

Designing and Facilitating Effective Networks: An Early Years Stronger Practice Hub Guide



***Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs -
Working Together to Strengthen Practice***

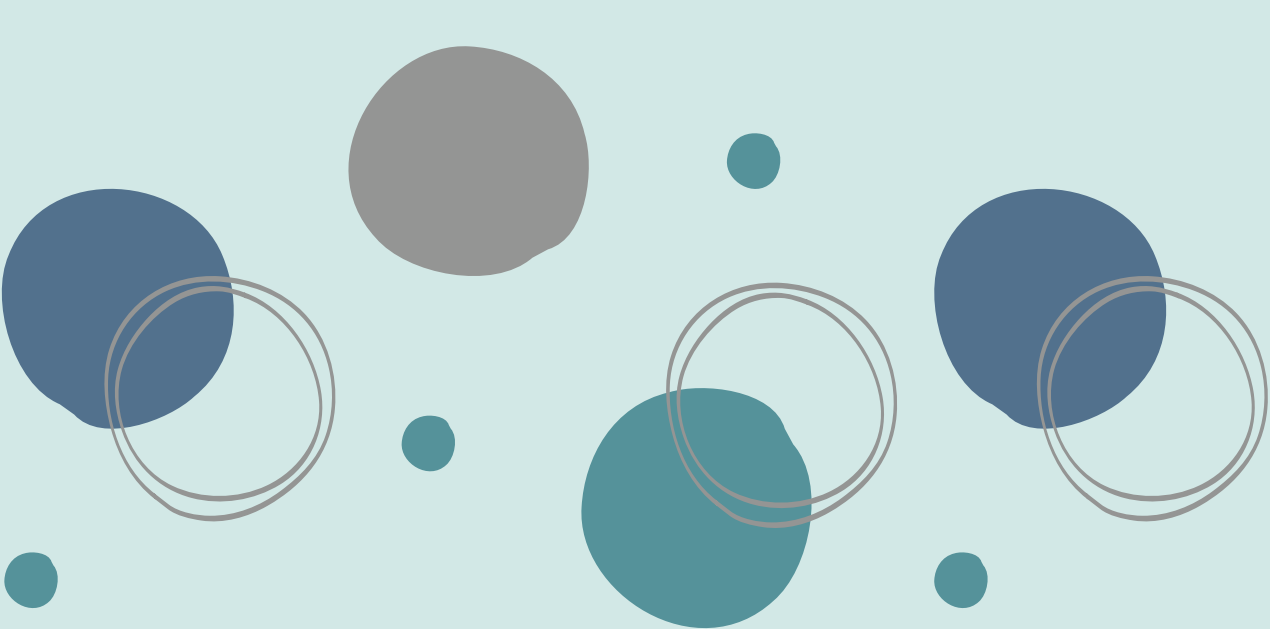


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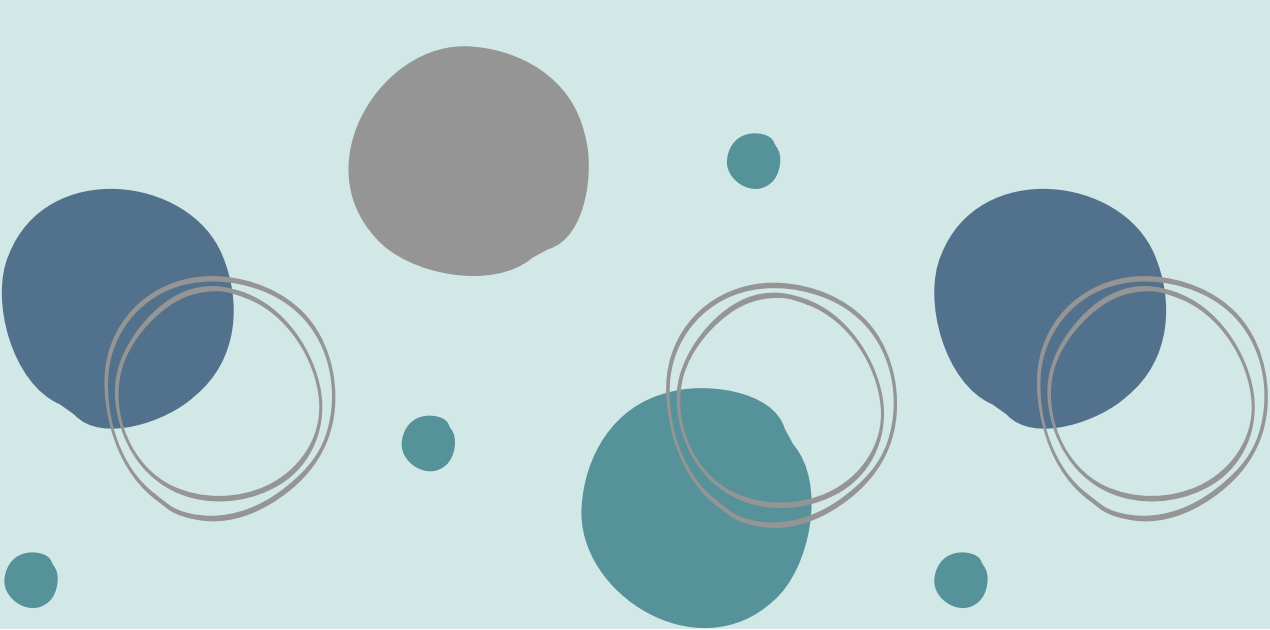
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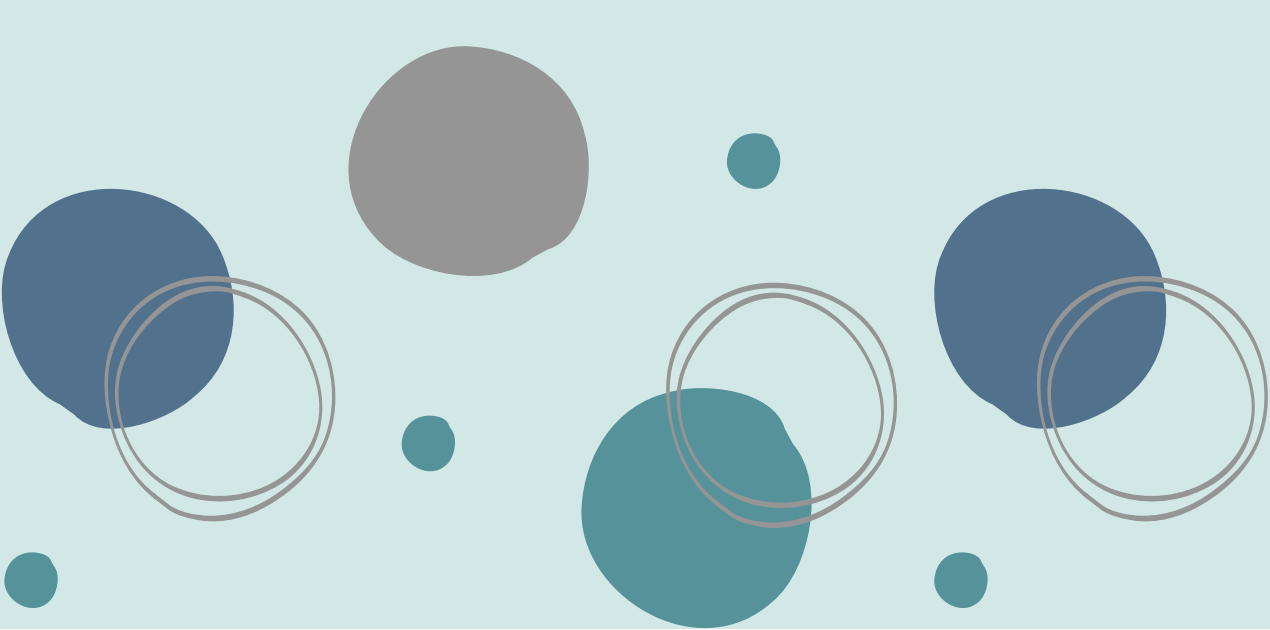
Introduction

