Early Years Provider Reference Group - Meeting

Date and time: Wednesday, 18 March 2026 – 1 pm to 2.30 pm

Venue: Teams

Present: Alison Bishop (Chair),
Alison Mooney, Caroline Allanson, Charlie Baxter, Chris Barton, Deborah Parfitt, Emma Read, Julie Pearson, Karen Scott, Kate Spencer-Allen, Lesley Hart

Notes: Donna Mills

1	**Welcome and Introductions** • Donna Mills, Business Officer, Cambridgeshire County Council, taking minutes. • Karen Scott, Head of Histon Early Years Centre, maintained nursery school. • Debs Parfitt – Shelford Day Nursery, representing PVI, Vice chair for group • Kate Spencer-Allen – Assistant Head at St.Matthews Primary School, represent maintained nursery class. • Lesley Hart – Early Years funding Co-ordinator. • Chris Barton, Senior Advisor for Access and Inclusion in the Early Years Childcare and School Readiness Service. • Charlie Baxter (CBa), Stretton Pre-School, represents the group on the school forum • Emma Read – Business and Governance Advisor, primary carry out Early Years Funding Audits. • Caroline Allanson – Manager at Eaton Socon Preschool, PVI setting. • Julie Pearson – Children Services Manager for the Early Years Alliance. • Alison Monney – CORAM Pacey, Childminding support and development officer, standing in for Caroline Maryon. • Alison Bishop, Head of Babraham Nursery and Chair of the Group. Represent PVI.
2	**Election of chair and vice chair** The group began by addressing the election of the Chair and Vice Chair, which had been postponed from the first meeting due to DP being in Australia. AB confirmed she is currently Chair and is willing to continue, though open to stepping aside if anyone else wished to stand. No alternative nominations were put forward, and she was confirmed to remain Chair for the year. DP confirmed she is happy to continue as Vice Chair, and with no other nominations, she was reappointed. It was also noted that CBa recently took on the Schools Forum representative role, which had been recorded in the previous year's minutes.
3	**Terms of reference – Vacancy for Independent school being changed.** The group reviewed the Terms of Reference, following previous discussions about replacing the independent school representative due to low participation from that sector. LH confirmed that no expressions of interest had been received.

	The group agreed to create an alternative category, seeking a setting with a high proportion of EYPP or deprivation, to ensure more representative input. CB presented deprivation and SEND distribution maps, highlighting key clusters, particularly in Wisbech, North Cambridge City, Huntingdon, and Eaton Socon. Members discussed the importance of both deprivation levels and geographical balance within the reference group. It was agreed that the Council would initially target settings in the Wisbech/Fenland area for recruitment, with broader outreach if needed. The Terms of Reference will be updated to remove the independent school category and replace it with two places reflecting the new criteria. The group confirmed this approach as more representative of current funding users. **ACTION** – Update Terms of Reference, remove Independent school category, replace with new criteria.
4	**Local Provider Agreement** The group discussed the Local Provider Agreement, which had been issued earlier that day. CB explained that although the annual update usually involves consultation with the Provider Reference Group, this year only minor changes were required, allowing the agreement to be released ahead of 1 April. DM had coordinated the new e-sign process for over 700 providers. The agreement remains closely aligned with statutory guidance, with only small deviations where necessary, including a new clause requiring providers identified as potentially financially unsustainable to engage with the Council's business and governance team before early payments can be considered, to ensure responsible use of public funds. Clarification was provided regarding updates to section 2.1 on bank account requirements, confirming that accounts should usually be in the name of the provision but may also be held by a company, charity, or individual delivering childcare. Members noted that the updated charging guidance was clearer, particularly around consumables, which had been a source of parental complaints. The group sought clarification on the requirement for settings to publish charges. CB confirmed that providers must publish the costs of any chargeable extras and all information relating to funded hours, but they are not required to publish private fee rates for non-funded hours. This aligns with statutory guidance, which places the responsibility on the local authority to ensure transparency around funded provision. The group also noted updates relating to inspection grading, which is now more complex than the previous "good/requires improvement" split; the revised appendix and intervention table aim to summarise these changes clearly. A concern was raised about the four-week absence rule for funded children, particularly for families taking extended overseas trips. LH agreed to check whether this information is included in the parent booklet and add it if necessary. The group also discussed the requirement for settings to verify funding claims when a child attends more than one provider. CB confirmed that an updated parent/carer declaration form will be issued for use from April, with full adoption expected from September. The new form

