|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Date:**  | 14 May 2020 |

Dear Colleagues

**Early Years Settings Re-opening**

I absolutely appreciate the struggles that early years providers and many other sectors have endured during this period and will continue to endure for some time. We are very thankful for all that our providers have done to support families, vulnerable children and children of critical workers. Our early years sector should be very proud of what they have achieved in such difficult circumstances.

As you know the Government has announced that, if the 5 tests they have set out are met, they will ask early years settings to begin welcoming all their children back again from 1st June, and it is likely that numbers will build up gradually

Of course, as you know very well, the task of ensuring safety for both staff and children, even if in smaller numbers to start with, and addressing the health, logistical and financial implications of the new requirements is not simple.

The prospect of dealing with all that will have to be done may be somewhat daunting, so we

have put together some initial information which we hope will help:

Risk assessment

The Early Years team has produced the attached risk assessment template which can be adapted to suit the needs of any setting. This risk assessment should hopefully assist in planning for re-opening or re-opening to more children and be a prompt for the things that you will need to consider prior to the 1st June 2020.

Re-opening your provision

Parents may be reluctant to return their children to early years provision and quite rightly it is their choice. If your setting has few or no critical workers, vulnerable children nor any parental demand then it is only practical to remain closed, however as the weeks go by parents’ situations may change, especially if parents are recalled from furlough and return to work.

If you do not open your setting immediately, it will be extremely important to continually monitor parental demand as you may need to open at some point before the end of the Summer term, or plan to manage opening in September.

Staffing

It is the decision of the setting or business if a staff member should remain on furlough. If the business requires staff to come back into employment, the appropriate risk assessment must be completed, and the appropriate Government Guidance followed.

If required to do so, staff need to return to work unless they have been identified as critically vulnerable. If after discussion or negotiation they choose not to return work and alternative deployment, e.g. working from home, is not possible, they would be required to take unpaid leave or resign their position, or the setting would need to look at terminating their contract. In all cases the appropriate statutory guidance must be followed.

In all cases there is an expectation that appropriate negotiations/discussions are held with all staff members as it should be the last resort to go down the route of termination.

Before staff return to work there needs to be opportunity for an induction back into the workplace. This needs to include an opportunity for staff to discuss their concerns and anxieties, and to agree appropriate strategies that support all staff to return to the workplace.

Early Years Entitlement (summer term 2020)

In March 2020 we made the commitment to allocate 100% of the funding up front to providers based on their estimate claim. Settings were paid in early April to ensure that they could remain financially viable and to support them through any period of closure.

The ‘actual form’ will be for accountancy purposes only and to determine what hours remain for each child from the Autumn term. There will be no ‘claw-back’ of unused hours.

There will be some settings that have provided or plan to provide more funded hours during this funding term than their original estimate claim. In these cases, providers will be able to apply for the COVID-19 Hardship Grant for this money. This grant is subject to a successful application process which has a financial test. If you wish to apply for this then please contact, your LA link worker for details and the appropriate application form.

For eligible children returning from 1st June 2020 it is expected that settings will offer their normal funded hours. Children’s ‘normal’ EYE hours must therefore continue to be deducted from parent invoices.

The total funded hours that eligible children would have claimed for the term, in line with the normal terms and conditions of the provider agreement, will be deducted from each child’s overall entitlement and the remaining hours can be claimed as normal from the Autumn term. This should be detailed on the ‘actual form’.

Additional financial support

Somerset has worked very hard to support providers, including offering a much more generous financial support package to the early years sector than most other Local Authorities. By the end of May in excess of £800,000 will have been distributed to providers through our Covid-19 Financial Support Grant and the Covid-19 Hardship Grant schemes.

The COVID-19 Financial Support Grant for settings continuing to care for vulnerable children and children of critical workers, has been adjusted this month and is in place. It is currently being reviewed in consultation with senior leaders due to the government’s announcement. There will continue to be support available from June 2020 and details of what this will look like will be announced soon.

Providers can continue, as announced previously, to apply for the COVID-19 Hardship Grant. Please contact your LA link worker for further details on this and for an application form.

It has always been our intention to do everything we can for our providers to ensure their future sustainability, but we are confined by our budget. Where budget remains, this will be distributed to our providers. As above, I anticipate that we will be able to inform the sector of the details of this within the next week.

Providers are also able to make use of the packages of financial support from the Government. Details of all the support available to businesses can be found by visiting:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/financial-support-for-businesses-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

Social and emotional needs of children and transition

We are also working on guidance and a toolkit of resources for settings and families to support the social and emotional wellbeing of their children transitioning back into setting. We hope to have this ready to send out within the next week.

In the meantime, please find attached a list of useful links that includes resources to support this and other wider themes.

Further guidance

We are in the challenging position of wanting to get as much information out to settings as soon as possible, but also not wanting to risk incorrectly second guessing what the Government guidance will say. This is especially important in terms of recommended numbers of children/ size of spaces/ total staff members etc. We must be led by Government recommendations on these matters. We anticipate that this guidance will be published early next week.

Ultimately it will be down to individual settings to determine what they deem to be safe working practices. Please be assured, however, that we are working incredibly hard to turn the information coming from the Government, around as quickly as possible.

If you require any further information, please contact your LA link officer.

 Yours sincerely,

 

Alison Jeffery

Early Years Lead and Primary Adviser

AJeffery@somerset.gov.uk