Early Years Provider Reference Group - Meeting

Date and time: Wednesday, 7 October 2026 – 1 pm to 2.30 pm

Venue: Teams

Present: Alison Bishop (Chair),
Caroline Allanson, Caroline Maryon, Charlie Baxter, Chris Barton, Deborah Parfitt (Vice Chair), Emma Read, Karen Scott, Kate Spencer-Allen, Lesley Hart, Tom Dickinson

Notes: Donna Mills

1	**Welcome and Introductions** • Tom Dickinson – Finance Business Partner – Supporting the Early Years Service with financial management. • Caroline Allanson – Manager at Eaton Socon Preschool, PVI setting. • Lesley Hart – Early Years Funding Co-Ordinator • Karen Scott, Head of Histon Early Years Centre, maintained nursery school. • Caroline Maryon – Service Manager for Coram Pacey • Debs Parfitt – Regional Manager at STEMtacular Childcare, representing PVI, Vice chair for group • Charlie Baxter – Preschool Manager for Stretton Pre School's in Yaxley • Emma Read – Early Years Business and Governance Advisor – Carrying out funding audits. • Kate Spencer-Allen – Assistant Head at St.Matthews Primary School, representing maintained nursery class. • Donna Mills – Business Officer, taking the minutes. • Chris Barton - Senior Advisor for Access and Inclusion in the Early Years Childcare and School Readiness Service. • Alison Bishop - Head of Babraham Nursery and Chair of the Group. Represent PVI
2	**Wisbech Vacancy** In the last meeting a discussion took place regarding recruiting a representative from the Wisbech area to improve geographic representation within the group. An email was circulated advertising the vacancy, but no expressions of interest were received. It was agreed that a further email would be sent with a one-month response deadline, while local advisors and members would make direct approaches and phone calls to settings in the area to encourage participation. It was noted that the start of the new term may result in greater interest from new providers. School-based nursery representatives would also be eligible to fill the vacancy. **ACTION** – DM to resend an email to Wisbech settings regarding vacancy, DP to speak with her contacts in Wisbech.

3	**EY Funding consultation** The group received an update on the Early Years Funding Consultation, which the local authority had responded to. The most significant proposed change relates to SEND funding, with Disability Access Funding and SENIF potentially being replaced by a single targeted SEND funding stream from 2027/28, followed by an inclusion supplement from 2028/29. Concerns were raised about how funding would be allocated, particularly if settings received funding upfront without flexibility for children who join later. Further clarity has been requested through the consultation response. Members were advised that proposed changes to Early Learning for Two-year-old funding would have little direct impact on Cambridgeshire, as all funding is already passed through to providers. However, it was noted that national changes could affect funding levels for two-year-olds, and this would be monitored closely. Proposed changes to the deprivation supplement were also discussed, including the possibility of national standards for how deprivation funding is calculated and distributed. The consultation also included proposals around funding rate setting. It was noted that redistributing unspent contingency funding during the financial year would be unlikely in Cambridgeshire due to the way funding is allocated and recovered throughout the year. Further proposals would introduce separate government funding streams for local authority central services and provider funding from 2029/30, which may improve budget transparency but would not necessarily simplify provider funding rates. Finally, members were informed that the current five supplement categories could be reduced to three from 2028/29: deprivation, inclusion and site-specific supplements. Deprivation and inclusion supplements would become mandatory, while the site-specific supplement would remain optional for local authorities to use. Members discussed the consultation proposals and noted disappointment that no changes had been proposed to simplify the relationship between Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) and deprivation funding, which continue to be funded separately. It was explained that proposed changes to deprivation funding calculations would place greater emphasis on local area deprivation indicators rather than solely relying on free school meal eligibility, with the aim of better reflecting levels of deprivation within communities. Concerns were raised about the potential impact of the consultation on future funding levels, particularly for younger age groups and SEND funding. Members expressed uncertainty about whether the proposed changes could lead to reductions in funding rates over time. It was acknowledged that, at present, there is insufficient information to determine the overall financial impact, and further details are awaited from the consultation response. Discussion also focused on the future of SEND funding and whether funding arrangements may move closer to a school-based model. It was suggested that, initially, a combination of upfront funding and existing SENIF, style payments are likely, although longer-term arrangements remain unclear. Members highlighted the importance of maintaining effective support for children with additional needs and noted that wider SEND reforms and proposals within the SEND White Paper may also influence future funding arrangements. It was agreed that providers should continue to monitor developments while awaiting the consultation outcome and subsequent statutory guidance. The local authority confirmed that summaries and updates would be shared with the sector as soon as further information becomes available, enabling providers to prepare for any required changes.