This guide has been co-produced by a group of Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs (EYSPH) to support both new and established EYSPHs in designing and delivering effective networks for early years practitioners. This guide is intended primarily for Hub leads and staff, and partners involved in planning and facilitating network activity. It will be most useful for those establishing new networks, reviewing existing ones, or responding to emerging local priorities.

The EYSPH involved in this project include;

- Early Years South West Stronger Practice Hub
- Heart Midlands Early Years Stronger Hub
- East of England Early Years Stronger Practice Hub

The guide draws together research evidence, insights from existing EYSPH, and useful practical advice to support professional development, build social connection, and support information sharing. It is designed to be used flexibly for planning, delivery, reflection, and reporting, with different sections supporting different stages of network development, depending on local context and need. The aim is to create engaging, inclusive, and evidence-informed networks that strengthen practice and improve outcomes for children.



Section 1. What are networks?

For this guide, a network is a collaborative group of early years practitioners, who come together to share knowledge, expertise and effective practice. Networks are designed to offer support, reduce professional isolation and provide access to professional development often focusing on local or regional needs.

By bringing practitioners together regularly over time, networks provide opportunities for shared learning, reflection, and sustained improvement.

Why networks support effective professional development

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) *Effective Professional Development Guidance Report* highlights that professional development is most effective when it is sustained over time and includes opportunities to:

- build knowledge
- develop motivation
- practise new techniques
- embed changes in practice

Networks can support this by providing regular, collaborative opportunities for practitioners to learn together, test ideas in practice, and reflect on what is working. This can make them more effective than one off training sessions, which rarely lead to lasting change.

When does it become a network?

A network is formed when a group of practitioners begin to meet on a regular basis. The frequency of the meetings can vary depending on the needs of the sector or group that is attending the network. The duration of the network can also vary depending on the focus or need.

For example, some may help meet a short term objective, e.g., supporting the sector with the implementation of a policy change through the reception network. Others may have a longer-term duration and aim to build the skills of the attendees, e.g., monthly SEND network, a half termly childminder network or a fortnightly apprentice network.

What are the possible starting points for networks?

A network can begin from a variety of differing starting points, depending on local context, practitioner needs, and existing structures. These could be:

- Identify any existing networks and provide support and collaborative working.
- After auditing and fact finding, establishing a new network to meet an identified need.
- Using a conference or training event as a starting point, establishing a network to provide professional development or ongoing support for attendees.
- Responding to a change in policy or practice.

What format can networks take?

A network needs to be organised in a way that it is accessible for all participants. This can be:

- A virtual network
- A face-to-face network
- A hybrid network (a blend of virtual and face to face meetings)

Section 2. What do networks do?

Networks can provide an opportunity for peer connection, mutual support and access to a range of learning opportunities. However, making the most of them requires intentional, deliberate planning and support.

This could include:

- Providing opportunities for collaborative practice, for example visiting other settings to observe and share practice.
- Providing opportunities for practitioners to reflect on effective practice and gain support when facing challenges. ([See Case Study 5](#)).
- Providing a platform to share high quality provision and practice, which could improve the outcomes for all children. ([See Case Study 1](#)).
- Sharing timely local and national updates.
- Supporting practitioners to plan, trial and reflect on small changes in their own setting.
- Providing bespoke professional development based on evidence-informed practice, with a specific focus on supporting implementation.

