

## **Early Years Reference Group – Meeting Minutes**

**Date: Tuesday, 1 July 2025 Time: 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm**

**Venue: MS Teams Chair: Liz Curtis-Jones Clerk: Tom Easterbrook**

### **Attendees**

- Liz Curtis-Jones – Principal Lead, Best Start in Life
- Tom Easterbrook – Schools Forum Officer (Clerk)
- Vanessa Eddey – Team Manager, Schools, Finance & Support Team
- Tracy Privett – Early Education Funding Officer
- Lucy Cropp – Early Education Funding Officer
- Marketa Toon – Finance Manager, Yarrells Prep School
- Becca Martin – Childminder, Weymouth
- Regina Basurto – Childminder, West Dorset
- Dani Mark – Co-owner, Muddy Monkeys Forest School, Blandford
- Lorraine Clark – Director, Hopscotch Preschool and Nursery, Ferndown
- Debbie Appleby – Owner, Orchard Day Nursery, Verwood
- Alex Fulton – Manager, The Birch Preschool, Blandford

### **1. Welcome and Introductions**

The Chair welcomed members to the inaugural meeting of the Early Years Reference Group. The group was described as a vital new forum to ensure that the voices of all early years providers are heard in strategic discussions.

Each member introduced themselves, representing a wide range of settings across Dorset.

The Chair emphasised that this group is not intended to be a passive information-sharing session but a collaborative and challenging space where members are encouraged to question, reflect, and bring forward the views of their peers. The importance of diverse representation was highlighted, particularly in light of the complex nature of early years funding.

### **2. Declarations of Interest**

The Clerk reminded members to declare any specific interests in agenda items. While all attendees have a general interest as early years providers, no specific declarations were made.

### **3. Review of Terms of Reference**

The Clerk presented the Terms of Reference, which outlines the group's role in strengthening the relationship between providers, the local authority and Schools' Forum.

The group will provide feedback on funding formula impacts, sustainability, and the administration of grants. The Code of Conduct was also introduced, focusing on respectful, open, and confidential dialogue. Members were reminded that while discussions may be challenging, the aim is to foster a constructive and transparent relationship between the local authority and providers. There was general agreement with the principles outlined. Members appreciated the clarity and welcomed the opportunity to shape future agendas.

### **4. Timing and Content of the Next Financial Consultation**

Vanessa Eddey led a detailed discussion on the financial consultation process. She explained that while funding rates are typically confirmed late in the year (often December), there is an opportunity to consult earlier on principles such as the deprivation and the small setting supplements.

Several members challenged the fairness of using provider location to determine deprivation funding, arguing that many children travel from more deprived areas and the current model does not reflect the actual needs of the children. There was strong support for exploring a child-level deprivation model, though concerns were raised about data availability and administrative complexity.

The small setting supplement was also questioned. Some felt it may no longer be necessary due to increased income from new entitlements, while others noted it still plays a role in supporting viability. Members requested clear data on how many settings are affected by each supplement. There was consensus that both supplements should be reviewed in detail at the next meeting, with scenarios and data modelling provided.

### **5. Sector Update**

The group discussed the new DfE scheme offering a £1,000 incentive for new or returning practitioners in group and school-based settings.

Exclusion of childminders was a major concern. Some welcomed the scheme as a recruitment tool, especially given the sector-wide staffing crisis. Others expressed frustration that experienced, qualified staff receive no such recognition or support.

There were concerns about retention, with examples shared of staff leaving shortly after receiving similar incentives in the past.

The cost of Level 3 qualifications was highlighted as a barrier. Some settings are loaning staff the money to complete training, but this is not sustainable. The group agreed that while the scheme may help attract new staff, it does not address the long-term workforce sustainability challenge. Dorset Council officers committed to raising these concerns with the DfE and exploring local funding options alongside contacts at DWP

## **6. Local Provider Agreement**

This item generated significant discussion. Members reflected on the recent changes to the Local Provider Agreement, particularly around charging practices and the DfE's statutory guidance on voluntary contributions.

