Dorset Schools' Forum

Date of Meeting:	**16 January 2026**
Report Title:	**Annual review of the arrangements for early years provision**
Executive Director:	**Paul Dempsey, Executive Director for People - Children**
Report Authors: **Titles:** **Emails:**	Liz Curtis-Jones (Principal Lead for Best Start in Life) Vanessa Eddey (Early Education Funding) liz.curtis-jones@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk vanessa.eddey@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk
Presenting Officers:	**Liz Curtis-Jones.** Principal Lead for Best Start in Life **Vanessa Eddey.** Team Manager, Schools Finance & Support
Report Status:	**Public**
Reason for Submission to Schools' Forum:	**For INFORMATION** **Under Forum power/responsibility: 4(a)(i)** acting as the conduit for information relating to Children's Services budgets, and particularly schools' and early years' funding, for relevant colleagues in schools and early years settings, to ensure the work of the Schools' Forum becomes a central part of the local education context;
Recommendation(s):	• Members are asked to support a joined-up approach that brings together school-age childcare and the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, while also helping improve children's early development and school readiness in Dorset • Members are invited to comment on the approach of the national childcare policy and progress to date

Reason for Recommendation(s)	To keep the Schools' Forum up to date with the local and national agendas and programme of planned business enabling us to: • improve outcomes for children • support families and attendance • align with national policy and funding • deliver value for money. • strengthen community partnerships
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

The Childcare Act 2006, and Early Education and Childcare statutory guidance, gives local authorities a duty to secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, childcare provision for children aged 0-14 and up to 19 for children with disabilities. The provision should be sufficient to meet the requirements of more parents/carers to enable them to work or undertake education or training leading to work, and for their child to access their free entitlement childcare place.

We are also required to:

a) providing information, advice, and assistance to parents on childcare provision in the area
b) providing information, advice, and training to childcare providers

We have seen significant changes in the funded childcare offer since the announcement from central Government in March 2023 to expand the 'free' childcare offer and most recently the requirement to:

- publish a Dorset 'Best Start Local Plan' by 31/03/2026
- formally carry out an annual childcare sufficiency assessment and publish following Cabinet approval (DC is due Spring 2026)
- expand and enhance the current wraparound Childcare (school-age focus)
- integrate the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme with school-age childcare and summer learning
- deliver targeted early years 'evidence based' interventions to support 76.4% of all Dorset children and 55% of children eligible for Free School Meals to achieve a Good Level of Development at the end of EYFS in 2028
- strengthen partnerships and strategic co-ordination through the Best Start in Life Local Plan

The expanded childcare offer included:

- by September 2025 eligible working parents of children from 9 months old will be entitled to 30 hours per week of free childcare during term time (38 weeks); this continues up to the child's school start date.
- from September 2026, all primary school pupils whose families require it should have access to wraparound childcare (both before and after school, 8 am–6 pm)

For the academic year 2024/2025, we have spent £32.57m on early years funding and the Early Years Early Education Funding Team have processed 22,582 claims; a 44.7% increase in claims on the previous academic year.
Aligned with the Children, Young People and Families' Plan 2023–2033 and underpinned by the Healthy Child Programme, the Best Start Local Plan will fulfil our statutory duties under the Children Act 2006 and 2016. It ensures universal and targeted health support from pregnancy

through early childhood, tackling inequalities early and improving social mobility. By integrating health and education priorities, we aim to raise Good Level of Development (GLD) attainment and strengthen lifelong wellbeing for every child.

2. **Wraparound care**

Dorset was allocated £2.4 million for the 2-year programme, most of which is being allocated to schools and private, voluntary, and independent providers. The programme comes to an end in March 2026, but the ambition to ensure parents and carers have sufficient school-age childcare continues into the next financial year.

To date, the programme has allocated over £1m of funding to 64 schools and childcare settings to either expand their existing provision or create new childcare before and after school. Through this funding, these settings have created over 1000 new childcare places for primary school-aged children in Dorset.

Despite the programme coming to an end in March, funding continues be allocated to settings who want to create new provision to meet local demand, and to those who require sustainability funding to keep their provision up and running. In December 2025, the government announced their commitment to ensure progress made within the 2-year wraparound programme will be continued, as well as taking on new responsibilities relating to the Free Breakfast Club Scheme and school-age childcare sufficiency.

3. **Providing information, advice, and training to early years providers**

There are 287 registered childcare providers in Dorset offering early education funding; this includes 111 childminders, 129 'group' providers in the Private, Voluntary and Independent sectors and 47 school-based nurseries. Other providers include holiday clubs and wraparound settings before and after school.

