

# Agenda Item 41

**TITLE** Early Years Hardship Fund

**FOR CONSIDERATION BY** Schools Forum on 15 March 2023

**WARD** None Specific;

**LEAD OFFICER** Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson

## **OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY**

This reports forms part of regular reporting to Schools Forum, informing areas of statutory decision making and improving visibility and consultation on wider Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) financial matters.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Schools Forum is asked to note and comment on plans for an Early Years Hardship Fund which will be able to respond swiftly with one off support to Early Years Providers that experience short term financial challenges.

## **SUMMARY OF REPORT**

This report is to outline proposals for an Early Years Hardship Support Grant. It will outline the criteria by which early years providers can apply for support from the hardship fund and how the fund will be monitored.

**Early Years Hardship Fund  
March 2023**

**.01 Purpose of the Report**

This report provides Schools Forum with details of the proposed Early Years Hardship Fund

**.02 Recommendations**

Schools' forum is asked to:

- Note and comment the implementation of the Early Years Hardship Fund
- Comment on the criteria for applications to the Early Years Hardship

**.03 Background**

In July 2022, the ESFA sent through an adjustment of £205,799 additional funding for 2021-22. Along with the anticipated clawback of £51,000, Wokingham had £256,799 remaining from the 2021-22 Early Years Block. Given the challenging financial position across the education system, and that faced by individual providers, it was proposed that an Early Years Hardship Fund be created.

The fund is modelled on the Early Years Covid Support Grant that was available to providers during the time of the Covid pandemic which provided support to settings that experienced short term financial difficulties. The actual take up of this fund was comparatively low, however it provided a level of security and flexibility to ensure that placements could be maintained while support was provided while the provider returned to a more secure footing.

**.04 Proposal**

The Local Authority has a duty to ensure there are sufficient Early Years provider capacity in their local area. It is therefore incumbent on the LA to support where possible providers that find they need short term support to sustain their provision and therefore ensure sufficiency of early years placements. It is for this reason that Early Years Hardship Fund is being proposed. We also recognise the level of pressure face by all settings, so we propose to keep £50k aside for the Early Years Hardship Fund and distribute the remaining funds of £206,799 as per previous methodology to settings before the end of March based on the number of actual funded hours in 2021-22. This equates to just over 10 pence per hour.

**Eligibility**

- The Grant is available to Ofsted registered Early Years settings within the Borough of Wokingham

- The Grant is available to those settings who face financial challenge in meeting the immediate fixed costs associated with continuing their early years business in the short term.
- The Grant is available to eligible settings who are registered to claim the 2-, 3- or 4-year-old funding, it is not intended to replace such funding. Settings must demonstrate that they have made appropriate use of existing funding streams and that there is no financial mismanagement.
- As part of the application process settings will confirm that all other appropriate funding streams have been utilised.
- Settings agree that WBC officers may monitor the use of the grant to ensure it is being used for the purpose detailed in the application.

### Overarching Principles

- The grant is intended to support the sustainability of provision across the borough.
- Settings that apply for the grant can be assured of discretion.
- The grant requires an 'open book' approach, settings that apply for the grant must be willing to demonstrate e.g. short term inability to meet fixed costs, and the reason for such could not have been anticipated and must be linked to short term financial pressures.
- The grant is not dependent on setting type or size.
- The grant can only be awarded to eligible settings.
- The grant does not have to be repaid.
- Settings may only apply for the grant once.
- The grant is not intended to replace or duplicate any other grant funding available to the setting.
- All other avenues of financial support for which the setting is eligible must have been explored and utilised.
- The grant is available until the end of the 2023-2024 financial year or until the funding allocation has been exhausted.

### .05 **Transparency and monitoring**

- The Early years team will monitor the applications to the grant on a quarterly basis
- The Early Years Team will report to Schools' Forum on the use of the grant and amounts allocated
- The Early Years Team will seek feedback from providers on the process and accessibility of the grant in January 2024.
- As a result of feedback the Early Years Team and Finance colleagues will make recommendations to the Early Years Task and Finish Group as to whether the Early Years Hardship Fund should continue in its present form.

### **Members of the Early Years Task and Finish Group**

Ian Morgan	Little Ducklings Day Care - EY Rep - Schools Forum
Kerrie Clifford	Ambleside Nursery - EY Rep - Schools Forum
Karen Edwards	Acorns Day Nursery

**Elaine Munro**  
**March 2023**