Early education partnerships: webinar Q&A

Funding

How much funding is available, and are the proposed figures for the full 3 years?

Funding is available for up to 100 partnerships in year 1.

The amount that each partnership receives in year 1 will vary according to how many members (early years providers and schools) are in the proposed partnership:

- partnerships with 2 to 4 partner organisations will receive up to £12,500
- partnerships with 5 to 9 partner organisations will receive up to £25,000
- partnerships with 10 to 14 partner organisations will receive up to £37,500
- partnerships with 15 or more partner organisations will receive up to £50,000

The initiative is intended to run for **3 years**, but year 1 is a development phase. Grants for year 1 will be issued to successful applicants to use during the year 1 development phase, from September 2026 to March 2027.

Partnerships receiving year 1 funding will need to submit a costed proposal for years 2 and 3 by January 2027. Further guidance on this will be published later and communicated to successful partnerships.

What can the funding be used for?

Partnerships will have the flexibility to plan and deliver their activities according to local need, within at least one of the four priority areas:

- continuity of learning
- professional development and shared practice
- family engagement
- information and resource sharing

Detailed information about what funding can and should be used for in year 1 is available in the early education partnerships year 1 guidance – please see the section ‘how to use year 1 funding’.

Partnerships that are awarded year 1 funding will need to submit an application for years 2 and 3 by January 2027. Guidance for year 2 of the initiative, including information about how to submit these proposals, will be issued later this year.

Grant funding is provided for revenue expenditure only and must be used to support the delivery of partnership activities as outlined in this guidance and in line with the year 1 funding objectives. Eligible revenue expenditure includes, but is not limited to:

- staff time and backfill costs directly related to partnership activity
- professional development

- venue hire
- travel and subsistence
- consumable materials
- externally commissioned support or training

All funding is subject to the terms and conditions set out in the department's grant funding agreement.

Funding cannot be used for capital expenditure or activities that duplicate existing government-funded provision.

Will there be future funding or application opportunities?

We are not expecting future application rounds for this initiative, so we could encourage you to apply by 17 July 2026 if you would like to be considered.

There is no commitment for funding beyond this initiative. Partnership activity should embed practice to support sustainability beyond the delivery period.

How will funding be divided within the partnership?

Our expectation is that all early years providers and schools within a partnership have access to the funding for costs incurred as part of partnership activities.

The partnership grant administrator will be responsible for distributing funding to all members of a partnership. Although the funding will be distributed by DfE to the partnership grant administrator to do this, the division of funds is to be collectively agreed upon by all partnership members.

All members of the partnership will share leadership of the work and are expected to work collaboratively, including by establishing governance arrangements that are clear, proportionate and effective, and enable meaningful joint decision making and shared accountability. Partnerships will need to decide how they divide and distribute funding within the partnership to best fulfil their aims and meet the needs of local communities.

Further information about roles and responsibilities is available in the partnership guide.

Why are early education partnerships and stronger practice hubs funded and reception networks aren't?

We know there is willingness and professional generosity from great schools to support others on Reception, and we had an overwhelming number of schools apply to be reception networks. Our expectations on the network are light touch, and there are fewer requirements on reception networks' lead schools than there are on stronger practice hubs and early education partnerships

We encourage reception networks to join a partnership to benefit from early education partnerships funding, to build on what they've already started to do

through reception networks. However, you must not duplicate or displace existing initiatives.

We recognise that there are already examples of good practice and partnership working across the country, and we encourage early years providers and schools to build on what is already in place. Partnerships should work with their local reception networks, stronger practice hubs, Best Start Family Hubs and other local services or community support.

Partnership formation, membership and eligibility

How should partnerships be formed and do they need to be established before applying?

Early years settings (including childminders) and schools are encouraged to engage with other schools and providers in their local area to establish a group who wish to form a partnership. They could use local networks and existing relationships or seek out new connections. Local authorities, multi-academy trusts, stronger practice hubs, reception networks and others are encouraged to support and facilitate this where possible so that schools and providers can also reach out to them if they are interested in forming or joining a partnership.

Although a state-funded primary school will act as the partnership grant administrator and must submit the application on behalf of the partnership, it does not need to be them who initiate the contact or partnership formation. For example, a PVI nursery and childminder may decide they are interested in forming a partnership, and could approach or connect with local primary schools and other early years providers to discuss forming a partnership. They would all then agree which primary school will be the partnership grant administrator

Partnerships will need to be formed prior to applying; all members (early years providers and schools) should agree they will be included in the partnership and should agree the primary school that will be the partnership grant administrator.

The partnership grant administrator will need to provide details about each member of their partnership in the application form. All application form questions are set out in our year 1 guidance, enabling partnerships to see what is required, discuss and agree their application before it is submitted by the partnership grant administrator.

How many should be in a partnership - is there a minimum or maximum number of partners allowed in a partnership?

