Early Years Collaborations – A Guide for Potential Leaders

Background

Kent’s refreshed Early Years and Childcare Strategy was introduced in 2014 against a backdrop of a revised statutory role for local authorities in quality improvement as well as a range of Kent County Council priorities and plans affecting children, families and young people. The Early Years and Childcare Strategy included, as part of a system-wide approach to continuous improvement, the following priority:

- The introduction of and support for early years and childcare provider collaborations, designed to build capacity and drive further improvement

In this context and with this aim in mind, early years collaborations began to be developed in 2014.

Why collaborations?

Our vision is for Kent to be the most forward looking area in England for education and learning so that we are the best place for children and young people to grow up, learn, develop and achieve. Kent should be a place where families thrive and all children learn and develop well from the earliest years so that they are ready to succeed at school, have excellent foundations for learning and are equipped well for achievement in life, no matter what their background.

In fulfilling this vision we aspire to achieve the following:

- To mitigate the effects of poverty, inequality and disadvantage through the provision of high quality early education and childcare, more effective support for parents and narrowing of the early development achievement gaps for all disadvantaged children
- To ensure increasing numbers of children are ‘school ready’ at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and make a successful transition to school
- To embed an integrated, multi-agency approach to early years and childcare provision and services
- To ensure better continuity of provision and multi-agency services from pre-birth, throughout the EYFS and into and beyond Key Stage One
- To embed a system wide approach to continuous improvement in early education and childcare provision that includes more collaborative networks of providers and the use of a comprehensive range of chargeable and centrally funded services.

Defining a collaboration

A possible definition for an Early Years Collaboration is:

A group of early years providers, working together in proactive, respectful and equal partnership for the greater good of, and best outcomes for, all the children and families they collectively serve
Forming collaborations

The majority of existing collaborations are formed by locality. Providers are not constrained by district boundaries and collaborations are free to set their own limits on how many providers are involved but between six and eight is considered a manageable number.

Where there are a number of leaders within a close geographical area or where collaborations become too large to be effective the Early Years and Childcare Service will arrange to meet face-to-face with the leaders to discuss how the split might take place and how the local collaborations may be formed. There is absolutely no reason why a collaboration cannot have more than one leader.

Agreeing ways of working

In order to agree exactly how the collaboration will work and to ensure staff behave in a respectful way towards others it is important to set out ‘terms of reference’ in advance. The length and content of this document is entirely down to the individual collaboration to decide. In order to assist with discussions, the Early Years and Childcare Service has produced a Collaborative Ways of Working Proforma which can be adapted to suit the needs of individual collaborations. This includes agreeing what happens when a provider leaves the collaboration and/or when someone acts outside of the agreed ‘code of conduct’. A copy of the Proforma is included as Appendix 1.

If new providers set up in the area of a collaboration it is up to the collaboration to decide whether or not to allow the new provider to join. If other local providers who haven’t previously engaged also want to join then the group must decide at what point the collaboration divides into two or more further collaborations and who will lead the new ones.

Being part of a collaboration should not be an onerous task and everyone should feel they have an equal share of the responsibility for its success.

Leading a collaboration

Being a collaboration leader does not mean being ‘in charge’ or taking responsibility for all of the work of the collaboration. However the position of collaboration leader is intended to be one of influence and inspiration. Excellent knowledge of good practice in early years and strong leadership skills are required to ensure that the whole collaboration is able to display the following characteristics of an effective collaboration which have been agreed by existing early years collaboration leaders:

- The collaboration leader or leaders have strong leadership skills and use a cooperative and empowering approach to leading
- All members of the collaboration are engaged in its life and work
- The collaboration shares a firm understanding of the characteristics of a good quality early years setting
• Collaboration members have developed good relationships such that they feel able to provide feedback and challenge to each other or share their own challenges such as the receipt of an Ofsted judgement of Requires Improvement or Inadequate
• Collaboration members share best practice such as via meetings and peer visits
• The collaboration cooperates to organise training and other forms of professional development for its members
• Where funding has been held by the collaboration, all members have been involved in deciding how this has been spent
• The collaboration has or is undertaking meaningful evaluation of its activity which relates to teaching and learning within member settings
• The collaboration bases its development on the use of this and other data to identify the future direction of travel
• The collaboration is open to inviting other professionals to their meetings to facilitate partnership working
• All members participate in driving the collaboration forwards taking responsibility for tasks and actions
• Members of staff within each member setting are aware of the collaboration membership and its aims
• The collaboration is effectively organised with procedures and paperwork in place such as terms of reference and development plans.

