

Early Years Provider Reference Group - Meeting

Date and time: 8 October 2025

Venue: Teams

Present: Alison Bishop (Chair),
Caroline Allanson, Chris Barton, Charlie Baxter, Sharon Griffiths,
Lesley Hart, Caroline Maryon, Deborah Parfitt (Vice Chair), Karen
Scott, Kate Spencer Allen.

Apologies: Annette Brooker, Mitchell Clark, Gary Croxon, Gemma Hope

Notes: Donna Mills

1	Welcome and Introductions • Kate Spencer-Allen, Assistant Head Teacher for St.Matthews Primary School, maintained nursery class. • Donna Mills, Business Officer, Cambridgeshire County Council. • Sharon Griffiths, Early Years Business and Governance Advisor, Early Years School Readiness Service. • Charlie Baxter, Stretton Pre-School. • Caroline Maryon, Service Manager for Coram, PACEY, supporting childminders in Cambridgeshire. • Chris Barton, Senior Advisor for Access and Inclusion in the Early Years Childcare and School Readiness Service. • Lesley Hart, Early Years, Funding Co-Ordinator • Caroline Allanson – Manager at Eaton Socon Preschool • Karen Scott, Head of Histon Early Years Centre, maintained nursery school. • Alison Bishop, Head of Babraham Nursery and Chair of the Group. • Deborah Parfitt, Shelford Day Nursery and Vice Chair for the reference group
2	Current Membership The membership table was shared on screen. There are currently several vacancies within the Provider Reference Group. Since the last meeting, we've received resignations from both LP, (Little Flames chain), and LW (area manager for Bright Star). Following LW's departure, we reached out to large chain providers (defined as those operating across multiple counties with more than 10 nurseries) to maintain balanced sector representation. This resulted in limited interest

and one formal nomination from Kindred Nurseries. The group can decide whether to circulate the nomination or proceed without further review.

Additionally, there remains a vacancy for an independent school representative. We previously contacted independent schools around this time last year but received no responses. Guidance is requested on whether to repeat this outreach or leave the vacancy open.

The independent school vacancy remains unfilled. Given the very small number of independent schools now offering funded places across the county, the group is asked to consider whether continued representation from this sector is necessary.

In the voluntary sector, GC (Early Years Alliance) sent apologies for this meeting. He is currently discussing with his new deputy manager whether they can continue to share attendance, as HW did previously. If this is not possible, we may need to seek alternative representation.

There is also one general vacancy that has been held open due to having three representatives from day nurseries, while the Terms of Reference specify two. The group is invited to consider whether to open this vacancy more broadly.

The group discussed the independent school vacancy and agreed to review which schools currently offer funded places to assess options. If independent representation is no longer appropriate, members suggested targeting underrepresented areas such as East Cambridgeshire and Fenland. This could include a setting in a high-deprivation area or an additional day nursery to better reflect county-wide demographics. The nomination from Kindred Nurseries was reviewed, and the group supported inviting Annie Tierney to join, recognising her extensive experience and suitability.

Members also acknowledged the recent passing of Ruth Pimentel, expressing sadness and sharing personal reflections on her contributions to the sector.

The group confirmed there are six independent school nursery units currently operating in Cambridgeshire. Given the limited number and previous challenges in securing engagement from this sector, members agreed to reach out once more to these settings. If no interest is received, the group will consider alternative representation, with a preference for a provider from a high-deprivation area in East Cambridgeshire or Fenland. Members also agreed to amend the Terms