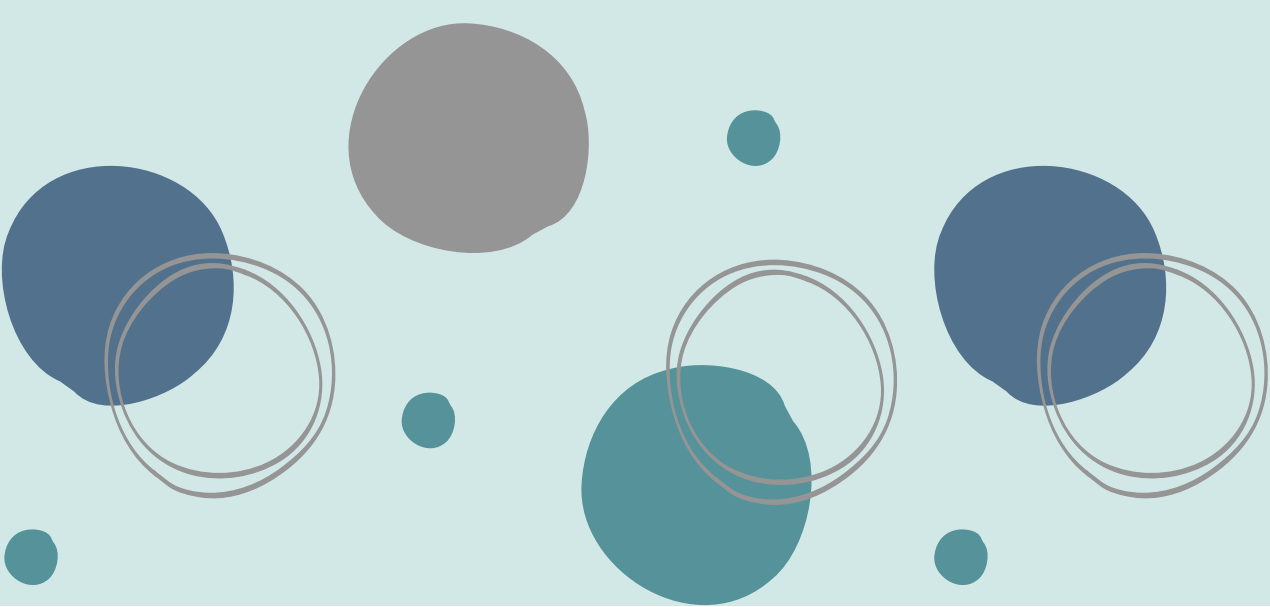


Section 3. Designing and facilitating an effective network

Networks are established for a range of purposes. Some focus on sharing information and updates, others prioritise reducing professional isolation and strengthening relationships, and many aim to support professional development and changes in practice. While networks often combine several aims, one usually takes priority. Being clear about this purpose ensures that content, format and facilitation remain appropriate and proportionate.

EEF's *A School's Guide to Implementation* highlights that sustained improvement is more likely when change is supported by a clear, structured process. It describes four flexible and overlapping phases: Explore, Prepare, Deliver and Sustain, and emphasises that implementation is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event.

The Prepare–Design–Facilitate–Evaluate structure in this guide reflects this approach. It is intended to help Hubs plan carefully, deliver effectively, learn from experience, and support practitioners to embed changes in practice over time.



Prepare

Understand Practitioner Needs and Shape Content & Format Accordingly

Effective networks begin with a clear understanding of who they are for and what they need. Identify the target group, the challenges they face, and their levels of confidence and experience. Gather practitioner voice –such as through a short pre-network survey– to identify priority topics, preferred formats, accessibility considerations, and barriers to participation.

Use this insight to shape the content, structure and delivery method. Sessions should be planned in manageable, accessible chunks that build on existing knowledge, avoid cognitive overload, and include time for reflection.

Practical example

An EYSPH planning a network for childminders sends a short survey asking about preferred times, key challenges and priority themes. Responses show strong interest in communication and language, and a preference for short, practical in-person sessions. The EYSPH designs a three-session series held in local family hubs, each including modelling, discussion and a short reflective task. ([See Case Study 3](#)).

Map, Learn From, and Build on Existing Networks

Understanding the current landscape of local and regional networks ensures your offer is purposeful and complementary. Mapping what already exists—such as LA led groups, sector forums or informal practitioner meet-ups—prevents duplication and identifies opportunities for collaboration. Observing or attending established networks provides insight into effective formats, facilitation styles and engagement strategies. This can be an opportunity for you to strengthen existing network activity with lessons from here.

Planning, Timelines and Resourcing

Clear planning supports strong engagement and sustainability. Consider:

- Whether the network is time-limited or ongoing
- Preparation time for planning, research, promotion and recruitment
- Capacity and expectations for facilitators and participants
- A realistic timeline for content development and delivery
- Carry out quality assurance on network facilitator to ensure high quality evidence informed PD will be delivered which is aligned with EYSPH aims and objectives.
- Make plans to ensure hub staff are able to attend network meetings regularly to continue to monitor delivery.
- Ensure everyone is aware of or able to access the safeguarding procedures and follow due process.

Plan for Data and Feedback

Identify from the outset what data you need for monitoring, reporting and evaluating impact. Plan how this will be collected (e.g., attendance, surveys, reflections, engagement metrics) and how it will be used to refine future sessions. Build in simple, regular mechanisms for gathering practitioner voice.

Draw on Partners and Local Expertise

Work with partners who can add value, extend reach or contribute specialist expertise. This may include local leaders, subject specialists, researchers or experienced practitioners. Their insight strengthens content quality and ensures the network reflects local context and priorities. EYSPHs working collaboratively ensures best value for money. For example, if a hub is using an early years specialist to facilitate a network session, hubs could join together as clusters to deliver the session. (See Case Study 2).

What to avoid when planning a network:

- Avoid starting a new network when the sector or Local Authority is already facilitating a similar offer.
- Avoid starting a network without first understanding what the sector requires in your region.
- Avoid making meetings too content heavy, which can lead to cognitive overload.
- Avoid spacing meetings too far apart or too close together, as this can lead to fatigue or disengagement.
- Avoid planning a fixed schedule of content without allowing for flexibility or adaptation.
- Avoid overloading the agenda. Make sure time is built in for practitioners to network informally and socialise.

