

Childcare Works Briefing 4: Schools Forum

Introduction

The powers and responsibilities and understanding of schools forum vary in their application in local areas. This paper aims to support a clear understanding of the role and remit, along with the relationship to the local authority.

Membership

We often hear the early years sector is under represented on schools forums. However, there is flexibility to expand that representation. Page 7 of the Education Funding Agencies (EFA) Schools forum operational and good practice guide describes the ability of the forum to be flexible with its membership in order to meet local priorities. Early years, and in particular the delivery of 30 hours, is a national and therefore local priority.

Powers

Schools forums are described in the aforementioned EFA guidance as generally “consultative” in nature. Local authorities are not permitted to delegate their decision making to a schools forum. Therefore, it is important to note schools forum advises the LA decision making process.

“11. Local authorities should be aware that the Local Government Act 2000 restrict the delegation of local authority decisions to Cabinet, a member of Cabinet, a Committee of Cabinet or an officer of the Council, which would not include schools forums. As a result the local authority cannot delegate its decision making powers to schools forum, e.g. decisions on the funding formula. “

The guidance lists a number of areas the schools forum can make a decision on following the recommended local authority proposal, including:

“Funding for central early years expenditure, which may include funding for checking eligibility of pupils for an early years place, the early years pupil premium and/or free school meals.”

Education Funding Agencies (EFA)

Schools Forum Operational and good practice guide

Therefore, and according to the EFA Schools forum powers and responsibilities (November 2016), schools forums can provide a decision on the overall early years funding block, but not on the formula within it. In the case of the formula the forum purely plays a consultative role.

What can you do to encourage a supportive schools forum?

1. Meet with the most senior local authority officer who reports to schools forum (director with responsibility for education, for example). Ensure they are aware of the schools forum powers relating to early years, and need for adequate and appropriate representation. Gain their support and confidence in relating to the forum.
2. Offer a briefing session or induction to schools forum members. Most representatives will have only working in the statutory school sector. They may need support in understanding: what the early years sector is, how the sector is made up locally, the differences between provider types, how the sector is funded and regulated, and the difference the sector makes to outcomes for children, social mobility, regeneration, safeguarding, health and wellbeing etcetera. Do not assume a thorough or specialist knowledge base.
3. Suggest visits to different provider types to support a greater understanding of the sector by members.

4. Deliver short sharp issue based papers to maintain a regular refresh of early years awareness. Use case studies and invite providers to present to illustrate your issues.
5. Request greater representation of a mix of early years providers to reflect the size and shape of your local market. Early years entitlements and 30 hours free childcare is a national and therefore local priority.
6. Brief the schools forum chair and lead officer regularly. Develop and maintain a positive relationship to ensure their support during meetings.
7. Identify champions within the forum, there may be schools who are delivering, commissioning or working with early years provision locally.
8. Share data and celebrate successes with members regularly to continuously show impact.
9. Be confident enough to challenge inappropriate behaviour during meetings, and complain to the chair and your senior officer if meetings become inappropriate.