	of Reference to allow an additional representative to ensure broader demographic coverage across the county. The group discussed how to define the criteria for filling the proposed additional vacancy. It was agreed that the Terms of Reference should broadly state that the representative should be from an area of high deprivation. For the current recruitment, the group will target settings specifically in East Cambridgeshire and Fenland, as these areas are currently underrepresented. This approach allows flexibility for future changes in group composition while addressing current demographic gaps. The group noted that Lisa previously represented the Provider Reference Group on the Schools Forum and agreed a replacement is needed. While the commitment is relatively low (approximately termly meetings), it involves significant preparation. Deb offered to temporarily step back into the role while a permanent representative is identified. Members discussed the importance of maintaining PVI sector representation and agreed that dual roles should be avoided to preserve early years visibility. Alison expressed interest in taking on the role in future, once staffing pressures ease. Chris will inform Schools Forum of the interim arrangement, particularly ahead of the January funding meeting.
3	New funding system – EYES An update was shared on the Early Years Education System (EYES), which is being introduced across the council. Initially scheduled to go live in November, the launch was postponed due to significant data migration issues. These challenges highlighted the importance of ensuring a seamless transition from the old system to the new one, particularly for providers. As a result, the revised go-live date is now set for June 2026, aligning with the autumn task. Capita will remain open for the summer task to allow for final adjustments, especially given the frequent changes during the summer period. Any updates made during this time will be reflected in both systems to ensure accuracy in payments and data. EYES is developed by System C. The system is centred around the Early Years module and offers significant improvements in functionality and integration. For staff working in access and inclusion, the back-office interface allows for seamless tracking of children across funding, SEND, and early support systems. This integration means staff can view a child's journey through various services without needing to cross-reference multiple platforms. Additionally, the admissions module within

EYES enables tracking of children into school and supports outcome monitoring.

One of the most notable features is the live register, which allows children to be added at any time and instantly checks funding eligibility. The system uses a colour-coded indicator, green for eligible and red for not eligible, which simplifies the process for users. This functionality reduces the need for last-minute data entry during estimate and headcount tasks. Once children and their hours are entered, the system streamlines the submission process, allowing providers to confirm details and send them through with minimal effort. On the council's side, this automation reduces manual matching and processing work.

Language used around claims is also being updated to align with the new system. Terms like "interim" and "actual" are being replaced with "estimate" and "headcount" to improve clarity for providers. The headcount now includes census data, meaning both can be submitted simultaneously. For schools, the census function is disabled, allowing them to continue submitting their census as usual. However, from April next year, census submissions will become termly and will be built into the headcount process. The system will pull through previous staffing and other relevant data, requiring only updates and final numbers. This change means headcount submissions cannot be completed without a census, which will help reduce the administrative burden on the council by ensuring timely and accurate data collection. It is essential that census data is submitted correctly, as funding from the DfE is now calculated termly and depends on accurate census returns. A piece of work will be undertaken with schools to address issues around incorrect or missed census submissions to ensure compliance and accuracy going forward.

The group discussed the rollout of the new system, confirming that it will not be launched to the wider sector immediately to avoid confusion. Communications about the new system will begin around Easter, including screenshots and general briefings. More detailed training will take place in June, just before and after the go-live date. This will include both general overviews and task-specific sessions, such as how to complete estimates. These sessions will be recorded to allow users to follow along at their own pace. In addition, written guidance with screenshots will be provided to support different learning preferences. The system itself is described as intuitive, with clear buttons like "Add New Child" and "Add Future Starter." Training will continue throughout the first year, with refreshers and signposting to recorded materials as new tasks arise. Providers will be asked to confirm or update their portal contact details to ensure a smooth transition, with existing accounts

being migrated to the new system to avoid re-registration. The new system will also support multiple logins per setting, unlike the current system, and will include audit trails to track user activity. Access can be restricted by role, allowing some users to edit and others to view only.

There was a discussion around whether the new system will allow providers to input actual hours, similar to the current 11.4 cap. It was confirmed that entering actual hours should be possible, but this is still being tested. The team is also reviewing the cap settings, particularly for the summer term, to better support year-round providers like day nurseries. This includes exploring the possibility of increasing the number of weeks and introducing additional caps (e.g. 48 and 51 weeks) to accommodate different provider models. However, technical limitations, such as the system currently only allowing one decimal point, are being addressed with the supplier. Testing with real data is expected soon, which will help confirm how the system handles these scenarios. The financial implications are also significant, as the DfE funds based on a 13-week summer term, while the council has paid out for 21 weeks of stretched claims, leading to a temporary paper deficit of around £6 million. A consultation with the sector is planned for early next year to gather feedback on proposed changes. The ultimate goal is to allow providers to input their actual delivery patterns (e.g. 50.8 weeks), which would improve accuracy in invoicing and audits, but this must be balanced with funding constraints and system capabilities.