Design

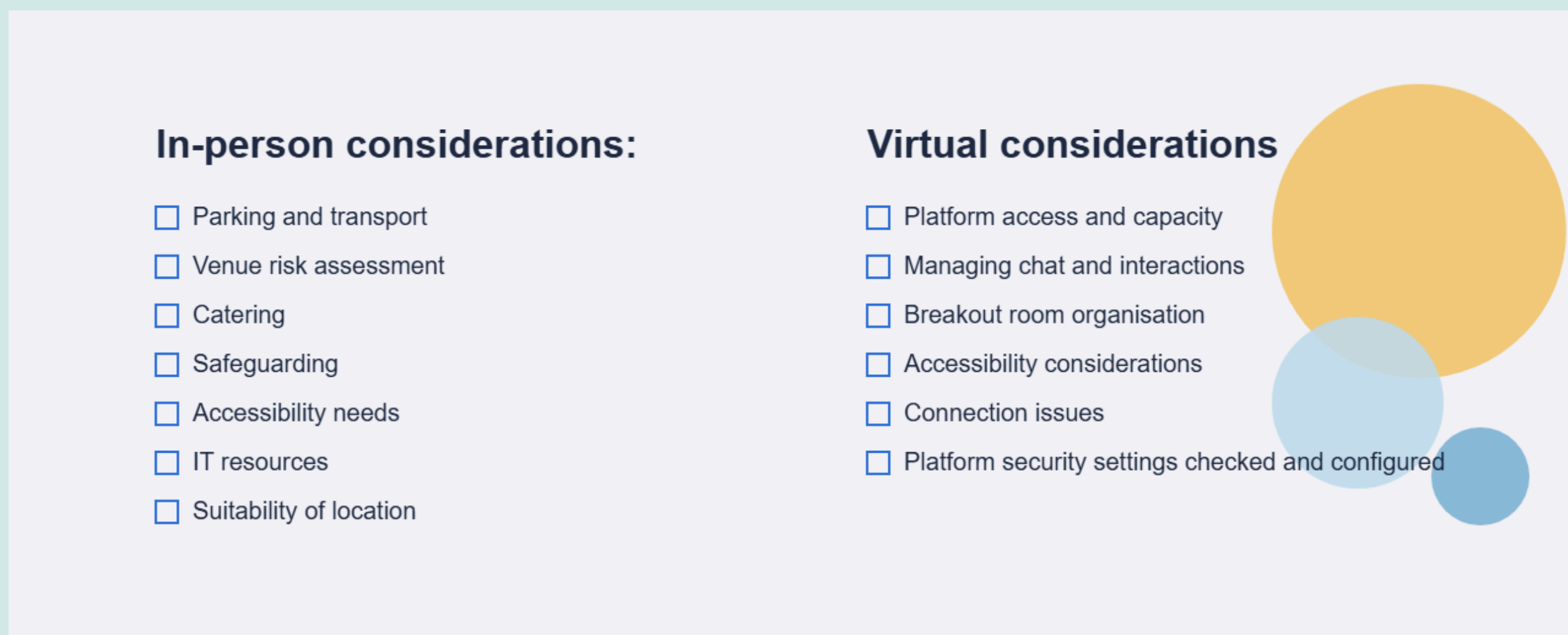
Building and Sustaining Participation

A clear recruitment and engagement strategy is essential. Early interest, through a blog, briefing or teaser, helps build momentum. Sharing dates well in advance supports consistent attendance. Strategic use of social media and professional networks broadens visibility, while targeted promotion ensures communication reaches the right audiences. For example, if you are delivering a childminder network in a specific area, promotion should be directed towards this group of early years practitioners. All promotional activity should operate within the parameters of the grant funding agreement.

Prepare the Delivery Environment

Ensure the environment—physical or virtual—is accessible, welcoming and fit for purpose. Anticipate technical challenges and plan for smooth facilitation.

Delivery Mode Checklist



In-person considerations:

- Parking and transport
- Venue risk assessment
- Catering
- Safeguarding
- Accessibility needs
- IT resources
- Suitability of location

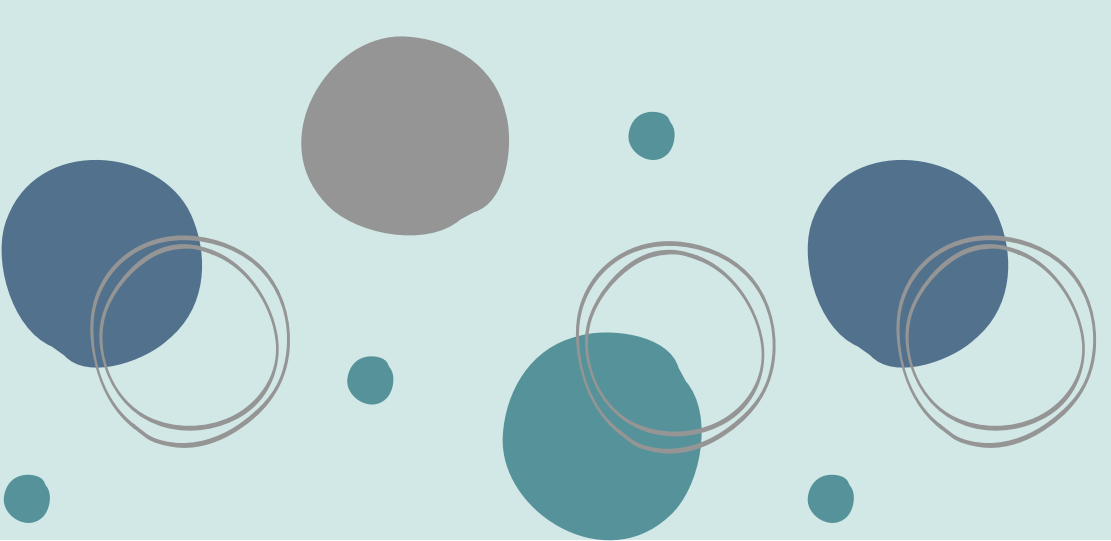
Virtual considerations

- Platform access and capacity
- Managing chat and interactions
- Breakout room organisation
- Accessibility considerations
- Connection issues
- Platform security settings checked and configured

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Design Networks Based on Purpose and Aims

Before planning, ask: **What is the main purpose of this network activity?** Networks may focus on one aim or combine several, but clarity prevents overload and ensures activities match the intended purpose. When combining aims, be clear about priorities and avoid overloading participants. Match activities, pace and expectations to the primary purpose.