We have two central posts leading on the delivery of early years policy and strategy providing matrix management for 18 Best Start in Life Advisors across the county.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to early years settings which includes prioritising free support to those who are:

- in the process of setting up a childcare business
- registered, and not yet had their first inspection
- graded 'less than good' at their latest Ofsted inspection
- provide early education and childcare to vulnerable children and require additional support

Of the 255 settings with an inspection outcome on the 'Early Years Register', <2% are 'Less than Good' and >98% are 'Met, Good or Outstanding'.

We target support to settings who have children with additional needs referred to us from Health Services through a statutory Section 23 Notification, those with lower-level needs and those identified through the increased support offer.

Currently we are supporting 276 children across the county. We have developed an Early Years SEND Support Power BI report that will help us to share information with schools in a timely manner to ensure children and families are well supported in that move into school from the early years.

4. **IMPOWER Project - Strengthening ambition for the early years to reception pathway**

Work continues to embed Valuing SEND (VSEND) across early years and throughout our schools as we prepare for the 2026 Early Years –Reception cohort.

In partnership with Specialist Teachers and Educational Psychologists we are working to support inclusive practice using VSEND to identify the needs of our most vulnerable children. In addition to this, we are developing the tool to continue to focus on training needs as well as focusing on children during key phase transfer times.

Recent partnership meetings have focused on refining the VSEND tool, strengthening parent radar information, and improving readiness across settings. Locality data shows increasing uptake of VSEND, supporting more consistent planning for children with SEND.

Our aims for schools and SENCOs include:
- Improved communication and enhanced support for SENDCOs and schoolteachers
- Further rollout of VSEND practice
- Strengthened transition planning
- Continued development of both the 'EY to Reception' and 'Moving On' pathways.
- Schools and settings can expect clearer information about children joining Reception in September 2026

Our aims for children and their families:
- To benefit from a more joined-up journey and improve confidence in mainstream provision
- Supporting families to understand the school offer for their children in relation to their individual needs
- Beginning early identification and preparation for the 2027 School Risers
- Gathering parent and carer feedback to strengthen the pathway through the parent tool
- To support families those children are not attending an early years setting to access their entitlements as well as those who are considered vulnerable to achieving their full potential for example, children whose family are in the armed forces, children with Child Protection Plans or Children in Need.

5. Financial Implications.

Completion of an Early Years Spring Census drives the level of funding which is paid to Dorset Council through the Early Years Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant. Dorset Council then distribute this funding to providers, based on a funding formula that uses actual hours the child attends the setting. This is changing to a termly census for 2026-27.

The early years entitlements are:
- the 30 hours entitlement for eligible working parents of children from 9 months up to 2 years old
- the 30 hours entitlement for eligible working parents of 2-year-old children
- the 15 hours entitlement for families of 2-year-olds receiving additional support (FRAS, formerly known as the 2-year-old disadvantaged entitlement)
- the universal 15 hours entitlement for all 3 and 4-year-olds
- the additional 15 hours entitlement for working parents of 3 and 4-year-olds

Funding levels for providers have been set for 2025 to 2026 as follows:
- under 2s will be funded at £10.44 per hour from April 2025.
- 2-year-old funding is £7.72 per hour from 1st April 2025.
- 3-&4-year-old funding base rate is £5.71 per hour. Additional supplements are paid to settings in areas of deprivation and small settings with income levels less than £20,000 in the last calendar year.
- Early Years Pupil Premium Funding is provided when settings support children from a range of disadvantaged groups £1.00 per hour.

- Disability Access Funding (DAF) can be used to support reasonable adjustments enabling children with disabilities to access early years entitlements. This will increase from £881 per annum to £975.

6. Current funding arrangements:

- Funding comes to Dorset through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) which is a ringfenced grant from the government to be used in accordance with regulations.

- Allocated in **4 blocks** which are not specifically ringfenced however, there are restrictions on their use which makes movement of funding between the blocks difficult:

  1. the **Schools Block** which pays for mainstream schools' budgets
  2. a **Central Services Schools Block**
  3. the **Early Years Block** (EYB) which pays for the free entitlement to nursery funding for all 3&4 years olds for 15 hours and for those with eligible working parents for 30 hours and also for 15 hours for the 40% most deprived 2-year-olds
  4. the **High Needs Block** (HNB) which pays for pupils whose additional SEND provision cost is more than 10k (generally those with SEN).