4	**Principals for setting EY Funding formula 2027/28** The group discussed the principles that should guide the setting of the Early Years Funding Formula for 2027/28. Members were asked whether the existing approach of maintaining SEND funding at a relatively stable level while maximising the base rate should continue. There was strong agreement that keeping the base rate as high as possible should remain the priority, particularly in light of falling birth rates, declining occupancy levels and the financial pressures facing many providers. Members felt that supporting the sustainability of settings was currently more important than increasing SEND funding allocations. While acknowledging concerns about future SEND funding reforms and uncertainty surrounding potential changes to SENIF and other funding streams, members agreed that now was not the time to alter the current funding approach. It was noted that the introduction of a single SEND funding stream could simplify processes, but there remained significant uncertainty about how this would operate in practice and what impact it would have on providers and children with additional needs. The group was informed that a request had been received from a childminder to consider introducing an English as an Additional Language (EAL) supplement. Members discussed the request and noted that introducing an EAL supplement would likely require a reduction in the base rate for all providers. There was no support expressed for changing the current approach, and members agreed that maintaining the highest possible base rate remained the preferred option. It was agreed that funding models for the next year should continue to be based on maximising the base rate and maintaining SEND funding at current levels where possible. CB will use these principles when modelling funding options ahead of the annual funding rate announcement expected in December.
5	**EYES** An update was provided on the implementation of the new funding system. It was reported that the transition had been largely successful, supported by extensive testing and preparation work. However, some unexpected issues had arisen as providers began using live data, resulting in updates to guidance and internal processes. Members were thanked for their engagement with the new system, and it was acknowledged that both providers and the local authority continue to learn and adapt as the system develops. It was noted that most providers had successfully submitted their claims using the guidance provided, although there had been a number of enquiries relating to information already available within published guidance. Feedback from providers was welcomed to help identify areas where further improvements or support could be offered. Members were reminded about two upcoming training sessions scheduled for the following Tuesday. While originally planned to focus on reporting functions, the sessions had been expanded to include guidance on mid-term changes, which providers are now required to process directly through the system rather than submitting to the local authority. Providers were encouraged to attend if they felt the additional training would be beneficial. It was also confirmed that the sessions would be recorded and made available on the Knowledge Hub for future reference. Recognition was given to the significant effort made by the team over the summer to support providers and ensure implementation was as smooth as possible. The move to the new system was described as challenging, with unexpected data migration issues and ongoing technical problems requiring substantial additional work. Despite these challenges, members were advised that the system is becoming more stable and improvements continue to be made as issues are identified and resolved.

	It was noted that extensive support had been provided to providers, including out-of-hours assistance for childminders and settings with limited administrative capacity. While some issues remain, particularly for maintained nursery schools where registration arrangements differ from mainstream schools, progress continues to be made and confidence in the system is increasing. Members were also informed that a finance module is expected to be introduced later in the academic year, providing greater flexibility in payment processing. This would reduce the need for manual workarounds currently required for provider payments and could enable more flexible payment schedules, including monthly payments, for settings that would prefer this approach. Overall, while challenges remain, the transition was reported to be progressing positively, and ongoing system developments are expected to deliver further benefits for providers. Positive feedback had been received from providers, including childminders, who highlighted the responsiveness of the team and the availability of support when needed. It was acknowledged that the transition represented a major undertaking, involving the migration and management of approximately 18,000 children's records across a wide range of provider types. The group recognised that, despite some initial challenges and ongoing system refinements, the local authority had worked hard to minimise disruption to providers. Examples were shared of issues that had been identified and resolved quickly, including claim submission arrangements for childminders. Members noted the team's commitment to responding to sector feedback and adapting processes where improvements could be made. Providers also praised the range of support available throughout the transition, including webinars, evening training sessions, email communications and direct responses to queries. While adapting to a new system had been challenging for some providers, it was widely agreed that the support provided had helped make the process more manageable and that the team should be commended for their continued hard work and dedication. The group discussed some of the benefits of the new system, including the live register functionality and automated reminders. It was noted that further provider support may be beneficial around eligibility codes and funding processes, as some challenges remain in ensuring codes are checked and understood correctly by both providers and parents. The local authority advised that additional workshops may be considered to help address these areas. Members also reflected on differences between Cambridgeshire's funding processes and those used by other local authorities. It was noted that Cambridgeshire's approach offers greater flexibility in areas such as stretched funding, funding transfers between settings and payment arrangements, which were viewed positively by providers with experience of systems elsewhere. Feedback was gathered on areas for future system development. Providers suggested that functionality allowing claims to be saved, withdrawn or restarted before submission would be helpful, particularly for larger settings managing high numbers of children. CB agreed to consider these suggestions as the system continues to develop and reminded providers that support remains available for anyone requiring additional guidance. Members were encouraged to contact the team directly to arrange one to one support where needed. **ACTION** – CB to raise a request with System C to explore the introduction of a "Save and Continue" or "Withdraw Submission" function within the system, to improve provider