Purposes of a Network

Professional Development



Specific aims:

- Improve interactions
- Embed new approaches
- Build confidence with evidence-informed strategies

Design tips:

- Structured reflection
- Action planning
- Modelling
- Peer problem-solving
- Follow-up tasks

Social Connection



Specific aims:

- Reduce isolation
- Build trust
- Provide emotional and practical support

Design tips:

- Welcoming environments
- Psychological safety
- Informal sharing
- Consistent routines

Information Sharing



Specific aims:

- Share policy changes
- Communicate local priorities
- Signpost services

Design tips:

- Clear updates
- Time for questions
- Written follow-up
- Signposting

Facilitate

Foster Continuous Learning

Maintain a reflective, adaptive approach. Review what works well and adjust elements that are less effective. Use participant feedback to refine future sessions and ensure content remains relevant.

Promote Active Participation

Use structured tools –polls, prompts, collaborative tasks– to encourage engagement and shared ownership. Ensure balanced, inclusive dialogue and create opportunities for practitioners to contribute their expertise. Also to encourage sustained attendance consider offering attendance certificates and a curriculum linked resource.

Responsive facilitation example If a mid-session poll shows participants want more practical modelling, facilitators may introduce a short demonstration or invite a peer example to keep the session aligned with need. (See Case Study 6).

Sustain Relationships, Accountability and Shared Ownership

Set clear expectations around participation and respectful conversations. Provide optional support between sessions –such as peer check-ins or communication channels– to maintain connection and continuity. Encourage participants to shape future agendas and share practice examples. (See Case Study 1).



Evaluate

Be Clear on Purpose

Evaluation should begin by revisiting the original purpose of the network. Reflect on why the network was established, why this group of practitioners was targeted, and what changes in confidence, knowledge, or practice were intended. Keeping this purpose in view helps ensure that evaluation focuses on meaningful improvement rather than simply reporting activity.

Review Impact and Engagement

Use a range of information, including attendance, participation, feedback, and practitioner reflections, to understand how effectively the network is supporting social connection, learning and development. Look beyond satisfaction and enjoyment to consider whether participants are developing stronger relationships, a deeper understanding of evidence and guidance, and whether this is contributing to changes in day-to-day practice within their settings. For example, use a pre and post practitioner confidence survey to inform impact and next steps.

Where appropriate, seek examples of how practitioners have trialled strategies, adapted routines, or shared learning with colleagues. This may be gathered through short surveys, follow-up conversations, reflection activities, or examples of practice shared within sessions.

From Engagement to Sustained Value

High attendance and positive feedback are important indicators of engagement, but they do not always show how a network is supporting longer-term benefit. Depending on the network's purpose, consider whether participants continue to draw on shared learning, resources, or connections over time, and whether this is helping to strengthen confidence, practice, or access to support. To promote and sustain engagement, build in practical approaches such as offering certificates, setting up shared online spaces (for example WhatsApp groups or Padlets), or creating opportunities for peer support between meetings. Reflect on the extent to which learning, relationships, or information shared through the network are revisited, reinforced, and built on through ongoing discussion and follow up.

Share Learning

Share key learning, emerging themes, and examples of effective practice with participants and wider professional communities. This may include successes, challenges, and lessons learned. Sharing learning strengthens collective understanding, supports continuous improvement, and helps build sustainable, high-quality networks across the sector.

Applying feedback

When analysing feedback, consider further support and wider professional development activity that has been identified as a need during the network. You may want to consider whether some settings would benefit from a bespoke support package.

Section 4. Sources and useful links

- [Effective Professional Development Guidance Report \(EEF\)](#)- *Summarises the evidence on what makes professional development effective. Useful for planning network content, structure, and follow-up, particularly where the main purpose is professional development.*
- [Guide to Effective Professional Development in the Early Years \(EEF\)](#)- *Applies the EEF's professional development principles specifically to early years contexts. Supports the design and delivery of evidence-informed professional development.*
- [A School's Guide to Implementation \(EEF\)](#) - *Explains how to plan, deliver, and sustain change using the Explore–Prepare–Deliver–Sustain model. While written for schools, the principles are highly relevant to early years networks supporting practice change over time.*
- [Early Years Evidence Store | EEF](#) - *Summarises evidence-informed approaches to help educators to understand and reflect on their practice. Useful for identifying research and resources to underpin network sessions.*
- [Stronger Practice Hubs Website](#) - *Contains **contact details** of hubs involved in this guide. Also contact details of all hubs to reach out for support in setting up networks or collaboration opportunities to strengthen networks*

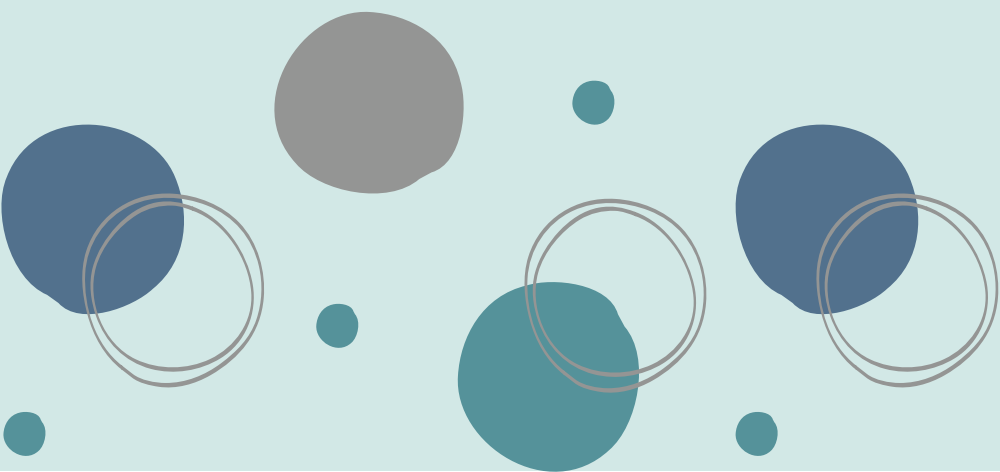
Section 5. Case Studies

How to use these case studies

The following case studies illustrate how Stronger Practice Hubs design and deliver networks that aim to support professional development, strengthen social connection, and enable effective information sharing.

