

Early Years Reference Group Meeting

Wednesday 17 November 2021

1. Welcome and introductions

Lyssy Bolton (LB), Lucy-Anne Bryant (LAB), Jane Boulton, Jo Clarke (JC), Rosemary Collard (RC), Emma Cooke (EC), Jenny Harvey (JH)(notes), Sarah Hawkins (SH), Deborah Muir (DM), Emma Osmund (EO), John Proctor (JProctor), Claire Shipley (CS), Emily Wood (EW)

2. Apologies

Gary Binstead (GB), Lucy-Anne Bryant (LAB), Jackie Day (JD), Russ Martin (RM), Debbie Muir (DM), Jane Provis (JProvis)

3. Minutes of last meeting (21 September 2021)

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

4. Matters arising

Item 5 – business rates for nurseries. MT reported that the Director of Resources has said this is a national issue and not a local choice on basis of affordability. MT will try to encourage further conversation with the Director. JProctor said that 50% of the cost of waiving business rates for the sector would be covered by central government. JProctor stated that all private and voluntary providers need to be encouraged to raise issue in writing with Wiltshire Council's Assistant Director for Finance, Lizzie Watkins, as the rates are a large financial burden on nurseries at this current time. He also said that Revenues and Benefits would know how many private nurseries there are in Wiltshire and would therefore be able to calculate the potential cost.

Item 7 – Inclusion Support Funding and EY High Needs budget transfer issue. JProctor asked how any EY surplus funds could now be ringfenced by EY instead of being transferred to High Needs. MT confirmed that it was the High Needs contribution in EY that was cut from the budget. Marie to ask why EY has not been given as much uplift as that given to High Needs Block previously. The ISF budget has been wholly funded from the EY block with no Higher Needs block top up however, a reimbursement of higher cost pressures is undertaken by Angela Everett (AE) which members would not be aware of. Marie to double check criteria with AE and feedback to group

Item 9 – EYRG membership. JH confirmed that contact has been made by St. Osmund's Pre School and Trudi Surman will no longer be attending EYRG meetings. Current representative vacancies are 1 voluntary setting and 1 childminder.

ACTION: MT to speak with Ian Brown for list of private nurseries in the county
MT to liaise with Angela Everett/Pam Thomson on ISF and feed back to group
LAB to make contact with possible representative replacements

5. EY budget monitoring pre-Schools Forum meeting

MT shared EY budget monitoring documentation with the group (copies of the documents are attached to these minutes)

There is currently a £1.3m underspend on this year's budget across the board. The DfE will make their mid-year adjustment so this will be reduced.

MT confirmed that there is a separate ringfenced budget that could be used to do some extra one-off work that could make a difference i.e., focused training, resources. Unfortunately, it cannot be used to add extra pence to the hourly rates.

Suggestions from the group included vulnerable children as a focus and nurseries who have a significant number of Child Protection. However, it was agreed that caution on how to support gaps was required for all age cohorts as all children are vulnerable as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. EC stated that they could come back to the group with proposals once the available budget was confirmed.

MT confirmed that £1million COMF was rolled forward from last year, with a further £600k allocated for this year. With other Covid-19 initiatives that have taken place already this year, most of this funding is already spent/allocated.

EC/MT suggested that it could be used for those in financial hardship. Both commented that childminders are really struggling at the moment. EC confirmed that at least 4 childminders a day are closing due to Covid-19, and there is no additional support money available to them. EC also confirmed that most childminder income is from babies/toddlers and wrap around care so it's very difficult from them.

ACTION: EC and MT to bring list of one-off work proposals to next meeting

6. Chancellors Budget announcement 2022-23 onwards

MT shared news from the Chancellors Budget announcement 2022-23 onwards (a copy of the announcement is attached to these minutes).

Childcare budget announcements included:

- £170 million by 2024-25 to increase the hourly rate;
- £180 million in 2024-25 to create network of family hubs;
- £150 million for training of early years staff (we believe this is a continuation of existing funding).

MT reported that a member of her team had been in a DfE call earlier in the day and a question about the 2 year old funding rates was asked. The DfE officers on the call said that no decision had been made on a national funding rate.

MT advised the group that whilst the documentation showed a hypothetical potential increase, no decision on funding rates could be made until confirmation was received from the DfE. JProctor suggested that it might be helpful for the sector to have this 'potential' information now as it might aid decisions on whether to remain open or permanently close. MT advised that these figures could in no way be used for any financial planning.

