

**Early Years Reference Group Meeting
Friday 7 June 2024**

1. Welcome and introductions

Lyssy Bolton (LB), Lucy-Anne Bryant (LAB) (Chair), Emma Cooke (EC), Jenny Harvey (JH) (notes), Kirsty Merrifield (KMe), Debbie Muir (DM), Kai Muxlow (KM), Emily Wood (EW), Ben Stephens (BS)

2. Apologies

Lucy Bracher (LB), Jackie Day (JD), Emma Egan (EE), Charlotte Forester (CF), Lisa Fryer (LF), Sarah Hawkins (SH), Julia Honeywell (JHo), Emma Osmund (EO), Margaret Ritson (MR), Marie Taylor (MT), Karen Venner (KV)

3. Safety Valve Arrangement

Our guest speaker, Ben Stevens, Inclusion, SEND and AP Transformation Lead, gave a presentation to the group on the SEND Transformation plan (Safety Valve Arrangement). A copy of the presentation is attached.

One of the key drivers for the Safety Valve Arrangement is the high deficit in the high needs block. Wiltshire Council needed to find out and understand why there has been significant growth in this block. There has been a sizable increase in the number of EHCP's in the younger age cohort (early years). Wiltshire Council needs to reflect on inappropriate EHCP referrals and placements and whether there are alternatives to EHCP for these children. In some cases, Family Support might be a more appropriate route, and the service is looking at advertising these more to increase awareness of the alternatives.

BS confirmed that if Wiltshire Council were able to reduce the deficit to £137.3 million, central government have agreed to pay £67 million towards the total, with Wiltshire Council paying the remaining £70.3 million.

DM commented that since Inclusion Support Funding (ISF) changed, it is more accessible to EY settings. It has had a huge impact in her setting and thanked EC and her team. LAB stated that ISF investment at the right time is making a difference, and DM and her setting is an example of this.

KMe queried the 2 new roles in EC's team. EC confirmed the roles were Early Years Pathway Navigators who will be focusing on pre-EHCP children, looking at what other routes could be sought before going down the EHCP route.

LB raised the issue of access to additional professionals and multi-disciplinary approaches and routes. LB also mentioned the Bristol evidence-based training model and changing pedagogy. The Hanen Program for early childhood educators is called 'Learning Language and Loving it' and is being offered by Bristol & Beyond Stronger Practice Hub ([LEARNING LANGUAGE, \(A4 Poster\) \(beyth.co.uk\)](https://www.beyth.co.uk)). There is an event on 4th July 2024.

DM queried whether there were any plans to deliver further BLAST training. EC confirmed that there was a large rollout of this training a while ago. Retraining is approximately £20 per person so is affordable and accessible for settings to pay themselves.

There was a discussion on how this important information could be shared with the sector. EW suggested a communications package including a presentation recording could be put together with further periodic updates. LAB suggested an article about the Safety Valve Arrangement in the EY newsletter, and EC suggested inviting BS to the next Early Years Managers meeting.

**ACTION: EC to invite BS to the next Early Years Manager meeting
LAB to include an article on the Safety Valve Arrangement in the next Early Years Newsletter**

4. Minutes of last meeting (22 March 2024)

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

ACTION: None

5. Matters arising (MT)

Item 5 – Completed

Item 6 – Capital funding expansion. LAB apologised for not sending the criteria to LB; this will be done.

Item 6 – Capital funding expansion. LAB will provide LB with additional information on the Forest area.

Item 8 – Local Provider Agreement. JH confirmed member feedback received was fed into the Agreement, which was then issued to the sector just ahead of the Easter break.

ACTION: LAB to deal with Capital funding expansion items

6. Budget Monitoring

In the absence of MT, JH shared a Finance Update report produced by MT with the group. A copy of the report is attached.

The outturn for the Early Years block 2023/24 showed an underspend of £1.162million. The DfE will shortly do a post-year adjustment which will recover some of this figure. The outturn position for Revenue Monitoring 2023/24 showed a deficit of 452 in the number of PTE children taking up the Early Years Entitlement. This is the main driver of the underspend and is due to a drop in the birth rate. The largest age cohort affected is the three/four year olds.

Both LB and DM left the meeting at approximately 11.45am

KMe queried the low birth rate mentioned for the drop in the number of children taking up early years entitlement. Her setting is currently full. However, she has noticed that they usually have several traveller families attending, and they have had none in the last 2 years. They don't appear to be accessing early years as in previous years.

KMe also commented that her setting has seen an upwards trajectory in home and flexi schooling. For the past 4 or 5 years, children have been attending the setting, then moving into homeschooling. Now unusually, more children are being home schooled before attending the setting.

KMe has had conversations with several traveller families, and they are moving around more than before due to the uncertainty of finding and keeping a site for their home. They are also experiencing issues as to whether to enrol their child in pre-school/school; the current economic situation is also affecting this community. EC commented that The Lookout Day Nursery usually have a few home schoolers, and it would be interesting to see if they are experiencing the same situation.