Partnerships have the flexibility to form and deliver according to local need and what would work best for their local context.

As a minimum, every partnership must include:

- **at least one state-funded primary school** with a reception cohort

- **at least one other type of early years provider** (for example, a group-based provider, a school-based nursery, a maintained nursery school, a childminder)

As long as partnerships meet this minimum, they can be of any size. There is no upper limit, although the application form is limited to 50.

All partners are required to take an active role in decision making and delivery, so realistic consideration should be made as to how many partners will be most effective in meeting local needs. The size of the partnership is suitable for facilitating collaboration and support across the partnership.

Can a partnership contain more than one primary school?

Yes, if there is more than one school in a partnership, members of the partnership should agree which primary school will act as the partnership grant administrator.

As a **minimum**, every partnership must include:

- **at least one state-funded primary school** with a reception cohort
- **at least one other type of early years provider** (for example, a group-based provider, a school-based nursery, a maintained nursery school, a childminder)

Can a partnership be between a school and their own school-based nursery?

A partnership cannot **solely** be between a primary school and their own school-based nursery or any other which is managed by the school. A school and their school-based nursery can both be part of the same partnership, but it must include other early years providers or schools too.

Can settings be part of more than one partnership?

Yes, schools and early years providers can be members of more than one partnership. You may choose to be a member of more than one partnership if, for example, your feeder early years providers are members of different partnerships. However, a school that is a partnership grant administrator cannot be the partnership grant administrator for more than one partnership.

While there is no limit on how many partnerships a member can be part of, each setting should consider their capacity to be able to effectively participate in decision-making and delivery of activities within any partnerships they are a member of.

Can partnerships change and grow after they have applied or in years 2 and 3?

Partnerships are expected to be established before the application is submitted, and year 1 focuses on strengthening those relationships and governance arrangements.

Partnerships will be expected to establish their own partnership governance arrangements that enable meaningful joint decision making and shared accountability for the partnership. If any partnership would like to change the

members, it will need to be agreed by all members. Partnerships will need to inform the department if they intend to make changes to their members - this may be subject to discussion and agreement with the department.

Can a Best Start Family Hub, third sector organisation, stronger practice hub, etc be a member of a partnership?

All organisations within a partnership must either be an early years provider or a state-funded primary school with a reception cohort. We do however encourage partnerships to collaborate with organisations in their area, provided this addresses identified local needs and aligns with partnership activity that is focused on children's development, wellbeing and readiness for reception.

Will larger partnerships with more reach be prioritised?

No, we hope to see a good mix of partnership sizes and geographical spread as part of the sifting process.

The number of children reached may be used if a tiebreak is required between applications, in the event that we need to take a decision between partnerships with equal prioritisation (based on prioritisation criteria) that have passed the assessment.

Further information about how applications will be assessed, including prioritisation criteria, is available in the year 1 application guidance.

Can there be multiple partnerships in the same area? / Is there a limit to the number of partnerships in a given area or local authority?

There is no limit to the number of partnerships in a given region or local authority – there may be multiple partnerships in the same local authority or area. Each application will be assessed on its own merits.

However, we hope to see a good mix of partnership sizes and geographical spread as part of the sifting process. To ensure we have a broad range of delivery contexts, the department may at its discretion adjust the number of partnerships if there are particular areas of the country or sizes of partnership that are significantly under-represented.

Our intention is that partnerships offer local support and collaboration. However, there is no defined limit to the geographical spread of providers and schools within a partnership, recognising that what is considered ‘local’ may vary in different areas of the country, such as between rural and urban areas. For the same reason, partnerships may form across local authority boundaries.

Proposed partnerships should consider local challenges and needs in the context of their local area and show they are able to coordinate effectively across all partners and with local support and services.

Partnership grant administrator

Can a maintained nursery school be the partnership grant administrator?

We recognise the significant interest in this question and the strength of feeling from the MNS sector. MNSs play a vital and respected role within the early years system, and we are aware of the expertise, leadership, and established practice they bring in relation to school readiness, transitions, and supporting children with additional needs.

However, having reviewed the position, we have concluded that MNSs will not be eligible to act as the PGA for partnerships.

In reaching this position, we have considered the intent behind the PGA role. Although the PGA is responsible for administering funding, the guidance is explicit that this does not give that organisation authority to direct or control the partnership. Decisions on priorities and delivery should be made collectively and on an equal basis by all partners. We want to ensure that this principle remains clear and consistently applied across all prospective partnerships from the outset.

This decision also reflects the need to remain consistent with the published guidance, which clearly sets out that the PGA must be a state-funded primary school. While we fully acknowledge that the funding mechanisms for MNSs are similar, introducing a change at this stage would create inconsistency with the guidance already shared with the sector, including via our consultation group which had MNS representation, and agreed with ministers. This could also be unfair to partnerships who have already started making arrangements / preparing their applications on the basis of the guidance.