- The Early Years Block (EYB) is based on the spring census. Current EYB values have been updated by the Spring 2025 census:

3- & 4-year-old universal	£12,059,803
3- & 4-year-old additional	£7,145,564
2-year-old - FRAS	£1,680,777
2-year-old - working parents	£10,111,635
Under 2s - working parents	£14,096,196
Early Years Pupil Premium	£394,470
Disability Access Fund	£232,624
Total Early Years Block	£45,721,068

- We have recently re-formed the Dorset Early Years Reference Group, a sub-group of the Schools Forum to ensure consultation with early years providers about funding is invited. All providers can attend however, attendance is currently low. As this is a new approach, we will continue to offer the opportunity to meet with us and provide their feedback.

- This group will be:
  - led and facilitated by the Early Education Funding Manager and has no decision-making powers but consists of representatives from early years providers.
  - providing information to feed into regular update papers for Schools Forum
  - meeting regularly to discuss early years funding related agendas

7. Capital Funding

In 2023 the DfE announced a childcare reforms programme which seeks to increase the availability of funded early years childcare, and the availability of term-time wraparound childcare for primary school aged children. To enable this, Dorset Council were allocated £550,847 from the Childcare Expansion Capital grant. Early years were allocated 80% of this figure, and the remaining 20% was allocated to the wraparound programme.

The £440,677.60 for early years has all been allocated to settings. This funding has been used to create approximately 96 new early years places through settings that have undergone refurbishments, reconfiguration or entirely new buildings. For example, Orchard Day Nursery in Verwood have created a new bespoke building to meet demand and created 24 new places for 9-month-old babies.

£110,169.40 of capital grant for the wraparound programme was fully allocated to schools and voluntary and community providers so far. This has been used towards larger purchases over £500 for the sole purpose of improving the extended/new wraparound provision, for example:

- Fixed Assets (Storage containers, play equipment)
- To create an inclusive space (Sensory area, accessible toilets)
- To make small adjustments to physical space (New lighting, fencing or carpet)

Two examples of the capital funding for wraparound provision:

- Broadmayne First School who installed a new trim trail for the children to enjoy at the club
- Beaminster St Mary's Academy who installed a new fence around their modular building to ensure children were safe and could access the outside area

8. School-based Nurseries

The School Based Nurseries Capital Grant is a one-off grant (of £150,000) available for eligible schools in England to bid for capital funding. The funding must be used solely for capital expenditure to create new nursery provision or expand existing provision.

- Eligible schools are invited to apply for funding during three phases: Phase 1 (academic year 2024 to 2025), Phase 2 (academic year 2025 to 2026) and Phase 3 (academic year 2026 to 2027).
- Dorset Council works in partnership with maintained schools and multi-academy trust leads to demonstrate support for applications by providing and submitting an approval letter or form.
- During Phase 1, three Dorset schools were successful in securing funding.
- We are currently in Phase 2 and have supported seven schools to submit applications. Several other schools have chosen to wait until Phase 3 due to the level of detail required for the application. We expect to receive outcomes during January and February and are confident that the information and guidance we provided helped schools to submit strong applications.

9. Early SEND Support Funding

Wherever possible, children in the early years with additional needs will have their needs met in their local provision and information is published online about how this funding can support their child access their early years funding entitlements. Early years settings do not have a notional SEN budget as schools do; there is an early years inclusion fund called Early SEND Support (ESS) Funding.

This funding is for children not yet statutory school age who have additional needs or a disability (SEND). It is demand-led and aimed at helping providers deliver early intervention for children lower level or emerging SEN as well as for those with an EHCP. In Dorset, we offer this to all children in the early years and do not limit eligibility to those children accessing early education funding.

ESS can be paid from either the Early Years Block (EYB) or High Needs Block (HNB). In Dorset we use the HNB for all SEN including early years. Budgets are scrutinised and we monitor the impact of demand closely.

Applications are made via the online form and parent/carer consent is required before we review the application.

10. Well-being and Health implications

Expansion of the funded childcare offer: Access to work for parents and carers will contribute towards economic growth, reduced poverty, skill development and improved quality of life for families. Access to quality early years provision supports cognitive skills, social and emotional development and communication and language skills in readiness for school.

The early years curriculum also supports physical health promoting healthy habits including nutrition and exercise. Often the early detection of developmental delays are also picked up leading to effective interventions.

11. Climate Implications

Not applicable

12. Other implications

Nothing additional identified

13. Risk Assessment
Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:
Current Risk: **low**
Residual Risk: **low**

14. Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA)

Expansion of the funded childcare offer: As part of their consultation on the new childcare funding arrangements, the Government published an Equality Impact Assessment. Their conclusion reflected there are some positive, negative, and neutral impacts however, overall, the decision was taken to roll out the new arrangements.

Through the provision of information, advice and training we support providers to consider all aspects identified in the equalities impact assessment, carry out risk assessments and support settings to plan for mitigations

15. Appendices

No additional information provided

16. Background Papers

No additional information provided

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.