	flexibility when completing and amending claims before final submission. The request will be submitted for consideration as a future system enhancement.
6	**AOB** **Safeguarding and information sharing** A discussion took place regarding safeguarding information sharing across early years settings, schools and partner agencies. Concerns were raised that important safeguarding information is not always being shared effectively, particularly where children attend multiple settings or where younger siblings attend different providers. Examples were shared of cases where a lack of communication between settings and schools resulted in safeguarding concerns only becoming apparent after further investigation. Members acknowledged the challenges schools face in identifying where younger siblings attend, particularly with large numbers of feeder settings. It was noted that a whole-family approach to safeguarding remains important and that difficulties in information sharing can create risks where children and families are already known to services through Section 17 or Section 47 processes. Concerns were also raised about inconsistencies in the sharing of information through Operation Encompass and wider multi-agency communication processes. The group discussed the role of social care and other agencies in ensuring safeguarding information is shared appropriately across all settings involved with a family. While recognising operational challenges, members felt there should be greater visibility of all children linked to a family where safeguarding concerns exist. It was noted that effective information sharing should not rely solely on individual settings identifying and communicating concerns. An update was provided on developments within the new funding system, which now links to the same underlying database used by social care. Members were advised that social workers can now view education information, including the settings attended by children and siblings, which should help improve information sharing and support a more joined-up approach to safeguarding. However, it was noted that police officers do not have direct access to these systems, highlighting ongoing challenges in information sharing between agencies. **AI** A discussion took place regarding the increasing use of generative AI within early years settings and the need for clear guidance on its safe and appropriate use. Concerns were raised after an example was identified where AI appeared to have been used to generate information for a SENIF application, raising questions about whether personal data had been entered into an AI platform. Members acknowledged that AI use is becoming more common, particularly among newer staff, and that settings are beginning to encounter situations where AI has been used to assist with written reports and observations. The group agreed that AI has the potential to be a valuable tool for supporting tasks such as drafting documents, improving grammar and spelling, creating templates and reducing administrative workload. However, members emphasised that children's personal information must not be shared through AI platforms, and that clear boundaries and guidance are required to ensure data protection responsibilities are met. There was broad agreement that the focus should be on safe and responsible use rather than attempting to prevent the use of AI altogether. Members noted that national guidance is expected in the near future, including advice being developed for educational settings on the use of generative AI. In response to emerging

	examples within the sector, local guidance is also being developed to help providers understand appropriate use, data protection considerations and potential risks. The discussion also explored wider concerns around AI-generated imagery and online safety. Members highlighted the increasing sophistication of AI tools and the challenges this creates when sharing photographs online. It was noted that some organisations are moving towards using images that avoid showing children's faces, such as photographs of activities, hands, feet or children photographed from behind, in order to reduce potential risks. Overall, the group agreed that AI is a rapidly developing technology that brings both opportunities and challenges, and that providers should be supported to use it safely, responsibly and in line with data protection requirements. **Early Years Inclusion Grant** Members discussed the Early Years Inclusion Grant and noted that formal feedback on the use of the funding had not yet been gathered. It was confirmed that a short survey would be issued after the October half-term break to collect information on how settings have used the grant and to meet reporting requirements. Feedback gathered through the survey will help inform future evaluation of the grant's impact. Providers shared examples of how the funding had been used to support inclusion and workforce development. One setting reported using part of the grant to access specialist training from Sarah Storey on English as an Additional Language (EAL) and bilingualism, which staff found valuable and tailored to their needs. Another setting explained that the funding was being used to provide Makaton training for staff to better support children with communication needs, while also benefiting the wider setting. The discussion highlighted the flexibility of the grant in supporting a range of inclusion-focused initiatives and training opportunities. Members were encouraged to share examples of how funding had been used through the upcoming survey to support future evaluation and good practice sharing across the sector.
Next meeting date Poll to be sent out to check availability for week commencing Monday, 7 December 2026	