ACTION: LAB and EC to liaise with Wiltshire Council officers about traveller families and home schooling

7. Early Years Entitlement Expansion

LAB confirmed that several funding applications have been received, and currently 8 providers are being funded. KMe queried the total number of applications received and where the successful applicants were located. LAB confirmed 20 applications had been received, and the successful applicants were located across the county.

The main criteria to access this funding are:

- the setting is located in an area of low sufficiency
- is judged as either good or outstanding by Ofsted, and
- financial provider contribution included.

If agreed, the setting is expected to contribute at least 50% towards the development of places.

LAB shared the Occupancy Summer 2024 slide (copy attached). Pressure is showing as building in Bradford-on-Avon, Devizes, and Pewsey for under 2s but the local authority isn't currently seeing this as being problematic. However, there is high demand in all areas of the county for 3&4 year olds which is a concern. A new setting will shortly be opening in Limpley Stoke which should slightly ease the pressure in Bradford on Avon (low availability for all age groups). There will also be 2 new settings in Melksham.

There are a further 4 weeks within which providers can submit applications.

KMe suggested that providers are possibly waiting and watching to see if demand does come before committing funds. LAB stated that some settings have 50 families on their waiting list, and its these who need to develop and expand their provision.

LAB confirmed that staffing is a huge issue and looking at staffed places as available places gives a false picture. EW mooted the idea of a golden handshake rather than capital funding being made available to providers, but LAB confirmed that capital funding couldn't be converted to revenue.

KMe said that her setting supports students from the local colleges (Hampshire and Wiltshire). She has heard that unfortunately students are leaving their courses and training as the college courses are awful. In one instance, a teacher had gone on maternity leave, and the replacement teachers coming in had neither Early Years knowledge nor experience. LAB stated that it would be preferable if the colleges approached the sector and asked for assistance rather than risk student disengagement. The local authority needs to liaise with local Wiltshire colleges and neighbouring authority colleges to find out more information and address the issue.

KMe suggested guest speakers from local early years providers could go into the colleges and present what it is really like to work in a setting. KMe did recognise that not all settings would be able to support a student. EW queried whether the education model needed to change, i.e. a move away from college courses towards apprenticeships.

LAB stated that all EYRG members are keen to push Early Years as a career and champion it, and that working with good practitioners would encourage students to remain in the sector.

EW asked if Wiltshire Council could fund providers going into colleges and teaching and offering their practical knowledge and experience.

ACTION: EC and LAB to speak with Lisa Cuffy (Wiltshire College) about rejuvenating EY courses

8. Wrap around childcare development (LAB/All)

LAB confirmed there were 2269 responses to the wrap around childcare survey, and 55 responding parents said they wanted/needed wraparound care that was currently not offered.

61 schools didn't respond to the survey, and it's been found that some schools did not forward the survey onto their parents. EW confirmed that the survey link was added to Right Choice, emailed directly to all schools, and was placed in the Early Years Newsletter.

ACTION: None

9. Child Health Records Red Book

LAB asked KMe if red books were ever asked for in her setting. KMe confirmed not really and that they were viewed as rather pointless now. 75% of red books have weight inputs and 1st set of vaccines noted, but nothing else. Two years prior to Covid, there would have been notes in them and it was viewed as a more worthwhile document. Previously, they would have been chased if not provided, but not now. KMe confirmed that health visitors are not using them as they are being encouraged to go down the electronic route.

LAB and EC commented that different behaviour is being employed by different health visitors in different areas around the county. The Health Visitor service has signed up to the 10 Cultural Commitments around collaborative working. Hopefully with the new contract now in place, change will happen in time.

ACTION: EC/LAB to raise issues with Sally Johnson

10. SENIF update

EC gave a brief update on SENIF. Tighter control and management of the fund continues. When it was taken over by EC, it was found that incorrect levels of funding had been awarded. As increasing numbers of referrals are being received, questions are being asked as to why funding is needed and could there be alternative routes to support the child and setting. Now, Band 1 referrals are increasing, whilst Band 2 referrals are decreasing.

ACTION: None

11. Chair position

LAB confirmed that a provider voice was needed from this group at Schools Forum. Tasks include agenda setting, attending Schools Forum, representing EYRG to councillors where letters are required. EW confirmed an induction and support is available.

KMe stated that this group is still not known to all providers. EW suggested an article be added to an upcoming Early Years Newsletter.

All agreed, that in the absence of many members at the meeting, the nomination could be delayed until the next scheduled meeting.

**ACTION: LAB/JH to add an article about EYRG to the EY Newsletter.
JH to email all members again about the chair position ahead of the September meeting**

12. AOB

No other business for discussion.

ACTION: None

13. Date of next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for Friday 27th September 9.30am-11am.