The group discussed the issue of recruitment and retention of staff. Providers have advertised vacant positions several times, but no applications have been received. Some nurseries have waiting lists but not the staff. EC commented that the difficulties being faced in recruitment and retention within the sector is not just a county issue, it is a national issue.

It was felt that school leavers need to be looked to with apprenticeships available to make Early Years an attractive profession to enter. There is still work to be done in this area. All agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic had hastened people leaving the profession whether through early retirement, guaranteed/higher income elsewhere.

RC reported that some nurseries are closing rooms so they can manage staff and children. Demand for childcare has significantly increased.

LB commented that it appears to be the same in schools, however, they are recruiting staff leaving early years settings looking for more secure employment/better employment packages.

EW informed the group that she attended a DfE webinar the day before focused on recruitment and retention. The attached list of perceived reasons why there are issues with recruitment was shared. It was also discussed at the webinar that the lack of professionalism given to working in the Early Years sector also contributed to problems with recruitment and retention of staff. The group also recognised that larger chain nurseries might be able to offer financial incentives to applicants.

ACTION: MT to speak with personal B&NES school contact re: Early Years representative at careers conventions in the county.

NB. Since the meeting, the DfE have issued further information around 22-23 funding rates and this has been included in the EY newsletter. It will also be included in the December Schools Forum report on EY funding for 22-23.

7. Schools Forum & chair of EYRG transition

JProctor reported that no EYRG representative attended the last Schools Forum meeting in his absence. DM was the 2nd group representative on School Forum but was unfortunately unable to attend. After discussion, it was agreed that if any agreed representative is unable to attend the meeting, they are to contact JH who will offer stand in instruction.

JProctor informed the group that from January 2022 he will be stepping back from active duty with his own nursery group and will also be looking to step down from EYRG and Schools Forum. Consideration needs to be given for a potential new chair and possibly deputy chair. JProctor confirmed that a Wiltshire Council officer could be EYRG chair, but they could not be a representative on Schools Forum, therefore it made sense that the chair is a representative from the EY sector.

He also felt the positions should be held by people who are trustees/directors of a nursery where they have a more detailed understanding of the pressures faced by a provision in areas such as finance and recruitment. Also, as attendance in meetings is required (3-4 times a year each for EYRG and Schools Forum), people at this level are less likely to be required in ratio numbers. There does need to be Early Years representation and a voice at Schools Forum, otherwise the sector will not be heard.

MT informed the group that inductions on Schools Forum and Finance can be offered the new chair to build confidence.

EW advised that an article to find a new chair could be put in the Early Years weekly newsletter, and that Facebook/Twitter/a vlog could also be used. JProctor said that the article needs to encourage managers who receive the newsletter to forward it onto their directors/trustees.

ACTION: EW to liaise with Communications re: new chair article/vlog

8. AOB

RC queried whether early years providers were able to charge parents of funded 2 year olds for meals. EW confirmed that providers can charge for meals, but parents should be given the option of providing their own packed lunch.

Referring to EYRG representation at Schools Forum, LB said that whilst she had significant understanding of Schools Forum, she felt that it possibly shouldn't be the School representative representing the Early Years sector at this meeting. The group discussed but felt that as long as LB attended with an Early Years focus, then this would be appropriate.

JB raised the issue of recruitment and retention and asked the group if anyone knew of anything that could develop a volunteer person's skill set in readiness for work. EC said that Right Choice training courses are also available to volunteers. The individuals would just need to get themselves set up on the system.

They also have a few young people from Fairfield College who need some help and guidance with getting something on their CV. EC advised that Mandy Timbrell (Head of Employment and Skills) might be able to assist. Her email address is Mandy.timbrell@wiltshire.gov.uk.

On behalf of Deborah Muir (DM), JH asked the group how they had been finding the recruitment of Level 3 staff in recent months. They had been advertising positions via the Wiltshire Council site and the school website, but very few qualified staff have applied. The group echoed DM's experiences, and said that retention seemed to be an issue. JP recommended refresher safeguarding training delivered by Tony Griffin; their staff had attended a very interesting session.

JP asked for an update on the Establishment Portal, and whether and when the new Establishment Portal could enable providers to submit all year round funding claims. EW confirmed that there is currently no upgrade to the system for the foreseeable future, and that the 'all year round' functionality is still a work in progress. EW apologised for the portal issues experienced by early years providers at the start of the Autumn funding period.

ACTION: None

9. Date of next meeting

The next meetings are scheduled as follows:

Wednesday 5th January 2022 at 1pm.