Support is offered to collaboration leaders through:

• The facilitation of initial meetings to set up a new collaboration
• The offer of The Education People staff attendance at collaboration meetings by invitation to assist in the development of a collaboration plan or to address particular issues
• The provision of three Leaders Days throughout the year - the content of these sessions will enable the development of leadership skills and support the development of the collaborations for example through the analysis of data or support in working in partnership with others
• The signposting of other settings to the collaboration.

There is an expectation that all collaboration leaders, whether an individual or joint leader, have an Ofsted judgement of Good or better for their own setting. There is also an expectation that any leader whose setting receives a judgement of less than Good steps down from the position of collaboration leader.

Acknowledging that this is may be a difficult time for the setting leader, the process for supporting leaders in the position of having received an Ofsted Inadequate or Requires Improvement judgement is as follows:

• The Early Years and Childcare Service will identify a member of staff who will sensitively approach the leader and agree on how the issues regarding the collaboration leadership will be addressed
• Initial discussions will identify with the collaboration leader how they would prefer to manage their resignation with the collaboration members, offering support to do so. If the leader is a lone collaboration leader it may be possible to identify potential leaders during this discussion. The Partnership and Integration Team can offer support to the leader through visiting the leader’s setting or attending a collaboration meeting.

• Once the initial discussion with the leader has taken place, the Partnership and Integration Team will follow up in writing regarding the expectation to resign from the position and offering support to do so if required.

• Once the Ofsted judgement becomes public and in discussion with the leaving collaboration leader, the Partnership and Integration Team will formally contact potential new leaders.

Where a collaboration leader chooses not to resign from the position or where the collaboration members are not in agreement with the decision, The Education People is not able to continue to support the collaboration through the Leaders’ Events and signposting of other settings to the collaboration.

Following a positive re-inspection for the exiting leader’s setting, the Early Years and Childcare Service will support discussions for the reinstatement of the leader to individual or joint leader status.
Appendix 1

Early Years and Childcare Collaboration
Ways of Working

Nature of collaboration

Purpose
In this section include details of when the collaboration was set up and include a few bullet points on what the aims of the group are e.g.

- To identify, discuss and address issues of common concern
- To facilitate access to support and resources that are available from KCC/The Education People and other training providers
- To exchange ideas, strengthen skills and knowledge and share examples of good practice
- To facilitate a shared understanding of the children and families within the local community – promote partnership working to narrow achievement gaps, improve standards and meet the needs of children and families (such as the provision of 30 hours Free Entitlement).

Leadership
Consider the various options for leading the collaboration, for example, is it to be joint or rotated? Where leadership is to be undertaken by one person, consider how it will be managed should this leader have need to resign the position.

Membership
Membership of the Group is open to those who XXXXX
Include details of who can and cannot be a member of the group and the reasons for this.
Include details of who will Chair the meetings and what the election process for this will be.
Include details of who will support the administration of the group and how this will be decided.

Meeting Management
The Group will determine the frequency, dates and venues for its meetings but it would be good to consider at least once a quarter.
The Group will determine how action points/minutes will be distributed to group members and how the Group will communicate between meetings.

This could include:
- At least three meetings will be held each year organised and chaired by XXX
- Items for the agenda will be generated by members of the group
- Meeting papers will be circulated by e-mail at least one week in advance of the meetings
- Meetings may include small group discussions to share experiences and learning
• Non-members may be invited to join the group on a one-off basis to aid discussion of a particular topic
• Administration of the group will be provided by XXXX

Behaviours
The collaboration must decide what is expected of each member of the group e.g.
• Every provider will have their voice heard and their views will be respected by the whole group
• Members must attend at least 80% of meetings in order to remain in the group

Other points to note are:
• What happens when a member of the collaboration leaves?
• What happens when a new member wants to join?
• What is the optimum size of the collaboration before it needs to split into smaller groups?
• Who will lead the newly formed collaboration?

Review
e.g. The Group will review the relevance and value of its work on an annual basis.
Decide how often you will review:
• The work of the collaboration
• The Terms of Reference/Ways of Working
• The Membership
• Election of Chair/Administrator

Sharing of information and resources including confidential materials
In this section include how you will share information and resources; whose responsibility it is to ensure items are confidential and remain within the Group; what happens to documents that are shared including any copyright; whether there will be a web-based forum with password protection.

Decision Making
In this section include how decisions will be made ensuring details such as voting, majority rule, etc. are clearly outlined.

Budget
If money is available for the Group to spend jointly include details of how this will be managed; how decisions of spend will be decided; what happens in the event of a disagreement, etc.