	reflects tightened DfE wording requiring verification before a child starts, particularly important for cross-border claims, which are now monitored termly through DfE systems. **ACTION –** LH to check the parent booklet to see if the four-week absence rule is included and add if necessary
5	**New inspection format** The group discussed feedback on the new Ofsted inspection framework and what support settings may need. CB explained that the local authority had not run extensive briefings this year because Ofsted had already provided significant direct communication. Early feedback from inspected settings indicates that inspections feel more collaborative, with inspectors placing strong emphasis on staff wellbeing. Views on the information gathering call were mixed, with some leaders preferring in person learning walks and others valuing the opportunity to cover key information before the visit. Providers also reported that inspectors' expectations feel high, particularly as the new "exceptional" grade is intended to be extremely rare and not equivalent to the previous "outstanding." Inspectors are placing increased focus on healthy lifestyles, inclusion, and mathematical development, and some confusion remains around curriculum expectations. CB outlined local inspection outcomes to date: eight childminders and ten group settings have been inspected, all meeting safeguarding standards, with most achieving at least "expected" in all areas. The new intervention process now differentiates between safeguarding outcomes and leadership/governance judgments, with additional support available for settings receiving "needs attention" in other areas. The local authority is also planning further guidance, potentially via a briefing, Sway, or blog, on how providers can use Ofsted's comparative data to understand and strengthen their practice. The group explored the usefulness of Ofsted's "Explore an Area" data tool, with Chris demonstrating how providers can access local authority level information by selecting Cambridgeshire. The tool offers inspection outcomes, demographic context, EYPP and SEND data, and indicators such as obesity and oral health. CB explained that while the data is currently only available at county level, work is underway, through the Best Start in Life project, to develop a more detailed Power BI dashboard that will break information down to ward level, incorporating both education and health data. This is expected to be available later in the year. Members found the resource valuable, noting they had not previously accessed this level of detail. The group also discussed the challenge of the new "exceptional" grade, with concerns raised that larger national nursery chains may find it easier to demonstrate wider impact than smaller settings or childminders. Examples were shared of settings achieving the grade through strong local leadership and dissemination of practice.

	CB also updated the group on Ofsted's move from a sixyear to a four year inspection cycle, noting that additional inspectors are being recruited to manage the transition and that settings overdue under the new cycle will be prioritised. The group was invited to share ideas on what further support from the local authority would be most helpful as providers adapt to the new framework. The group shared experiences of accessing Ofsted materials and preparing for the new inspection framework. Several members had attended Ofsted webinars and SEND briefings, while others had engaged with external training such as NDNA sessions. One setting described a particularly effective staff activity using the Ofsted toolkit, where teams reviewed each inspection area collaboratively; this was highlighted as a valuable way to build confidence and deepen understanding, especially around curriculum, teaching, and achievement. Members noted that the updated Quality Framework is significantly clearer and more manageable than the previous version, with Lucy Frain's training sessions proving helpful. The new framework aligns closely with the Ofsted toolkit, making it easier for providers to map their practice. Some attendees had not yet seen the updated Quality Framework and arrangements were made to share it. The group agreed that the new approach feels more streamlined and supportive, with inclusion now strongly embedded throughout. In response to questions about future local authority support, CB explained that plans are still being developed, as responsibility for this area now sits with another team. However, the council will continue to monitor inspection patterns and provide targeted training where emerging themes suggest it is needed.
6	**SEND reforms** The group moved on to discuss the SEND reforms, with CB providing an overview of the national proposals and their implications for early years. She highlighted the five key principles, early, local, fair, effective and shared, and noted that the consultation document acknowledges the differences between the PVI sector and schools, with several areas left open for early years-specific feedback. CB encouraged all providers to respond to the consultation, and confirmed that both a local authority response and an early years-focused response will be submitted. She also updated the group on discussions with the DfE's national training lead, explaining that work is underway to determine which elements of training should be delivered centrally for consistency, and which should remain locally tailored to reflect Cambridgeshire's existing systems, such as the Early Support Pathway. Further details will follow as the national programme develops. The group continued discussing the SEND reforms, with CB explaining how Cambridgeshire's Early Support Pathway differs from other areas where parents must navigate multiple separate referral routes. She noted that the DfE recognises these regional differences and is considering which elements of training and support should be delivered nationally for consistency and which must remain locally designed.

The proposed SEND system will include universal, targeted, targeted plus and specialist levels, with EHCPs positioned at the specialist tier.

Schools will be required to use a digital plan for targeted support, but the DfE acknowledges this may not be suitable for early years settings and will consult further.

Planned changes to the Code of Practice include revising the four areas of need to better reflect executive functioning, motor, physical and sensory needs.

CB outlined local plans to base Early Support staff in every family hub and to embed specialist expertise within the Best Start in Life infrastructure.

She also highlighted national expectations for local authorities to plan sufficiency for children with SEND, though Cambridgeshire's view is that access depends more on funding and support than on physical places.

The group agreed on the importance of responding to the consultation, and CB confirmed that county-wide communications will be issued. Members reflected on the scale and ambition of the reforms, noting that many changes are planned for 2029, by which time Cambridgeshire will have undergone local government reorganisation.

Questions were raised about future funding, including SENIF and the proposed inclusion fund; CB confirmed that further consultation is expected in the summer term, though details of new funding allocations have not yet been released. The group also discussed the national plan to create 60,000 new specialist and inclusion base school places, noting that Cambridgeshire has already expanded its enhanced resource provision.

Members welcomed the potential for greater consistency across local authorities, particularly for cross border placements.

The group raised concerns about early identification of SEND, particularly the decline in two to two and a half year health checks and the resulting impact on timely referrals.

CBa highlighted that without proactive communication from health visiting teams, many children are not being assessed unless settings initiate contact, despite rising levels and severity of need.