Participants discussed the flexibility of entering their own funding weeks and expressed appreciation for the possibility of receiving support with funding processes, which are currently managed individually. There was reassurance that the new system will not be linked to Liquid Logic, which has caused concern in the past. The value of recorded training sessions was highlighted, especially given staffing challenges that make attending live webinars difficult. It was noted that different early years settings, such as nurseries, preschools, and childminders, have varied operational setups, and a sector-specific approach would be beneficial.

Communication between providers was also discussed.

The Funding team is currently handling complex tasks including matching children in the system, resolving over-claims, and manually adding deprivation funding. The transition to a new system is expected to automate some of these processes, reducing manual workload. Issues with interim payments during the summer term were acknowledged, and steps are being taken to prevent similar errors in future payments. The team is using large spreadsheets to cross-check

data between systems and manually correcting discrepancies, especially for funded two-year-olds. Overall, there is significant work happening behind the scenes to ensure claims are accurate and processed efficiently.

There was reflection on how the work of local authorities is perceived by providers, particularly in online forums. It was noted that the complexity and effort involved in managing funding is not always visible or understood, and that councils can sometimes be unfairly criticised despite working hard to deliver payments accurately and on time. Participants acknowledged the challenges faced by the funding team, especially with system limitations and the need to manually process and verify data. There was a suggestion to create a simple flowchart to help providers understand the steps involved in processing funding claims, which could help clarify why payments cannot be made instantly. The group shared positive experiences with the funding team, noting that issues are dealt with efficiently and payments are generally received promptly. It was emphasised that frustrations around funding often stem from broader financial pressures on settings, rather than from the actions of the local authority itself. The group also recognised the large number of providers and children involved in the funding process, and expressed appreciation for the work being done behind the scenes.

The group discussed the upcoming full funding consultation announced by the DfE, which will take place next summer as part of the “Best Start in Life” campaign. Providers will be encouraged to participate, with the aim of reviewing the funding process from both provider and parent perspectives. It was acknowledged that the system is particularly complex for parents to navigate, especially around renewing codes and understanding eligibility. There was concern that more parents than usual had not renewed their codes in time this September, and while discretion has been applied where possible, stricter enforcement will be necessary going forward due to census-related payment constraints.

Providers shared that their main challenges relate to supporting parents with declaration forms, which are time-consuming and often confusing for families. Despite this, the funding process itself was described as smooth and well-managed.

The declaration form, although unpopular, was recognised as useful for identifying over-claims. Some providers have adapted by accepting email confirmations from parents when signatures are difficult to obtain.

There was a query about whether the new system would allow providers to add children mid-term without contacting the funding team. It was

	confirmed that the new system supports mid-term changes directly through the live register, streamlining the process and triggering payment notifications automatically. This improvement was welcomed by the group.
4	30 hours administration and current funding form The group discussed the possibility of transitioning parent forms to a digital format to streamline processes and reduce paperwork. It was noted that digital forms could allow for pre-filled information and electronic signatures, which may help reduce errors and save time. While most families are comfortable using digital forms, support would need to be offered to those less familiar with technology. Compatibility with mobile devices and translation features were highlighted as important considerations. Concerns were raised about data protection, particularly around GDPR compliance and cybersecurity. The idea of storing forms centrally, such as with the County Council, was explored but may not be viable due to statutory requirements. It was clarified that the forms are agreements between the provider and the parent, and providers must retain access to them. Further guidance from the DfE is needed to understand the implications of digital formats and whether they meet current regulations. Sustainability was also a key theme, with digital storage seen as a more environmentally friendly and cost-effective solution. Some settings already scan and archive paper forms digitally, following retention and deletion policies. The conversation naturally moved into the topic of 30 hours funding administration, with general agreement that the current forms are cumbersome and time-consuming. There was a suggestion to offer digital forms as an opt-in or opt-out option to accommodate different settings' preferences. Although there is no funding currently available to implement digital systems, it was agreed that further exploration is worthwhile. Sharon will look into digital form providers used by other counties, and the County Council will consult with the DfE to clarify requirements and potential guidance. The group agreed to revisit the topic in the next funding cycle.
5	New funding webpages An update was shared regarding the revamp of the Early Years funding web pages, a project that has been in progress for the past 18 months and is now nearing completion. The new pages are expected to go live by the end of November and will be hosted on the Learn Together

platform. The aim is to make the site clearer and more user-friendly, with a dedicated Early Years Funding section specifically for providers. While parents will still be able to access the content, the structure will clearly distinguish between provider and parent information.

