

Early Years Reference Group Meeting

Thursday 10 September 2020

1. Welcome and introductions

Jane Boulton, Lucy-Anne Bryant, Mark Cawley, Rosemary Collard, Emma Cooke, Jenny Harvey (notes), Sarah Hawkins, Russell Martin, Debbie Muir, John Proctor, Marie Taylor, Emily Wood.

2. Apologies

Angela Everett, Trudy Surman

LAB confirmed that Jane Provis and Jane Shipley will take turns in attending future meetings in place of Angela Everett.

LAB informed the group of the resignation received from Claire McKinnon, Jack and Jill Pre School (voluntary charity representative). A replacement representative is to be sought, along with childminder and school based nursery representatives. An item will be added to the next newsletter which is due to be issued to the sector tomorrow.

ACTION: LAB To add request for representation to the weekly newsletter.

3. Minutes and actions, plus matters arising

All agreed that the minutes were a true and accurate record.

The group discussed re-examining the reallocation of any budget surplus this Autumn as previously agreed. MT stated it would be highly unlikely the local authority would be able to increase the hourly rate for the rest of the year. MT has asked the DfE if next year's budget will be flatlined as there isn't the child level data as normal. LAB confirmed that MP's are copied into budget emails to the DfE. MT will ask Fay Sissins to produce a Summer term expenditure budget profile.

ACTION: MT/FS to produce Summer term expenditure profile.

4. Update on Liquid Logic IT system

EW confirmed the EYES module went live on 1 September 2020, although it has not yet been rolled out to the EY sector as teething testing is still being carried out. The intention is to roll out the portal to the sector this term over a 4 week period, with providers having their own online access. The headcount week will be moving to the 1st week in November to aid this. It would have been ideal for the local authority to input the child level data into the system's Live Register on behalf of providers in readiness for the headcount, but this is just not possible due to the volume of providers and children.

JP asked about full system flexibility regarding funded weeks for both term time and all year round delivery. EW confirmed that is not yet the case, but work is in progress to get it working. There is currently no date yet for when this functionality will be ready but EW will seek a date for the next meeting.

LAB and EW mentioned that 2 year old funding will also be incorporated into the new system. There will be a separate portal for parents to access and submit their funding applications. This portal links directly to the national eligibility checking system and will give parents an immediate eligible/not eligible response. Where funding is approved, the system will issue a funding code which will be 12 digits in length, not like the current 5 digit application number. It was felt prudent that the funding code changes be shared in the next newsletter to prevent queries and codes being refused by providers.

ACTIONS: EW to liaise with Liquidlogic re: date for full funded weeks delivery functionality.
EW to add item to EY newsletter re: 2yo funding code changes.

5. Funding Autumn 2020

MC and others in the group felt that the Autumn 2020 estimate spreadsheet was a good method of collecting this term's estimated hours data. EW confirmed that not all providers had had a positive experience, with some having problems completing the form using their mobile phones.

LAB confirmed that Autumn 2020 estimated funded hours are very close to those of Autumn 2019, and that in most cases, Wiltshire settings are as full as they normally would be at this time of the year. Expenditure in Autumn 2019 was £7.6 million, and anticipated expenditure in Autumn 2020 is £7.1 million. *81% of providers are known to be open. Of the 86% (575) of settings which responded, 94% (538) are open (figures used for Children's Select report).*

The situation now is a very different one to that of a few months ago. Parental confidence has increased and subsequently so has demand for childcare. Whilst the government agreed to block purchase all childcare places at pre-COVID rates, they don't appear to have realised that not only will local authorities be reallocating the money to providers where the children are now, but also supporting those providers where the children have come from. The restriction of dual setting attendance and double funding will have a significant impact on the budget. Where providers have decreased the number of children they now accept since last year, the local authority would only fund the lower amount. MT and LAB confirmed that they are asking the DfE:

- i. what the term 'broadly' actually means as there is no surplus budget to fund these empty spaces, and;
- ii. what would be considered a reasonable tolerance level for the difference between a lower Autumn 2020 estimate and a higher Autumn 2019 estimate.

EYRG will be forwarded the response as soon as it is received.

EC and LAB confirmed Ofsted will be checking dual attendance situations in inspections, i.e. what risk assessments are in place, arrangements for the sharing of testing information between dual providers etc.

MC raised concern about the sustainability of a provider if they have to send a bubble home or completely close the provision in line with Public Health guidance, and the support they would be able to receive. MT confirmed that the local authority has no discretion to provide funds for non-eligible children (children who either aren't eligible for 2 year old funding or aren't of eligible age for 3&4 year old Early Years Entitlement). All agreed that this question needs to be put forward to the DfE.

There was group discussion about the different rates being charged when a provider has had to close, and it was felt that local authority support and endorsement was needed for providers to put additional charges in place as normal funding would not cover their main overhead costs. MC confirmed that some providers nationally are being formally investigated for charging parents through lockdown.

JB asked if parents would still be required to complete and physically sign the Parent Declaration forms. EW confirmed this would still be required as this is not yet digitalised within

the new system, although the local authority would accept a digitally scanned signature. JB informed the group that Springboard is investing in Digisign, an electronic signature and digital verification and authentication tool.

**ACTION: MT and LAB to pose additional question to DfE re: sustainability of providers and bubble/whole closures in Autumn 2020.
JH to add into minutes the current % of open settings.**

6. AOB

Test Kits – issue has been raised by a number of Trowbridge providers who have contacted their local MP requesting that every EY provider has their own testing kit. Discussion took place as to whether this would be a useful suggestion considering that secondary school only have a maximum of 10 kits. Trowbridge has a testing centre but this is difficult to get to if you don't drive/have access to a car. Online home testing kits generally take on average 5 days for a complete turnaround – receiving kit, sending back and getting results in the post.

Children's Centres – RM reported that children's centres are offering meetings on a one to one basis for families if absolutely necessary. Centrally, centres are being asked if it's now time to start having universal groups on site. LAB said that government guidance states that groups of more than 6 can gather for childcare including 'other children groups' which aren't registered. JB asked LAB to follow up what 'other children groups' meant. RM confirmed that Spurgeons have received additional funding for the online Freedom Programme for parents (the purchase of online access for any parent).

Parental interaction - JB raised concern over the level of personal interaction with parents. Virtual communication only works to a point, so they are looking at what other models would work for providers. It was suggested that face to face meetings with no more than 6 people could take place, but they would have to be Covid-19 safe.

**ACTION: EW to resend vulnerable children report password to JB.
LAB to find out the meaning of 'other children groups'.**

7. Next meeting

The next meeting will be scheduled for 30 September 2020, 12.30pm – 2pm. A Microsoft teams meeting request will be emailed out.