Each example provides a detailed snapshot of one session within a wider, ongoing network. Alongside this, the case studies show how sessions are sequenced over time, shaped by practitioner need, and connected through follow-up, reflection, and shared learning. Together, they show how networks take different forms (virtual, face-to-face, and hybrid) and serve different primary purposes, while sharing common features of effective practice.

These include intentional planning, regular engagement, use of evidence, opportunities for practitioners to trial, reflect on, and embed new approaches in their own settings, and careful consideration of sustainability and resourcing.



Reception Teachers Virtual Network (Case Study 1)

Early Years Stronger Practice Hub: East of England Early Years Stronger Practice Hub

Overview of the network

This virtual network supports reception teachers who may feel isolated, many of whom are the only Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) teaching professional in their school. It was established following feedback from a Suffolk Local Authority conference, which highlighted limited opportunities for peer networking and professional development. These sessions are held virtually after school at present, with the aim to meet in person at different schools to share practice.

Focus of the session

Supporting teachers to understand and implement the DfE Writing Framework (July 2025).

How this session fits within the network

This session provides a focused opportunity for reception teachers to apply and discuss the DfE Writing Framework in a practical context. It complements the wider network by giving participants dedicated time to reflect on practice, share challenges and strategies, and influence future sessions based on emerging needs. Feedback from this session indicated interest in future topics including Transitions into Year 1, Resilience and Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) and regulation strategies, which will help shape upcoming sessions in the network.

Participants

- 10 Reception Teachers (including Early Career teachers and experienced teachers)
- Hub Reception Lead - lead the session
- Hub Research Lead - attended to support in breakout rooms.

Aims

To provide:

- specific training linked to new policies
- practical guidance on how to implement new frameworks within practice
- evidence-informed professional development linked to early years practice

Format and delivery

Sessions are held online after school (4.00–5.00pm). This time was decided by the teachers as they could join the session whilst still at school. The focus of the session was communicated to the teachers well in advance to enable them to familiarise themselves with the content and prepare any questions.

The session began with a 15-minute presentation on the 'DfE Writing Framework (July 2025)', then there was a 30-minute breakout room for teachers to discuss the framework itself and how they implement the framework in their practice. The session finished with feeding back from breakout room discussions and time for questions and answers.

Evidence and/or guidance used

DfE Writing Framework (July 2025).

Engagement and feedback

Feedback was gathered informally and via virtual forms. Participants highlighted the value of seeing how others timetable and implement writing activities:

- 'To hear how other Reception classes are run and where children should be at, roughly, with their writing since I am new to EYFS.'
- 'It was really useful to see how the writing framework is being implemented in other schools and how people are timetabling the activities.'
- 'Made me think about how to split our phonics groups for after Christmas so the children are consolidating their work and supporting gaps in learning'
- 'Really good conversations on how to implement the new writing framework with practical ideas on how to do it.'

Outcomes

Participants had access to practical ideas to support using the writing framework and reported increased confidence in implementing it in their settings.

Costs and sustainability

Delivery costs are limited to staff time. Online delivery and high level of engagement supports sustainability. There may be additional costs in the future once in person networks are added.

Key learning

Importance of finding the best timing for the network.

Organise sessions to meet the current policy and practice changes.

Ensure reception teachers have adequate time to network and discuss practice.

Provide access to a variety of research evidence and evidence-informed practice tips.



Monday Childminder In-Person Network - Playgroup Setting (Case Study 2)

Early Years Stronger Practice Hub: Heart Midlands Early Years Stronger Hub

Overview of network

This weekly in-person network was created to reduce isolation among home-based childminders and provide opportunities for professional learning in a live play environment. Many childminders work alone and have limited access to peer support. The network provides a space to build relationships, reflect on practice, and trial evidence-informed strategies with children present.

Focus of the session

The session focused on embedding practice changes through observation, modelling, and discussion in a playgroup setting. Practitioners were supported to explore strategies for EYFS, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and early years pedagogy, and to reflect on implementing these approaches in their own settings.

How this session fits within the network

The network meets weekly, with each session building on prior learning. Practitioners are encouraged to try strategies between sessions and bring reflections back. Sessions are designed to provide both social support and practical professional development. Feedback informs the content and focus of subsequent sessions.

Participants

Attendees include newly registered childminders, experienced practitioners, childminders that are registered with Ofsted or a Childminding agency, and those working with assistants. The group is consistently described as supportive, non-judgemental, and confidence-building.

Aims

The network aims to:

- Reduce isolation and strengthen connection
- Provide clear, current guidance on national and local priorities
- Support practice change through modelling and shared problem-solving

Format and delivery

- Frequency: Weekly
- Setting: Playgroup with live child-led play
- Structure: Check-in, professional development input, modelling, peer reflection
- Facilitation: Early years specialists skilled in relational and evidence-informed practice

Evidence and/or guidance used

Informed by the EYFS Statutory Framework, EEF guidance, DfE priorities (Best Start in Life), local SEND processes, and practitioner feedback.

Engagement and feedback

Needs are identified through ongoing dialogue, verbal feedback, and follow-up conversations. Practitioners provide reflections on the strategies trialled in their own settings. Feedback informs planning of future sessions.

Outcomes

Practitioners reported increased confidence, reduced isolation, strengthened understanding of statutory requirements, and enhanced collaborative problem-solving.

