

Dorset Schools' Forum

Date of Meeting:	26 September 2025
Report Title:	Update on the Early Years Reference Group – Autumn 25
Executive Director:	Paul Dempsey, Executive Director for People - Children
Corporate Director:	Alice Deacon, Corporate Director for Commissioning and Partnerships
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Presenting Officer:	Tom Easterbrook, Schools' Forum Officer Schools' Forum Officer Schools, Finance & Support Team
Report Status:	Public
Reason for Submission to Schools' Forum:	For Information Under Forum power/responsibility: 1(e) Changes to the Scheme for Financing Schools
Recommendation(s):	That Schools' Forum notes the work of the Early Years Reference Group since the last meeting of Forum
Reason for Recommendation(s):	To ensure that Forum continues to be aware of the work and operation of the early is reference group as it is a formal subgroup of Forum.
DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST	Schools' Forum members are reminded of their responsibility to make a declaration of interest in any agenda item in which they have an interest, to the Chair or the Clerk, preferably in advance of the meeting.

1. Executive Summary

At the March 2025 meeting of Schools Forum, members agreed to establish an Early Years Reference Group (EYRG) to strengthen engagement with early years providers across Dorset. I am pleased to report that the group held its inaugural meeting on Tuesday, 1 July 2025, via MS Teams.

The meeting was chaired by Liz Curtis-Jones, Principal Lead for Best Start in Life, and attended by a broad range of early years representatives from across the county. The group includes members from childminding, private, voluntary, independent, and maintained sectors, ensuring diverse representation across Dorset's localities.

Membership of the Early Years Reference Group:

Rebecca Martin – Little Explorers Childminding (Childminder, Chesil – Weymouth)

Daniela Mark – Muddy Monkeys (Private Sector, North)

Marketa Toon – Yarrells School and Nursery (Independent Sector, East)

Alex Fulton – Little Birch Pre-School (Private Sector, North)

Heather Stephens – Cerne Abbas CE VE First School (Local Authority Maintained, Dorchester)

Ewa Praschma – The Old School Nursery (Private Sector, East)

Regina Madero – Mariposa Childminding (Childminder, West)

Debbie Appleby – Orchard Day Nursery (Voluntary Sector, East)

Lorraine Clark – Hopscotch Pre-School (Private Sector, East)

Key areas of discussion included:

Funding Consultation: Members raised concerns about the fairness of current deprivation and small setting supplements. There was strong support for exploring a child-level deprivation model and reviewing the relevance of the small setting supplement. The Early Years Funding Team will prepare data and scenarios for the next meeting.

Workforce Incentives: The group discussed the new DfE £1,000 incentive scheme for new and returning practitioners. Concerns were raised about the exclusion of childminders and the long-term sustainability of the workforce. Dorset Council officers committed to raising these issues with the DfE.

Local Provider Agreement: Members expressed confusion around charging practices and the definition of "consumables." There was concern about equity and transparency across settings. Dorset Council has sent a formal letter to the Secretary of State for Education highlighting the financial pressures on PVI providers, supported by cross-party councillors.

SEND Consultation: The group was informed of an upcoming consultation on the use of Early Years Block funding for SEND. Members welcomed the opportunity to shape the engagement approach and review the draft consultation.

The meeting was constructive and well-attended, with members actively contributing to discussions. The group will meet again in October, with a focus on funding formula modelling and SEND consultation.

2. Financial Implications

n/a

3. Climate Implications

n/a

4. Other implications

n/a

5. Risk Assessment

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: low

Residual Risk: low

6. Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA)

n/a

7. Appendices

A. Minutes of the 1 July 2025 Meeting

8. Background Papers

n/a

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.