Confusion remains over what constitutes a “consumable” and what can be charged for. There is inconsistency between local authorities, especially for providers near county borders. Some providers are charging high daily rates for consumables, while others offer the same services at no cost. This raises concerns about equity and transparency. Several members warned of a two-tier system, where children from lower-income families miss out on enrichment activities because their parents cannot afford voluntary charges. Others noted the difficulty of setting universal limits, given the diversity of settings, business models, and costs. There was strong support for Dorset Council to provide clearer guidance, including examples and FAQs. Members also requested that the Council raise the issue of national inconsistency with the DfE.

As part of Dorset Council's response to sector concerns, the Chair shared that a formal letter had been sent to the Secretary of State for Education, raising issues around the impact of National Insurance contribution changes on early years providers. This action followed extensive feedback from the sector, particularly regarding the financial strain on PVI (Private, Voluntary, and Independent) settings.

The letter was developed with cross-party support from Dorset Council members, including Councillor Nick Ireland and Councillor Andrew Parry, and was signed by local party leaders. It highlighted:

- The disproportionate impact of National Insurance changes on non-school settings.
- The lack of parity in funding and support between school-based and private providers.
- The risk to sustainability if providers stopped delivering funded places due to financial pressures.

The Chair explained that only 12 providers had submitted detailed financial data, but the reported impacts from the employers tax changes ranged from £1,000 per week to over £65,000 per year. These figures were used to illustrate the scale of the issue in the letter.

Although a response from the Secretary of State had not yet been received, the group was informed that MP Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) had responded and met with Dorset Council representatives, including Liz Curtis-Jones, Vanessa Eddey, and Councillor Claire Sutton. During the meeting, Mr. Hatton expressed understanding of the challenges and committed to raising the issue with Stephen Morgan MP, the responsible minister

The Chair noted that while the group is realistic about the political complexities involved, maintaining pressure and visibility on these issues is essential. The engagement with MPs and ministers is part of a broader strategy to ensure Dorset's early years sector is represented at national level.

#### **7. 30 Hours from September**

This item was noted as a standing agenda point. No additional discussion was held, as many of the issues had already been covered under the Local Provider Agreement and sector update.

#### **8. SEND Consultation in the Autumn Term**

The group was informed of an upcoming consultation on the use of Early Years Block funding for SEND. This will focus on how funding is allocated and used to support children with additional needs. Members supported the idea of using multiple engagement methods, including locality meetings and informal discussions, to reduce survey fatigue and ensure broad participation. The group will be invited to review the draft consultation before it is launched.

#### **9. Any Other Business**

A new team member, Melissa, has joined the Early Years Funding Team to support with the growing volume of claims. Members expressed appreciation for the continued support from the funding officers, especially given the significant increase in workload.

A suggestion was made to include a brief overview of Schools' Forum at a future meeting, to help members understand its role and how early years issues are represented. Members were encouraged to suggest future agenda items and to reach out between meetings with ideas or concerns.

## Action Summary

| Action No. | Description                                                             | Owner                    |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1          | Prepare data and scenarios on deprivation and small setting supplements | Early Years Funding Team |
| 2          | Schedule October meeting and circulate consultation timeline            | Clerk                    |
| 3          | Raise concerns with DfE re: incentive scheme fairness and retention     | Dorset Council           |
| 4          | Explore local funding options for Level 3 qualifications                | Liz Curtis-Jones         |
| 5          | Clarify guidance on consumables and voluntary charges                   | Early Years Funding Team |
| 6          | Raise concerns with DfE about charging inconsistencies and equity       | Dorset Council           |
| 7          | Draft SEND consultation and share with group for feedback               | Vanessa Eddey            |
| 8          | Add Schools Forum overview to next meeting agenda                       | Clerk                    |