



Vicky Ford MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

28 May 2020
By email

Dear Minister,

I am writing to raise concerns on behalf of our members in the 389 maintained nursery schools.

You will be aware that our General Secretary, Paul Whiteman wrote to you recently to raise some of the issues that began to emerge at the beginning of the current pandemic crisis. Over the last few weeks we have heard from an increasing number of our members in maintained nurseries about the very significant and immediate challenges they are facing.

The Covid-19 pandemic and closure of schools to all but vulnerable children and those of key workers, has placed enormous strain and pressure on all educators and educational settings, but this has been acutely felt by our maintained nursery schools.

It is well established that maintained nursery schools are schools, yet announcements by government on the financial support available to cover exceptional costs incurred by schools during the pandemic omits maintained nursery schools from the eligibility for this emergency funding.

To compound this financial pressure, maintained nursery schools are not classed as businesses, and so are not eligible for much of the support afforded to the private, voluntary and independent nursery sector, such as business rates holiday and opportunities to furlough workers.

In the current situation, rather than being the 'jewel in the crown' of the education sector, it feels very much like maintained nursery schools are at the bottom of the pile and almost forgotten, suffering the worst of both worlds.

This unfairness in access to financial support is on top of the already precarious position of many maintained nursery schools as a result of a continued lack of guaranteed long-term funding solution from the government. Several local authorities were already considering or enacting consultation on closure of maintained nursery schools due to in the main part, a lack of certainty over long-term supplementary funding.

Last week, NAHT conducted a survey of maintained nursery school members which gained over 200 responses. 80% of respondents said that had incurred additional costs as a consequent of the pandemic.

Furthermore, like primary schools, maintained nursery schools rely on fees and other income as part of their budget. However, the reliance on fees is of a significantly higher proportion of their budget. The incurring of additional costs combined with a significant reduction in fees income is a 'double whammy' that many maintained nursery schools may not be able to survive.

We must also raise concerns highlighted by members regarding the re-opening of schools on 1 June: the inability of such young children to social distance and the physical layout of their schools, which are often small with limited classrooms, make adhering to the social distancing guidelines extremely difficult. 93% of respondents to the NAHT survey said they did not feel that the government's guidance was adequate for their setting, and 90% said the guidance was not feasible in their school.

Furthermore, nursery classes were not mentioned by the Prime Minister in his address of 10 May, but then included in DfE guidance the following evening, which exacerbated maintained nursery schools lack of time to prepare to reopen. This is coupled with the fact that the government is asking for potentially all children in maintained nursery schools to return on 1 June, without the phased approach that they are proposing for other schools. 70% of respondents to the NAHT survey felt that a staggered return of pupils would help.

A succession of early years ministers have recognised the valuable role played by maintained nursery schools in providing outstanding and transformative education for some of our most disadvantaged children and providing system leadership across the early years in PVI's and schools.

That 70% of maintained nurseries have stayed open through recent months compared to 35% of other early years providers is indicative of the central role they play, with many taking in children from PVI settings which had closed.

With no immediate prospect of a long-term funding solution being put in place, it is vital that the supplementary funding is extended and that additional funds are made available to prevent closures of any further nursery schools whose budgets have been pushed into deficit by the current situation, especially those which receive little or no supplementary funding at present.

The whole sector will need transitional help, however maintained nursery schools could play a vital role in sustaining capacity and quality in the wider system if their survival is assured.

In summary, we make three requests to the Department for Education:

1. That maintained nursery schools be eligible for funding to cover exceptional costs associated with coronavirus for the period March to July 2020, in the same way that other schools are.
2. That the government guarantees the long-term funding for maintained nursery schools beyond the Summer of 2021, to provide the stability that these schools need.
3. That the government accepts that there will be some need for local flexibility when it comes to the return of nursery classes from 1 June.

I look forward to your responses and working together to support our excellent maintained nursery schools.

Yours sincerely,



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