

**Early Years Reference Group Meeting
Thursday 9 January 2025**

1. Welcome and introductions

Lyssy Bolton (LB), Jane Boulton (JB), Lucy Bracher (LB) Lucy-Anne Bryant (LAB), Emma Cooke (EC), Jackie Day (JD), Emma Egan (EE), Charlotte Forester (CF), Lisa Fryer (joined 3pm), Jenny Harvey (JH) (notes), Sarah Hawkins (SH), Julia Honeywell (JHo), Kirsty Merrifield (KM), Debbie Muir (DM), Marie Taylor (MT), Karen Venner (KV) (Chair), Kerry Yeates (KY), Hannah Yeates (HY), Emily Wood (EW)

Introductions were made and Tracy Hodge (new CM representative) welcomed to the group.

2. Apologies

Kai Muxlow (KM) and Naomi Wright (NW).

3. Minutes of last meeting (26 November 2024)

The minutes were agreed as a true record.

4. Matters arising

Item 5 – HV meeting. EC confirmed that yes this had been done, but then cancelled. It will be reorganised for another date.

Item 7 – lobbying letter and article. KV will organise.

Item 9 – Education Safeguarding Group information. Completed.

Item 9 – Bath College contact. LAB to speak to KV.

Item 9 – Mid term starts and payment dates. JH confirmed that this has been initially looked at but needs further investigation to see what is feasible. A few group members stated that the issue of maternity leave is problematic and that it would be beneficial to have dates on the website showing when a parent can start claiming their funding on their return from maternity leave.

**ACTION: KV to organise lobbying letter and article
LAB to contact KV for Bath College contact
JH to add annual maternity leave funding dates to website and in EY newsletter**

5. Budget Monitoring (MT)

MT shared budget monitoring report as at end November 2024 which shows a £2.7 million underspend, largely due to 3- & 4-year-olds. The under 2's budget is currently overspending due to demand for spaces, but this was not unexpected. KV enquired whether other local authorities were experiencing the same situation as Wiltshire, but this was not known.

JB asked who Wiltshire's statistical neighbours were, and these were confirmed as Gloucestershire, Shropshire, Devon, Cambridgeshire, West Sussex, Bath and North East Somerset, Worcestershire, Hampshire, North Somerset and Dorset.

ACTION: None

6. EY Block – 25/26 Funding Rates Options and Consultation (MT)

MT had shared a 2025/26 funding rates consultation document with the group prior to the meeting.

Funding has previously been based on the following two principles:

1. Fully passporting 100% 2-year-old disadvantaged funding to encourage take-up and allow flexibility
2. Maximise 3- & 4-year-old funding rate as much as possible as this is the largest group of children attracting largest amount of funding into settings.

All agreed that these principles continue to be relevant and should remain. MT confirmed Wiltshire needs to passport at least 96% of each of the funding streams into the sector increased from 95% in 2024/25. All potential options are above this threshold.

MT went through the potential options available for consultation and group discussion followed.

LB queried why, as a recognised vulnerable cohort, disadvantaged 2-year-olds didn't have a higher hourly rate than that received by the DfE. MT confirmed that this funding stream is being fully passported to the sector and there is risk to giving more than we have received from the DfE. LAB asked if locally a decision could be made to increase the hourly rate by £0.02, but MT advised that this could be setting a precedent and taking it over 100% pass through could mean reduced future increases which were difficult to explain.

Whilst Option 3 was MT's recommendation, some members of the group felt the DfE funding of the 9m to 2-year-olds was higher than required (in order to attract new baby rooms) and expressed a preference to reduce that rate and increase the 3- & 4-year-old rate if possible. Option 4 was left open to do some live modelling in the meeting. After on the spot modelling and discussion the group unanimously agreed on Option 4:

Funding stream	Proposed 2025/26 hourly rate	% increase on 2024/25 rate
Under 2's (9mth-23mths)	£9.98	3.6
2-year-old working parent	£7.45	3.9
2-year-old disadvantaged	£7.76	3.7
3- & 4-year-olds (universal and working parent)	£5.52	5.9

ACTION: MT to take Option 4 to Schools Forum as Local Authority and EYRG's 2025/26 recommendation

7. Family Hubs (LB)

LB reported there is still a waiting list for 1:1 support but are signposting to other services and offering regular check ins to clients whilst waiting, navigators are located around the county and there are currently 26 parenting programmes running. Please contact LB if you have any Family Hub topics you would like to know more about, and she will bring these to future meetings.

MT asked if the waiting list is due to need or because the Family Hubs aren't fully staffed yet. LB confirmed both; need is high, and 2 more posts are being recruited for. Other options to manage the waiting list are being investigated.

KM suggested that an EY Newsletter article on where navigators are located would be good with a link so providers can signpost parents. LB will sort.

ACTION: LB to organise EY Newsletter article on navigators and services

8. Early Years Expansion Grant (LAB/All)

LAB reported no change from the last meeting. Providers have inferred that additional costs were viewed as a barrier to considering expansion which has been reported back to the DfE.

There is still half the funding so if anyone is interested in explaining their provision, they can contact the team to discuss it further.

KM queried whether a provider could apply for funding to adapt their provision if they have an overall number of places but more of one cohort than another. LAB confirmed this would be possible.

ACTION: None

9. Wraparound care (LAB)

LAB passed her congratulations to Nicola and her team. The team have approved delivery of an additional 3748 places, 1500 of which have been made by Wiltshire Council.

ACTION: None

10. Business rates

There was general discussion about business rates, the impact of increases across the board from 1 April 2025, VAT exemptions and policy differences between Scotland, Wales and England.

ACTION: KV to organise lobbying letter for all early years settings

11. Recruitment to Early Years (LAB/All)

Agenda item not discussed due to time constraints

ACTION: None

12. AOB

LAB confirmed this will be her last meeting due to a restructure within the Commissioning Team and expressed her thanks to the group for their hard work and dedication in helping to improve outcomes for early years children. EW is the Commissioning Manager for Early Years Entitlement and Wraparound Childcare so will take over EYRG leads along with Nicola Harris.

JB stated the Establishment Portal still has instances of the word 'free'. Can this please be updated?

KY raised the issue of charging and what can/cannot be charged and discussion took place. EC confirmed we are still awaiting clearer guidance from the DfE. All agreed that the topic of consumables and funded hours to be revisited for further discussion

ACTION: JH to investigate and organise removal of the word free on the Establishment Portal

13. Date of next meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday 20 March 2025 at 2pm.