MNSs remain a key and valued part of the initiative. The eligibility criteria require partnerships to include at least one state-funded primary school alongside at least one pre-reception early years provider. This means MNSs can play a central role as full partners within partnerships, working alongside a primary school that acts as the PGA.

Can a local authority or multi-academy trust act as the partnership grant administrator?

No, the partnership grant administrator must be a state-funded primary school. More than one primary school may be in a partnership, but all partners must decide on one to act as the partnership grant administrator.

We would encourage partnerships to engage with their local authority, and MAT if applicable, about forming a partnership and as they plan and deliver partnership activities. However, local authority endorsement is not required as part of the application.

We will provide details of successful partnerships, including contact details for the partnership grant administrator in each partnership, with local authorities and multi-academy trusts.

How much capacity would the PGA need in order to fulfil their role?

The capacity required will vary according to local context and the size of the partnership. We expect some of the funding could be used to cover time required for the partnership grant administrator role.

Partnership grant administrators should consider whether they have the capacity to fulfil this role, and all partners should agree which primary school will be the partnership grant administrator. This is an administrative role, not a leadership role – leadership and decision making should be collective and shared across the partnership.

Further information about roles and responsibilities is available in the partnership guide.

Partnership activities

What activities are partnerships expected to deliver?

Partnerships have the flexibility to decide what activities they will deliver under the initiative according to local needs and contexts, providing they fall into at least one of the 4 priority areas outlined in the partnership guide:

- continuity of learning
- professional development and shared practice
- family engagement
- information and resource sharing

For guidance during year 1, partnerships could:

- establish governance arrangements
- build relationships between partners
- understand local need
- engage wider stakeholders
- develop plans for years 2 and 3
- attend DfE or delivery partner support events

We will be running a series of webinars during the year 1 development phase to share evidence and best practice examples to help partnerships to plan their activities. We will also be onboarding a delivery partner to support partnerships in the development of their costed proposals for years 2 and 3.

Further information about the priority areas and what partnerships should do in year 1, is in the partnership guide and year 1 guidance.

Dates

Is the application deadline fixed, and will late applications or deadline extensions be considered?

We appreciate that the timing of the application window isn't ideal and that this is a busy time of year for you all. However, to utilise the funding available within this financial year and give successful partnerships time to develop their costed proposals in year 1, we must assess applications over the Summer to notify successful partnerships in September.

Therefore, it is a hard deadline of Friday 17 July 2026, extension requests cannot be accommodated, and late applications may not be considered.

What are the key dates?

- application deadline: 23:59 on Friday 17 July 2026
- funding agreements issued: September 2026 (indicative)
- year 1 implementation: October 2026 to March 2027 (indicative)
- support webinars and best practice forums: October 2026 to March 2027 (indicative)

Reporting, monitoring and assurance requirements

What monitoring, reporting and evaluation will be required and who is responsible for it?

We are aiming to keep the reporting burden to a minimum. The partnership grant administrator will need to keep a record of spend, how the year 1 grant is being used, and how the objectives are being achieved. In year 1 funding will be issued in either 1 or 2 tranches. If there are 2 tranches of payment the partnership grant administrator will be required to submit proof of eligible expenditure of the first tranche of funding, before receiving a second tranche.

The PGA will also be responsible for completing year-end assurance. This will be through a statement of grant usage which will form part of the grand funding agreement, which will be due no later than end of April 2027 for year 1 funding.

We are seeking to appoint a delivery partner who will be responsible for collection of all monitoring, reporting, and evaluation. Full details of the reporting requirements will be provided in the grant funding agreement issued to successful partnerships, and further guidance for year 2 and 3 will be provided at a later date.

Will you be sending a return for successful applicants to complete at the end of every year - will funding be ring-fenced?

The funding for year 1 will be via section 14 grant and the funding must be used in line with conditions outlined in the grant funding agreement, but this is not a ring-fenced grant. The partnership grant administrator will be responsible for completing year-end assurance. This will be through a statement of grant usage which will form part of the grand funding agreement, which will be due no later than end of April 2027 for year 1 funding.

In year 1, funding will be issued in either 1 or 2 tranches. If there are 2 tranches, the partnership grant administrators will need to submit proof of eligible expenditure of the first tranche before second tranche payments are issued.

Delivery partner procurement

Is the timeframe for procurement/appointment of a national delivery partner running concurrently in parallel or have they already been selected?

The procurement of a delivery partner is running concurrently. We intend to appoint a delivery partner to support partnerships in planning and delivering their agreed activities, embedding evidence-informed practice, and sharing guidance and learning across all partnerships to improve school readiness and transitions from pre-reception early years settings into reception.

Once onboarded, the delivery partner will support partnerships to develop costed proposals for years 2 and 3 of the initiative, as well as provide the tools, guidance and support needed to progress with delivery.