



Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London  
SW1A 2AA

15 January 2021

By email

cc: Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State for Education  
By email

Dear Prime Minister

### **Early years Covid-19 safety and funding**

We are writing on behalf of our members who work in maintained nurseries and early years settings in England. We would like to draw your attention to the mounting concerns being raised regarding their safety, the safety of the public and the financial security of the settings in which they work.

Whilst we recognise the vital importance of early education to children's wellbeing and development, our members' safety and wellbeing are paramount, as is the safety of all those who are in contact with children and staff in early years settings. While primary and secondary schools have now been instructed to move to remote learning for the majority of students, nurseries have been asked to remain open for all children.

As previously noted in our letter to the Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP on 5 January, this sits in stark contrast to the first national lockdown in March last year and the Government's overall message that everyone should remain at home wherever possible.

We have asked the Government for the scientific evidence upon which you have based this decision so that our members and the general public can be assured that their health and safety are being properly protected. We are still awaiting a response.

Continuing to keep nurseries fully open will undermine the Government's aim of reducing the spread of the virus in the community and threatens the health and safety of our members, their families and the wider community they serve.

Our members in nursery settings are reporting considerable concerns about the situation they are being placed in. They are extremely uneasy that they are being asked to work with full or near-full classes of children, with no social distancing, when the rest of the education sector is open only to the children of vulnerable and key workers.

There is currently no rationale requiring nurseries to remain open to all children when other schools and particularly primaries are not. Many nursery schools are as large as some primaries and are working with bubbles of children and staff, which are larger than a typical primary school class.

In addition to safety concerns, our members are asking why the Government is insisting their workplaces remain fully open without guaranteed funding, while all other schools continue to receive funding for statutory age pupils. Demand for nurseries and pre-schools has plummeted during the pandemic, as parents keep their children at home through safety fears, changing work patterns or financial strain.

Last year, the Government continued to provide funding at the level of the number of children who had attended pre-pandemic, allowing many nurseries to stay afloat, despite increased costs due to Covid-19 and huge losses from parental and other income streams. This year a similar approach should be adopted, otherwise there will be dire consequences.

A note we have received from one maintained nursery school highlights what is at stake:

*“If funding were based on the arrangements last term, we would be receiving approx. £132,840. If funding is based on the current arrangements of children in attendance, it will be approx. £77,760. With the current funding position, we will therefore be losing approx. £55,080 (based only on 3+4yr FE, not including 2yr FE or any loss of fee income figures). We are still open to all children, but a significant proportion of our families are choosing not to send their children in...” – maintained nursery school, West Sussex*

In many cases, nurseries continue to provide support for home learning for children not able to attend, and it would be unfair not to fund settings for continuing to support children at home, as well as those in nursery. We would also like to point out that even if all children on roll were fully funded, in most cases this would reflect a fall compared to their usual numbers.

Returning to funding based on current occupancy levels is putting pressure on overstretched budgets already on a cliff edge. Our members have told us that their nurseries will not be able to remain open for all children and will be forced to close if funding of early entitlement places does not remain based on pre-Covid-19 occupancy levels for the duration of the pandemic. The NEU and UNISON are both urging the Government to rethink its position, otherwise this will be a death knell for many nurseries.

The NEU and UNISON welcome the changes made to the CJRS scheme and other financial assistance that is available for nurseries during the pandemic, but this arrived far later than expected and remains insufficient. Furthermore, to prevent the misunderstanding experienced last year, the revised CJRS scheme and other financial support need to be urgently and extremely well-publicised, especially to the maintained nursery sector where there is a strong perception that schools are not eligible to use the scheme and confusion about what is available and how it can be accessed. This is especially to the maintained nursery sector where there is a strong perception that schools and maintained nurseries are not eligible to use the scheme and confusion about what is available and how it can be accessed.'

The essential role of the early years sector in our local communities cannot be underestimated. A great body of research and evidence has shown the value of early education and the difference good quality early education can make in a child's future educational attainment and social mobility.

There are only 389 maintained nursery schools open in England; and a survey of 3,000 pre-schools, nurseries and childminders by the Early Years Alliance last year found that one in four felt it was “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” that they would be operating in 12 months' time, with the

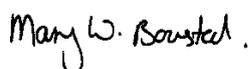
figure at one in three in disadvantaged areas, where need is greatest. Urgent action is needed now to prevent further closures.

During the last week, we both heard about the different approaches Local Authorities (LAs) are taking. While it is welcoming to hear that many LAs are continuing to fund places based on roll, it is clear that there is a lot of confusion as they try to balance instructions from the DfE with the requirements of safety and the pressures of funding.

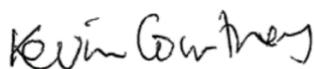
This cannot continue. Local authorities need a clear national policy and nurseries need adequate funding now and a long-term funding solution so they can continue the essential work they do every day. Today, we are both calling for:

- All nurseries and early years settings to reduce numbers attending, in the same way and on the same timescales as primary and secondary schools;
- Funding allocations be maintained for all nurseries on 2019/20 pupil numbers until after the pandemic is over;
- Emergency funding is immediately provided to cover additional costs incurred due to Covid-19;
- A commitment to review the early years funding formula as soon as possible and implement a long-term funding solution for maintained nurseries and other providers.
- Early years staff are given the same priority access to testing and vaccination as other school staff.

Yours sincerely,



**Mary Boustead**  
**Joint General Secretary**  
**National Education Union**



**Kevin Courtney**  
**Joint General Secretary**  
**National Education Union**



**National Secretary**  
**Education, Local Government,**  
**Police and Justice**  
**UNISON**