The new layout will include three main sections: resources and supporting documents, communications, and a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) area tailored for childcare providers. The intention is to create a “one-stop shop” where providers can quickly find answers to common queries, such as how to complete a DAF application, without needing to search through lengthy documents.

It was acknowledged that the current corporate webpage on the Cambridgeshire County Council site has become cluttered over time due to staff changes and additions. The new structure will streamline this by directing parents to the Family Information Service pages, while providers will be guided to the Learn Together site

Suggestions from the group included incorporating more visual aids like flowcharts to simplify complex guidance. Several attendees shared that they often contact the funding team directly for clarification, as the existing documents can be lengthy and difficult to navigate. There was general agreement that presenting information in multiple formats would be beneficial, especially for those who prefer quick-reference tools. One attendee highlighted the effectiveness of the attendance helpline used by schools, where a dedicated team member responds to queries via email within 24 hours. This model was suggested as a potential approach for Early Years funding support, particularly for handling recurring questions efficiently.

Overall, the group welcomed the improvements and expressed interest in reviewing the new pages before they are launched publicly. The goal is to ensure the site is clear, concise, and genuinely helpful for providers navigating funding processes.

An update was shared on recent efforts to improve accessibility and support for providers during busy periods. Two evening sessions were trialled, with phone lines open and staff available to respond to emails between 6 and 8pm. However, uptake was minimal, with only one phone call and a few emails received, most of which may have come in regardless of the extended hours. Despite the low engagement, the team plans to try again, possibly scheduling future sessions closer to key deadlines when demand may be higher.

	The group reflected on whether the lack of response indicated that providers were generally satisfied or simply too busy to engage during those hours. One attendee noted they had already completed their tasks by the time the sessions were offered, while another pointed out that issues often arise after submissions, particularly when new children join or changes occur. A suggestion was made to include clearer guidance for parents on the website regarding attendance and holidays, especially for international families. It was noted that some parents are unaware that funding may be affected if their child is absent for extended periods, such as during overseas travel. The group agreed that this information should be made more visible. In response, it was confirmed that a video on the importance of early attendance has been produced and features real-life testimonials from parents and settings. The video is expected to be released soon and will be shared via the Family Information Service (FIS) pages. The team will ensure that the messaging also covers the impact of prolonged absences on funding eligibility.
6	Local funding formula Funding formula for the next financial year. With Christmas approaching and timeframes tight, attendees were asked to email their thoughts following the meeting. Two key options were presented for consideration: one around additional SEN funding, which may be influenced by the outcome of the forthcoming White Paper, and another regarding the declining numbers of funded two-year-olds in Cambridgeshire. It was noted that the county has seen a drop of approximately 300 funded two-year-olds. A targeted campaign to raise awareness among parents is planned, but there was also discussion about whether additional weighting should be given to the disadvantaged two-year-old rate, potentially an extra 50p per hour. Historically, the working and disadvantaged rates have been kept equal, with the assumption that most disadvantaged children also receive EYPP. However, the group was asked whether they felt this change would be worth modelling. One attendee expressed a preference for keeping as much funding as possible in the base rate to support budgeting and maintain stability, especially given the likelihood that funding rates will remain unchanged in January and only potentially increase in line with inflation in April. Another noted a significant drop in funded twos at their setting, possibly due to more parents entering the workforce and qualifying for working parent

	funding instead. It was also highlighted that many children now fall into a crossover category, vulnerable but receiving working parent funding, which complicates tracking and support. The group agreed that further analysis of local take-up data would be helpful, and that sharing insights about these crossover cases could inform future funding decisions. Attendees were encouraged to email their feedback to Chris, particularly regarding the potential impact of the White Paper and the feasibility of making changes within the limited timeframe.
7	AOB Next school forum is 7 November 2025, 2pm in person at New Shire Hall.
Next meeting date Will take place end of November, beginning of December to approve the funding formula. Chris to find out when the announcement is expected and the meeting to be held a couple of days after.	