

Early Years Reference Group Meeting

Thursday 10 September 2020

1. Welcome and introductions

Jane Boulton, Lucy-Anne Bryant, Mark Cawley, Emma Cooke, Jenny Harvey (notes), Sarah Hawkins, Debbie Muir, John Proctor, Claire Shipley, Trudy Surman, Marie Taylor, Emily Wood.

2. Apologies

Rosemary Collard, Russell Martin.

3. Minutes and actions, plus matters arising

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

Item 2 - LAB confirmed a request for expressions of interest for new EYRG representatives was put in the last newsletter; a good response has been received, although there are private and maintained school positions still outstanding. EC suggested that all maintained nurseries be emailed. Private providers are represented by all areas of the county with the exception of the South, so this should be the focus.

Item 3 – MT sent out a Summer term expenditure profile to the group between the last meeting and today's. MT informed the group that more was spent than planned, but she is reasonably comfortable with that level at the moment.

Item 4 - EW confirmed she has not yet obtained a date from Liquidlogic on the availability of All Year Round functionality in the portal, but that is taking a lesser priority at the moment. EW informed everyone that rollout to the sector will hopefully start next week, and the All Year Round functionality will be tackled afterwards.

Item 4 - EW also confirmed that this week's newsletter to the sector will contain information on the new system generated 2 year old application numbers. MC asked how far in advance does the local authority assess, and EW confirmed it was currently 6 weeks in advance of a child's potential start date, but the new system will accept and assess applications at any point in the whole school term in which they turn 2.

Item 5 – LAB fed back to the group that a response from the DfE had been received on the questions the local authority had raised around funding. The response was essentially a rewording of the DfE's press release in July with no further guidance provided. The question raised regarding private income and whole bubble closure was not answered by the DfE (issue raised again by RC for this week's meeting). The group were disappointed with the lack of response from the DfE and other options will now be considered.

Item 5 - LAB confirmed that last week's survey response rate was 91%, with 84.7% of settings open and 6698 under 5's in attendance. DM stated that they don't appear to be receiving emails from either EW or the Funding team and changing email addresses at the moment is not an option for the provision.

LAB confirmed that the weekly newsletter format has changed following advice from Communications. It is now issued by Mailchimp and the newsletter will have no attachments, and the email will come from 'WiltshireCouncil,EarlyYears'. Most of the group found that the email is going into Junk inboxes. LAB confirmed that 57% of providers had opened the email, but only 17% had opened any of the links contained within the newsletter.

Item 6 - LAB is still awaiting clarification from the DfE on the wording 'other children groups'.

ACTION: LAB and EC to compile list of potential private providers and email maintained nurseries for group membership.

LAB to look into format of new Newsletter format. If not working by half term, organise a move back to the old format.

LAB to add John Proctor to list of providers to receive new Newsletter.

4. Funding Autumn 2020 (including comments for Schools Forum)

Making payments for actual children in settings as well as funding settings with fewer children at 2019 levels (broadly) would cost £1.5M more than the grant provided. The service wrote to the DfE requesting guidance on how we could approach any overspend. In response, the DfE quoted their original guidance offering no further advice on its interpretation. This leaves the authority in a difficult position. Across the south west, there are a number of paths being taken by authorities, i.e. paying providers based on Autumn 2020 headcount, paying on Autumn 2019 actual hours and then reclaiming money back from providers if Autumn 2020 headcount comes in lower.

MT informed the group that a summary report paper with options and a recommended option (3) will be presented to CLT tomorrow. MT put forward to the group a proposal suggested by the local authority on how to fund providers in Autumn 2020. The takes into account the numbers of children and funded hours for all provider types and averages over the last 3 years (2017-2019). So, the local authority can be fair and fund broadly in line with Autumn 2019 numbers, providers would be funded on above average losses, representing the removal of any natural market forces variances. SH asked about new children and both MT and LAB confirmed providers would be funded on the children they have. MT asked if the proposal felt fair to everyone – all agreed it was fair and approved the proposal for recommendation to CLT.

MT informed the group that the proposal could provide a £1.2 million underspend which would be used for the additional costs of the scheme at approximately £500k, and with £700k left for new children, returning children and any DfE post financial year adjustment. The currently unknown hours for the January 2021 census make forecasting more difficult. MT confirmed the DfE also didn't answer the post financial year budget adjustment question from the local authority. Spring 2021 will be funded on actual children with no protection as per DfE current guidance.

Although many providers are saying parents are becoming more willing to increase the number of funded hours they currently access, the group expressed overall concern about the furlough scheme ending in October 2020 and the potential impact on childcare towards the end of Autumn 2020 and Spring 2021. There will be an increasingly higher percentage of parents who won't be able to afford to send their child to childcare.

JP posed the question that as there will be more unemployed people in the county and the number of potentially eligible 2 year olds will increase, would the local authority have enough funding to fund these higher numbers? MT confirmed if children are eligible and accessing funded hours, then the local authority will fund them. Discussion took place regarding potential changes to provider business models if this were to happen. TS pointed out that they had already identified increasing numbers of 2 year old children with developmental and behavioural issues. EC asked if providers were using the 'Five to Thrive' approach as this could help.

ACTIONS: MT to email summary report to the group.

LAB to forward to JP a copy of the original letter from authority to DfE along with DfE response.

5. Funding setting closures due to Covid-19

EC confirmed there have only been a few cases of provider closures in the county. As previously stated in point 3 of the minutes, the group were disappointed at the response received by the DfE regarding funding for temporary bubble/whole provider closures so will be looking at other options.

JP reported that he has had some very difficult conversations with parents and providers about dual placements. These are only in place for practical reasons and if supported by risk assessments. As DSCs are currently not able to offer dual placements due to risk assessments and capacity to manage such situations, JB and other members raised concern that some children aren't able to access specialist provisions to improve outcomes. JB felt that DSCs are being pressured to offer dual placements, but LAB confirmed that the local authority cannot advise DSCs to go against insurance advice and risk assessments.

Some providers have had instances of staff members being advised by midwives that they shouldn't be working with children. Could be parent dependant/ underlying conditions. LAB to look into and get back to the group.

ACTION: EC/LAB look at children who are being held back from DSCs and support where needed.

LAB to ask Sally Johnson re: purported advice from midwives.

6. AOB

Covid-19 testing – MC try to keep pushing testing kits. There is no reason why the EY sector should not have them when all maintained nurseries have been given testing kits. Key workers were supposed to be given priority testing. The group felt this was a case of discrimination.

ACTION: None

7. Next meeting.

The next meeting will be scheduled for Wednesday 4th November 2020 12.30pm – 2.00 pm. A Microsoft teams meeting request will be emailed out.