

Nurseries challenge childcare minister on 30-hours policy ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Nursery owners have criticised children and families minister Robert Goodwill, claiming that comments he made to providers after a meeting in Westminster show a 'lack of knowledge and understanding' of 30-hours funding.

Following yesterday's debate in Westminster Hall on the 30 hours, Mr Goodwill was accosted by childcare providers invited to the House of Commons, including members of the Champagne Nurseries, Lemonade Funding (CNLF) campaign group, who spoke of their concerns about the policy and asked him a number of questions about its delivery.

During the conversation, Mr Goodwill said that settings are now receiving more money to deliver the 15 and 30 hours of funded childcare under the early years national funding formula.

While one provider in the crowd from Hertfordshire, who cannot deliver the extended entitlement because of restrictions on the use of the church hall the pre-school operates from, agreed she is receiving more money for the funded hours than before, other providers said this was not the case.

Another nursery provider, based in Dorset, where rates have fallen, said that his local authority used to pass on the full amount of funding, but it is now top-slicing it, which they are allowed to do, adding that much like childcare providers, local authorities were also struggling financially.

When Mr Goodwill was asked about why chains such as Busy Bees and the Co-operative Childcare are repeatedly referred to as making the 30 hours work when they have said they are charging for extras, he said, 'Providers can charge for additional services. If they take up the service, they must pay.'

In response, Donna Marie-Row, owner of Yorley Barn Nursery School in Suffolk and a founding member of CNLF, asked Mr Goodwill what happens if parents say they don't want to pay for lunches, nappies, wet wipes, paints etc, and insist that their child is coming free of charge?

Mr Goodwill said that he had not heard nurseries report that this is happening, but the group of providers disagreed. They called for the Government to take out the words 'voluntary contribution' and state that 'parents can expect to pay for additional services'.

Speaking after the event, Donna Marie-Row told Nursery World, 'I think I speak for many in attendance at yesterday's event, when I say how frustrating it was to witness the minister's complete lack of knowledge and understanding for his own policy, and the rules set out in the model agreement.

'CNLF would welcome the opportunity for a proper discussion. However, this should be around a table when the minister has more time. It's quite simple, either remove the word 'free', remove the words 'voluntary contribution', or give parents the promised [expected savings] of up to £5,000 to spend at a setting of their choice.'

CNLF spokesperson Jo Morris added, 'It was great to hear this vital issue being discussed in Parliament. We heard lots of examples of providers who are worried about the effects of this legislation on their businesses, which reinforces what CNLF have been saying for 18 months.

'We made an offer yesterday that we are here, ready to engage and work with the Government to find a solution that works for parents, providers, local authorities and the Government. We would welcome any opportunity to speak with the minister to really go through the issues that, as providers, are seeing daily.'

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, said, 'Yesterday's debate should have made it abundantly clear to the minister that, while everyone wants 30 hours to work, both parents and providers feel as though it isn't.

'It's true that some providers may have seen an increase in their funding since the roll out of 30 hours. But an increase makes little difference when it leaves you short of covering the cost of providing your service. And, for the majority of providers who have not seen an increase, and who may have seen their funding decrease, that shortfall can have even worse consequences for their settings.

'The Department for Education's policy is clear: providers can make up the shortfall by charging for lunches, nappies and trips, but this must be voluntary. That's an acknowledgement that funding for 30 hours falls short, and a decision that's having a profound effect on the most disadvantaged children. That's because, for every parent that might be more than happy to pay a little extra for their childcare place, and help prop up an underfunded, unsustainable government policy, there's another that, with the best will in the world, simply cannot afford to do so.

'Hopefully yesterday's debate was a wake-up call for Government. 30 hours is driving providers out of business and leaving the most disadvantaged children at the bottom of the pile and ministers must now start listening to parents and providers, and stop undermining their own policy with insufficient funding.'

Labour MPs had arranged for a meeting with providers before the debate to hear their concerns.

Tracy Brabin, shadow minister for early years, said, 'What became worryingly clear from providers questioning Minister Goodwill was how little he appears to know about his own policy.

'When he claimed the government had increased funding rates, he was left in little doubt that wasn't the case for the vast majority, when he was met with a chorus correcting him. This is why it's so important attendees to parliament had the opportunity to question him, and I'm so glad that we managed to create that chance.

'Now more than ever, the minister needs to provide clarity on the charges for additional services as it's causing confusion and difficulties for parents and settings alike.'

-reprinted from Nursery World

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