Costs and sustainability

Costs include facilitator time, venue/partnership arrangements, modelling resources, and optional refreshments. Sustainability is supported by consistent attendance, strong relationships, and alignment with local authority and SPH priorities.

Key learning

Relational, non-judgemental spaces are vital for childminders. Practical, embedded professional development and live modelling strengthen confidence and understanding. Consistency builds trust, and peer problem-solving promotes shared ownership. This model is replicable and supports a stronger, more connected childminding workforce.



Gather & Grow Childminder Network - Plymouth (Case Study 3)

Early Years Stronger Practice Hub: Early Years South West Stronger Practice Hub

Overview of the network

The network was established to reduce professional isolation, strengthen peer learning, and provide access to specialist support. It responds to a clear need for practical, accessible, evidence-informed professional development embedded within real play contexts. The network supports childminders across Plymouth and their mindees, with a focus on improving communication and language practice.

Focus of the session

This session focused on strengthening childminders' understanding of communication and language development and supporting the implementation of the ShREC approach through play-based activity and specialist modelling.

How this session fits within the network

The network runs regularly and is informed by practitioner feedback, surveys, and local authority intelligence. Sessions build on previous learning through reflection, informal discussion, and follow-up activities. Childminders are encouraged to apply strategies between sessions and share experiences at future meetings. Feedback gathered through QR codes, emails, and conversations informs ongoing planning.

Participants

- 9 childminders
- 30 children (mindees)
- Facilitator: Plymouth-based childminder
- Specialist: Speech and Language Therapist (SaLT)

Aims

- Strengthen childminders' confidence in supporting communication and language
- Introduce and embed the ShREC approach
- Provide real-time modelling and tailored advice from a SaLT
- Build professional relationships and reduce isolation
- Encourage ongoing professional development and reflective practice

Format and delivery

Sessions take place on Tuesday mornings from 10.00–11.30am at rotating venues, including family hubs and forest school spaces.

Each session includes:

- Stay-and-play activities linked to a theme
- Professional input on ShREC
- Specialist modelling during play
- Bespoke support and informal discussion

Sessions are led by a childminder and supported by a Speech and Language Therapist. Children attend, enabling real-time observation and application of strategies. No pre-reading is required.

Evidence and/or guidance used

- ShREC approach to communication and language
- Evidence-based SaLT strategies
- Best practice in play-based early years pedagogy
- Local knowledge of childminder needs and contexts

Engagement and feedback

Gathered through:

- QR code feedback forms available in the room
- Follow-up email with feedback link
- Informal conversations during and after the session

Outcomes

Participants reported increased confidence in supporting communication and language and improved understanding of the ShREC approach.

Feedback suggests greater motivation for further professional development and stronger peer relationships. Facilitated application of strategies is supported through real-time modelling.

Participant reflections included:

“Fantastic sharing of strategies between professionals, came away with new ideas to implement.”

“Really engaging and informative session, has inspired me to do more research and learning in this area of study.”



Nurture from the HEART - Early Years Settings, West Midlands (Case Study 4)

Early Years Stronger Practice Hub: Heart Midlands Early Years Stronger Hub

Overview of the network

The network was established in response to increasing levels of need related to children's emotional wellbeing, behaviour, and regulation. Settings reported challenges in supporting children's social and emotional development, particularly following periods of disruption and reduced access to specialist services. The network provides a safe, supportive space for practitioners to build knowledge, share experiences, and strengthen practice in relation to self-regulation and emotional wellbeing.

Focus of the session

Supporting practitioners to apply nurture principles, including attachment and attunement, co-regulation, and trauma-informed practice, in a practical context within their settings.

How this session fits within the network

This session provides a focused opportunity for participants to apply and reflect on nurture principles in practice. It complements the wider network by giving practitioners dedicated time to explore strategies, share experiences, and identify next steps. Feedback from this session indicated interest in future topics including co-regulation, environment design, and trauma-informed approaches, which will help shape upcoming sessions.

Participants

- Childminders
- Nursery practitioners
- Apprentices and new-to-role staff

These groups were targeted due to their daily influence on young children's emotional development and their need for practical, accessible guidance.

Aims

- Deepen understanding of the six nurture principles
- Translate theory into everyday EYFS strategies
- Build confidence in recognising and responding to emotional needs
- Promote relational consistency and emotional safety
- Encourage evidence-informed practice across settings

Format and delivery

Online interactive session combining input, discussion, and practical examples. The session was facilitated in a way that modelled nurture principles to create a safe and engaging space. Participants received the session focus in advance to prepare and reflect on their own practice.

Evidence and/or guidance used

- Attachment and attunement theory
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Trauma-informed practice
- Co- and self-regulation research
- EEF Evidence Store
- EYFS Statutory Framework

Engagement and feedback

Pre-session surveys identified key practitioner needs. Interactive elements encouraged reflection and discussion, and the facilitation created a safe space for open sharing. Post-session reflections captured early impact and helped identify topics for future sessions.

Outcomes

Participants reported:

- Increased confidence in co-regulation and emotional attunement
- More grounded responses to dysregulation
- Greater awareness of how predictability and relational safety shape behaviour
- Observable changes in settings, including calmer transitions and improved emotional safety

Costs and sustainability

Online delivery reduced costs. The session was facilitated by experienced professionals. Sustainability of learning is supported through providing tips for small, visible changes in practice, such as hello and goodbye rituals and calm corners.

Key learning

Embedding nurture principles requires consistent modelling, reflection, and leadership support. Practitioners benefit from practical examples and safe spaces to explore challenges. Future sessions could explore co-regulation, environment design, and trauma-informed approaches.



Childminder Network - Taverham, Norfolk (Case Study 5)

Early Years Stronger Practice Hub: East of England Early Years Stronger Practice Hub

Overview of the network

This network was established in response to requests from childminders in rural Norfolk, who highlighted limited access to professional development and opportunities to connect with peers. It provides a regular, accessible space for networking, information sharing, and evidence-informed professional development.

