

Nursery owner's 30-hours petition reaches 5,000 signatures ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A nursery owner has presented a petition to his local MP Nadhim Zahawi, calling for the Government to rethink funding plans for 30 hours childcare.

Steve Taylor, managing director of Winchcombe Farm Day Nursery in Upper Tysoe, has collected more than 5,000 signatures from parents and fellow childcare professionals who support his idea to replace the 30-hour childcare scheme for working parents with childcare credits paid directly into their Tax-Free Childcare accounts.

Instead of signing up for 30 hours, eligible parents would receive around £5,000-£6,000 a year directly from the Government - in line with the current funding amounts - to enable them to flexibly 'buy' the childcare they require.

'Giving parents this option would save millions of government pounds on employing a league of officials within 150 local authorities to administer this very complicated and overly bureaucratic "free hours" scheme, which is full of forms and red tape,' Mr Taylor wrote in his petition.

He added that it was a 'win-win approach for everyone - parents get the childcare they need at the times they want it; and childcare providers will still be in business to do their job so parents can go to work and be economically active.'

Mr Taylor, a father of five, who opened his nursery 13 years ago, said that the Government's flagship childcare policy was so chronically underfunded that it was likely to put thousands of childcare providers out of business.

In Warwickshire, private voluntary and independent childcare providers are set to be paid £3.77 per hour to care for three- and four-year-olds by Warwickshire County Council.

Mr Taylor said that the cost of providing quality childcare at his nursery was £5.22 per hour per child, leading to estimated losses in excess of £50,000 per annum based on his current register.

The nursery owner said the policy would make his business unsustainable, but described the meeting with his MP, who serves the Stratford-upon-Avon constituency, as 'extremely positive and very productive'.

'We gave him our petition and also talked to him in detail about the situation we - and very many other childcare providers across the country - find ourselves in,' Mr Taylor said.

'Nadhim has said he will be raising our concerns with the Secretary of State for Education and will also be contacting Warwickshire County Council to discuss how the money allocated by central Government to the county is shared to give the best and fairest rates for all types of providers,' he added.

Linda Findon, chair of Cygnets Education & Childcare Trust, a charity that has three settings in the region, also attended the meeting, and said that she was confronted with a similarly difficult financial future since the current funding amount was too little to cover the full cost of providing a place now and will be frozen until 2020, worsening the situation every year as providers face spiralling costs due to the increase in the national minimum wage, auto-enrolment for pensions, rising utilities costs, and business rates.

'The existing underfunding, relating to the universal 15 hours of free childcare, should have been fully addressed before extending to 30 hours. It is not "free" when providers have to subsidise it, nor can it be totally flexible; parents have been mis-sold on a Government promise, but we are not obliged to keep it,' Ms Findon said.

'At Cygnets and in other settings there is huge concern that quality of provision will be severely impacted as providers try to make the funding stretch. Loss of flexibility could also mean relationships with parents suffer.

'The Early Years National Funding Formula has not been fair for all as Warwickshire is one of the 20 per cent of authorities that have lost money. Without some adjustment, there will be an insufficiency of places to meet parental demand for the 30-hour scheme in the private voluntary and independent sector, which supplies the vast majority of places in the county.'

Mr Taylor is a member of campaign group 'Champagne Nurseries for Lemonade Funding', which continues to call on the Government to urgently rethink the plans and has attracted almost 15,000 supporters.

'The simple fact of the matter is that in order for this offer to work it needs to be properly funded, and we hope that our meeting with Nadhim as helped highlight the plight of thousands of childcare professionals who are facing a very bleak future,' Mr Taylor added.

- reprinted from Nursery World

Region: Europe ^[3]

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