CB acknowledged these challenges and noted that some of the issues raised would be addressed in the next section of her presentation.

Members agreed that needs within early years have increased significantly, with some families turning to private assessments due to delays in NHS pathways. The discussion moved to EHCP delays, with settings reporting waits of 18 months to two years in some cases. CB explained that delays occur both at the Educational Psychology stage and within the statutory assessment team, which is experiencing severe capacity pressures.

Online EP assessments were noted as problematic for early years children, sometimes causing further delays when parents request in person assessments.

Concerns were raised about the impact on schools unable to provide adequate support without completed plans. CB confirmed that work is underway to streamline processes for children already on the Early Support Pathway, reducing duplication for families and settings.

The group also noted a sharp rise in both the number and complexity of children entering Early Support, with a 105% increase over five years. Several providers reported multiple children currently requiring one to one support or early intervention, reflecting a wider trend across the county.

7	**Best Start in Life update** The group received an update on the national Best Start in Life strategy, with CB clarifying that this initiative is entirely separate from the earlier local Cambridgeshire and Peterborough programme of the same name. The current strategy is a statutory national requirement and forms a major piece of work for the local authority, with a delivery plan due for publication on 31 March. CB outlined the complex governance structure now in place, which must align with multiple overlapping programmes, including the Inclusion Programme, Families First, and significant changes within the health system following the creation of a large regional Integrated Care Board. A new cross sector partnership board has been established, feeding into both council leadership and operational workstreams. Four operational groups are now active: improving health, improving education, developing family hubs and Child & Family Centres, and data/digital/comms. The education workstream focuses heavily on improving GLD outcomes by 2029, with ambitious local targets for children eligible for free school meals. From April, five new Family Hubs, one per district, will launch, offering extended, evidence based support. CB also described plans for local practice development networks centred around each hub, designed to strengthen joined up working between health and early years and improve consistency across localities. Her own workstream will lead on data, digital access, and communications, including the development of an online Family Hub offer and improved information for families. Further details will be shared publicly once the delivery plan is released. CBa raised concerns about the significant decline in health visitor involvement, particularly the lack of two to two and a half year checks, which leaves early years settings as the primary point of identification. Members described increasing delays across health services, including speech and language therapy, with some children being discharged prematurely or advised to re-enter the system only shortly before starting school. Providers expressed frustration that these delays undermine early intervention and place additional pressure on settings already supporting children with complex needs. Several members noted a marked drop in children's developmental starting points, including communication, physical development, toileting, and self regulation, with many children entering nursery far below previous cohorts. The group discussed contributing factors such as reduced parental support from health services, increased parental isolation, and the long term impact of poor mental health among young parents. Members agreed that while settings are working hard to bridge gaps, the lack of early health input is creating a cascading effect that intensifies pressures on early years provision and schools. CB acknowledged these concerns and noted that the Best Start in Life programme aims to rebuild more joined up, consistent early support, though members recognised that improvements will take time to materialise. The group discussed the wider challenges facing parents, particularly the lack of accessible, consistent information and early support. Members noted that many parents are willing and motivated but simply unaware of key guidance, such as car seat safety or early developmental

	expectations. Some settings have begun creating their own information pages to help bridge these gaps. CB explained that one of the aims of the Best Start in Life programme is to bring all early years, health and parenting information together into a single, trusted online hub, making it easier for families to find clear, reliable guidance. Work is also underway to ensure that this information is accessible to families who have limited digital access. The group agreed that improving the availability and clarity of early parenting information is essential to supporting children's development and reducing the growing gaps seen at entry to early years settings.
8	**AOB** **Sam Wass** CB briefly highlighted recent research by Professor Sam Wass from the University of London, known for his work on The Secret Life of 4, 5 and 6 Year Olds and for contributing to national Best Start in Life campaigns. She recommended his work as an accessible and insightful explanation of how modern environments are influencing children's brain development. CB noted that Wass presents complex neuroscience in a clear, practical way, making it relevant for early years practitioners. His research explores how changes in daily life, such as reduced repetition, faster paced environments, and less predictable social interactions, affect children's ability to process information and regulate attention. Members recognised his name from recent conferences and agreed that his work offers valuable context for understanding the developmental shifts being observed in early years settings. **Financial Adjustments for providers** CB informed the group of upcoming financial adjustments for providers. She confirmed that SENIF will increase by 50p per hour this year, funded through an underspend in the SENIF budget. In addition, the remaining underspend will be passported to settings next week as an extra 50p per hour for hours already supported. There is also an underspend in DAF, part of which will contribute to the SENIF uplift, with the remainder being distributed as a lump-sum payment to providers. CB also explained that a prudent approach to setting the quantum last year has resulted in a further underspend, largely due to higher than expected take up of under twos and working parent two year old places. A portion of this underspend will also be passed on to providers, with an estimated payment of £10–£12 per PTE, subject to final finance approval. She emphasised the importance of returning underspends to the sector wherever possible, while balancing the risk of future clawback. The group expressed appreciation for the additional funding and the work involved in securing it.
Next meeting date Tuesday, 19 May 2026 - AM	