

Sector slams DfE for failing to address 30-hour childcare challenges ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Early years sector organisations have warned that the Government is putting the 30-hour childcare policy in jeopardy by failing to listen to providers' concerns.

The National Day Nurseries Association has accused the Government of rushing out the 30 hours childcare policy for working parents, and says the Department for Education guidelines on what nurseries are able to charge for are 'fuzzy'.

The 30-hour childcare entitlement for working parents will be rolled out across England in September, but the sector organisation is urging the Government to invest more money in the scheme and 'take stock'.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance said it was 'abundantly clear' more investment was needed and without it more nurseries would close.

The organisations were responding to the DfE's evaluation of the eight early implementer pilots for the 30 hours of free childcare, published today.

NDNA chief executive Purnima Tanuku said, 'Pilots say they had very little time to adjust to the extension, so surely the national roll-out needs more time and money invested in it. The Government needs to take stock and not rush this out.'

The report highlighted the challenges that nurseries are facing, she said, 'but then fudges the whole issue concluding that there is no reason the scheme "will not be a success".'

'It suggests that the "perception of problems" is causing difficulties, rather than acknowledging that the policy is chronically underfunded. This is not a perceived problem, but a real one that can only be resolved by working with the sector.'

NDNA argues that nurseries should be allowed to charge parents for meals and extras, while the Government's advice remains 'confusing', the sector organisation says.

The DfE has said that parents cannot be forced to pay for meals and extras as a condition of taking up a 30-hour place, but at the same time early years providers are allowed to charge parents.

Updated operational guidance, due to be published today, sets out the expectation that parents taking up the offer of a free childcare place should pay for meals, while making clear that there must be an opt-out for parents who cannot or do not want to pay.

Mrs Tanuka added, 'NDNA has urged the Department for Education to allow nurseries to charge parents for meals and other extras as a condition of a place in order to make this work, but so far has been rebuffed. Instead, providers and local authorities have to walk a tightrope to keep their businesses sustainable. They balance precariously between following the confusing DfE guidance and keeping parents on board with additional charges.'

'This evaluation acknowledges that many providers need to charge parents for additional items and those who used to offer an all-inclusive fee need business support and guidance to do just that. It makes no sense that the Government is not allowing these charges to be mandatory. Providers need clarity on this and need to be allowed to deliver funded hours in line with their own business model.'

She also criticised the suggestion in the report that private nurseries needed more business support to help them with the resulting increase in costs and fall in profit, which they reported, rather than 'a fair hourly rate'.

'This is an insult to experienced nurseries which have been providing high-quality childcare for years,' Mrs Tanuku said.

'Central government is again passing the buck to local government to make this policy work in suggesting providers need more local business support and expecting them to police the fuzzy guidelines.'

The NDNA backed a recommendation in the report for a review of sufficiency in the delivery of extended hours places and impacts on

other types of provision in April 2018 when demand will be peaking for the summer term.

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, said, 'The conclusions drawn by this evaluation will come as no surprise to the early years sector. It is not unwillingness on the part of childcare providers to deliver the additional hours which jeopardises the offer, but rather the unwillingness of government to recognise the challenges facing providers.'

'With the bulk of childcare places being delivered by PVI providers and almost 40 per cent of these providers reporting that their delivery costs have risen, it is apparent that funding rates need to be increased to support the full implementation of the policy. Indeed, the report states explicitly that rising delivery costs need to be considered when reviewing funding rates, something which the Alliance has repeatedly drawn attention to through its Fair Future Funding campaign.'

'Furthermore, with nearly 50 per cent of PVI providers reporting a decrease in profits, and many early implementers warning they are likely to limit the number of "free" places due to concerns about financial viability, it is abundantly clear that more investment is needed.'

'Ultimately, if these vital funds are not made available, we will see more providers closing their doors, more parents unable to access "free" childcare, and more children missing out on valuable early years experiences.'

Sue McVay, director of partnerships at the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), said, 'PACEY was deeply concerned to learn that only 7 per cent of funded places in the pilots were taken up with childminders, and that the key barrier was limited parental demand for their involvement. Our own research has also found that childminders are being consistently overlooked by parents and local authorities for funded places, and that this is a factor behind the drop of nearly a quarter in the number of registered childminders since 2012. The national rollout of 30 hours could push childminders further out of the market.'

'Childminding must be actively championed by national and local government and the health service to parents, so they understand that childminders are more than glorified babysitters; they are providing some of the highest quality care and early education for children and their families, demonstrated so vividly by last week's SEED study. Like other providers, childminders also need sustainable funding and business support. If action is not taken, we are going to see more and more childminders leaving the sector, which will have a devastating impact on parental choice and the quality of provision in England.'

Children and families minister Robert Goodwill said, 'In just a few short weeks as children's minister I have already heard time and time again of how the 30 hours is improving the lives of families in these areas, many of whom had previously found the cost or availability of childcare a real worry.'

'I'm delighted with the success of our early implementer programme, which is now not only anecdotal but confirmed in this independent evaluation. From cutting household costs to increasing the quality time working parents can spend with their children, access to 30 hours is giving families a real boost.'

'The hard work of all the professionals involved in the early roll-out has been vital, and I'm determined to continue working with them to drive momentum ahead of the national launch in September.'

-reprinted from Nursery World

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