION: MT to recommend EY funding rates option 13 to Schools Forum on 18th January 2024

10. AOB

JD expressed her thanks to EC for speaking to health visitors about EY funding.

ACTION: None

11. Date of next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for Friday 22nd March 2024 at 9.30am.