

Team spirit

What are schools forums and why do they matter? With funding set to take on an extra dimension from September with the free entitlement extension to 30 hours, *Charlotte Goddard* investigates



Despite making crucial funding decisions, and having been around for more than 15 years, schools forums have not permeated the consciousness of even old hands in the early years sector. 'I first became aware of the concept of a schools forum last month via a Facebook group,' says Keith Appleyard, treasurer of Fiveways Playgroup in Brighton for the past 30 years.

'We are one of the larger PVI organisations in Brighton, and we had never heard of the schools forum, or been contacted by the PVI representative,' he adds.

Intrigued, Mr Appleyard conducted an informal survey online. While he found evidence of good practice and awareness from people around

the country, an equal number of correspondents were in the dark, including one from Devon with 25 years' experience in the sector.

Yet schools forums have been around since 2002. Every local authority must, by law, have one, and this must include at least one representative from the PVI early years sector, as well as at least one from a maintained nursery school. The forum acts as adviser on the allocation of the education budget across schools and the early years. This funding is drawn from three funding blocks: schools, high needs and early years, with a specific focus on funding for SEN.

Although the groups generally have a consultative role, they also make some funding decisions, for example on how much early years

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funding a local authority should retain centrally.

IN THE KNOW

Statutory regulations state that forum members need to be easily contactable by the cohort they are representing and proactive in communicating decisions. But, says Mr Appleyard, 'The minutes and agenda are on the council website, but only if you know where to look for them. I'd like them to be emailed.'

Brighton and Hove council says early years providers are able to feed into its schools forum through the early years funding group, which is made up of representatives from a wider range of providers, including private, voluntary and school. 'Each year we discuss funding proposals for the following year with the early

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years group, and then a paper goes to the January meeting of the schools forum,' says a council spokesperson. 'This year, because of the changes to Government funding for early years, we consulted all early years providers on the changes and proposals. We then shared our proposals with the early years funding group and took a paper with recommendations to the schools forum meeting in January.'

Mr Appleyard says that while he did take part in a consultation, he and two other senior staff members who had each been there for 25 years 'did not recognise the existence of an early years funding group; and they have no idea who is supposedly representing them, as they've never been consulted, nor given any feedback, or been invited to participate directly.'

Indeed, despite the government guidelines, the PVI sector is not always represented. Wolverhampton's schools forum had no PVI representative since the previous representative's term ended in 2014. After what she says is a year of pushing the council to do something about this, Debbie Clarke, owner of Little Rascals Childcare, has just become the new PVI rep. 'I was contacting the early years team and they were putting it forwards to the [relevant] person, but I heard nothing,' she says.

Ms Clarke already represented PVI settings on Walsall's schools forum. 'There are other authorities out there without PVI representation,' she says.

'I am not sure schools forums see the need to have PVI representation, they are very much about the needs of schools, and they often gang up to protect the nursery schools.'

A DfE spokesperson says there must be 'fair representation' of the early years sector, and that agendas and minutes from these forums must be publicly available well in advance of each meeting. He adds, 'We do follow up on local authorities we don't believe are adhering to the guidelines.'

TAKING ACTION

The lack of representation is felt particularly in the area of special needs. 'Issues arise for the early years sector when top-up funding is required for a child with SEND,' says Nicky Gibson, inclusion manager at the Pre-School Learning Alliance. 'Unlike with schools, the early years PVI sector do not have an extra pot of money to dip into, so they need to apply to the schools forum, and success is variable.'

In some areas this is relatively straightforward, but in others, local authorities do not provide enough guidance to help providers make a robust application. 'The lack of success can be attributed to a range of factors,' she says. 'The lack of representation from the early years sector on the panel; no proper local system to administer these funds to settings; and non-robust applications from settings that don't have proper guidance.' The Alliance is advising set-



In Portsmouth, providers met up over funding rates

FURTHER INFORMATION

- <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/schools-forum-a-guide-for-schools-and-academies>
- https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/572724/Schools_forums_operational_and_good_practice_guide.pdf
- www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2012/2261/regulation/4/made

tings to ensure this is addressed.

In other areas of the country, nursery owners are taking direct action. Lucy Whitehead, owner of Rainbow Corner in Portsmouth, says, 'The PVI rep has never approached us regarding the topics discussed at these meetings or fed anything back. It's something that I am challenging.'

Ms Whitehead and other providers in the area have created The Portsmouth Funding Forum to feed into the schools forum. 'When the rates were released for April, we got told on the Tuesday, and found out this would go to cabinet on the following Monday for sign-off,' she says.

She adds, 'We had to rush to get our first meeting set up, but there was a good turnout. We agreed what we wanted to push back to the local authority, and two of our representatives were allowed to attend the cabinet meeting, and put our points to the schools forum.' ■

VIEWPOINT: BROMLEY SCHOOLS FORUM'S EARLY YEARS REP



Alison Regester is the owner of Parklands Nursery in Bromley, and has been early years representative

on the Bromley schools forum since 2006. Mrs Regester believes that involvement with the forum has been instrumental in securing additional inclusion funding to support work with children who have additional needs.

The forum usually meets each half term. It occasionally sets up smaller working parties to look at specific issues, such as the Early Years National Funding Formula, and these

groups share recommendations with the schools forum committee. Generally Mrs Regester is the only early years representative, but when there are specific early years issues to discuss, she is occasionally joined by another.

'Although I am there to represent early years, I am involved in all discussions, because decisions taken regarding schools funding or high-needs funding can have an impact on early years funding too,' says Mrs Regester. 'I give regular feedback to early years providers at the half-termly meetings of the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. These meetings are open to any childcare

provider in Bromley.'

The schools forum makes recommendations regarding how the Dedicated Schools Grant is allocated. 'This is very relevant to early years because it affects the level of basic rate funding we receive and what supplements providers get,' says Mrs Regester.

An officer from the education funding team attends the schools forum and has attended partnership meetings to explain the implications for providers. 'However,' Mrs Regester adds, 'in most cases the schools forum can only make recommendations. The decisions are taken by councillors.'

Mrs Regester believes that

early years providers in Bromley have a strong voice on the schools forum. 'There have been numerous occasions when I have felt that others on the schools forum have supported early years providers, with decisions being modified as a result of arguments I have been able to put forward,' she says. 'The frustration is that it is at central government level that new initiatives and policies are introduced, and the consultations at that level are frustratingly poor.'

'Through the schools forum we can raise concerns and ask questions, but how much this affects what happens in Bromley is governed by the statutory guidance from DfE.'