Focus of the session

This session was titled 'Nurturing Mathematical Minds, fostering Early Maths in Young Children', with the aim of supporting childminders to embed mathematical language and concepts within their daily provision. This topic was planned following requests from the childminders on how to ensure they include maths within their provision.

How this session fits within the network

Topics are identified through ongoing feedback and evaluation forms. Learning from each session informs future planning, and childminders are encouraged to trial strategies in their settings and share reflections at subsequent meetings. Each session follows a familiar format to support continuity and confidence.

Participants

- The East of England Hub Childminder Lead, who organised and planned the event.
- The East of England Hub Lead and Research Lead delivered the professional development.
- 18 childminders from the local area

Aims

- Provide networking opportunities and introductions
- Engage in an evidence-informed training session on early mathematics
- Explore quality resources to support the implementation of the training into practice

Format and delivery

Sessions are held in the evening for two hours in a centrally located village hall with parking facilities, selected for accessibility to all participants across the network area. The session began at 7pm to enable childminders to finish their working day and travel to the venue, and included refreshments on arrival. Participants received the session topic in advance to allow them to familiarise themselves with the content and prepare any questions.

The professional development element, delivered by the Research Lead, consisted of a 20-minute presentation followed by a 10-minute question-and-answer session. This was followed by independent discussion and networking, supported by hub staff, giving participants dedicated time to share challenges, strategies, and experiences with peers.

A display of books and loose parts was provided, and each participant was given a mathematical themed story. A raffle was held to distribute additional resources, this is a very popular part of the evening.

Evidence and/or guidance used

The ‘Nurturing Mathematical Minds, fostering Early Maths in Young Children’ training was linked to the following;

- EEF Mathematics Guidance Report
- NCETM 6 Key Areas of Mathematical Learning (National Centre for Excellence in the teaching of Mathematics)

Childminders were provided with a printed copy of the EEF Early Mathematics Guidance Report and the EEF Supporting Early Mathematical Development poster.

Engagement and feedback

Informal verbal feedback was gathered during the session, and each participant completed an online form to provide feedback on the session and share ideas for future sessions.

Quote from Childminder:

“I was apprehensive about attending maths training but I found the session really useful. There were lots of practical ideas that I can use with my children” – Childminder Norfolk

Outcomes

Feedback suggests that participants felt reassured that their practice aligned with current evidence and reported increased confidence in using mathematical language. One childminder noted improved understanding of subitising and its application in practice.

Costs and sustainability

This model requires higher resourcing than online networks, including hall hire, refreshments, staff time, travel, and resources.

Indicative costs included:

- Hall hire and food: approximately £140
- Resources: approximately £200
- Staffing and travel costs

Analysis of feedback suggests that this model supports strong engagement and impact for this practitioner group.

Key Learning

The importance of selecting accessible locations and timings

Designing sessions around practitioner-identified needs

Allowing time for networking and discussion

Embedding evidence-informed practice in accessible, practical ways



EAST OF ENGLAND
EARLY YEARS
STRONGER PRACTICE HUB

Monthly Online Leadership Network (Case Study 6)

Early Years Stronger Practice Hub: Early Years South West Stronger Practice Hub

Overview of the network

This network was established in response to leaders across early years settings identifying a need for accessible, evidence-informed professional development. Leaders highlighted the importance of strengthening leadership confidence, supporting team development, and reducing professional isolation. The network brings together leaders from nurseries, PVI, schools, and childminding to provide regular, high-quality support without geographical or time-based barriers.

Focus of the session

This session focused on developing leaders' confidence in understanding and using technical early years terminology, and in translating research evidence into practical tools for their teams.

How this session fits within the network

The network operates on a monthly basis and is shaped through ongoing co-design with participants. A pre-launch questionnaire identified initial priorities, and each session builds on previous learning through gap tasks, shared reflections, and follow-up discussion. Blogs are produced for each theme to support consolidation and wider sharing. Reflections and feedback from sessions inform future agendas.

Participants

- Nursery managers
- PVI leaders
- School-based EYFS leads
- Childminder coordinators
- Strategic Hub Director (network lead)

Aims

- Strengthen leaders' confidence in navigating and interpreting evidence
- Support leaders to translate research into practical tools for their teams
- Build shared understanding of technical early years terminology
- Encourage collaborative problem-solving and sector-wide dialogue
- Provide adaptable professional development materials leaders can cascade within their settings

Format and delivery.

Sessions are held monthly on Mondays from 2.00–3.00pm and delivered online. Each session includes:

- Evidence-informed input
- Video clips and research summaries
- Collaborative discussion and reflection
- Practical tools and handouts
- Gap tasks for application between sessions
- Sessions are led by the Strategic Hub Director and co-designed with leaders to ensure relevance and accessibility.

Evidence and/or guidance used

- EEF Evidence Store
- The Baby Report
- Research on sensory processing and self-regulation
- Evidence-informed video materials

Engagement and feedback

Gathered through:

- Pre-launch questionnaire
- Ongoing co-design with leaders
- Reflections shared during sessions
- Gap tasks feeding into future agendas
- Informal feedback on confidence and practice changes

Outcomes

Participants reported increased confidence in using technical terminology and in translating evidence into practice. Leaders described improved ability to lead professional development within their teams and greater confidence in supporting staff learning.

Costs and sustainability

Indicative costs include:

- Strategic Hub Director time for session design, facilitation, and blog writing
- Use of existing online platforms
- There are no venue or travel costs.

The network is supported by:

- A low-cost online delivery model
- Scalability across regions
- Increasing participant ownership of agendas and content
- Development of leadership capacity within settings

Key learning

- Online delivery removes barriers and increases accessibility
- Co-design ensures relevance and sustained engagement
- Evidence summaries and adaptable materials empower leaders to cascade professional development
- Unpacking technical terminology builds confidence and improves practice
- Gap tasks strengthen application and reflection
- A collaborative leadership network reduces isolation and builds sector-wide expertise

