



## **All Party Parliamentary Group for Nursery Schools, Nursery and Reception Classes**

**Early Education**  
The British Association for Early Childhood Education

### **Briefing for MPs: Safe opening of the early years sector under the 3<sup>rd</sup> lockdown**

There will be a Westminster Hall debate on the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on early years settings from 2.30-4.00pm on Tuesday 12 January 2021. The following provides a summary of concerns from the sector about current government policy:

1. Staff safety and wellbeing is the sector's key concern in relation to remaining open for all children. However, the strong messages under lockdown telling everyone to stay at home and to keep school-age children at home where possible sit in stark contrast with the messages to the early years sector to remain open causing confusion and concern. Government has not provided clear and persuasive evidence to the sector or to parents to show that it is safe for early years settings to remain open. This is needed urgently.
2. Early years practitioners need urgent reassurance that their safety is being prioritised eg by urgent action to make regular mass testing available to early years practitioners, and by ministers making the case to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation for early years practitioners to be prioritised for vaccination.
3. School and setting leaders are ultimately responsible for carrying out risk assessments as to whether it is safe for them to remain open. However, they feel national policy is pushing them one way, while their risk assessments are pushing them in another, and they are ultimately being left carrying the can for potential life and death decisions. DfE guidance states, "We understand that it may not be possible for all settings to be open at this time." However, that is not reflected in the messaging that all settings should remain open, nor in the decision to fund on the basis of attendance, instead of continuing funding at pre-COVID levels as was the case for the last two terms (see below).
4. Maintained nursery schools emphasise that there is no rationale for requiring them to remain open to all children when primary schools are not. Many maintained nursery schools are as large as some primaries. Some have children of Reception age and yet are advised to remain open when schools are being told that Reception age children should remain at home on the same basis

as older primary children. Some maintained nursery schools, because of the nature of their buildings, are working with bubbles of children and staff which are larger than a typical primary school class – even double the size. Maintained nursery schools are being required to stay fully open and yet do not have guaranteed funding, while primary schools continue to receive funding for statutory age pupils as normal.

5. In December, DfE ministers decided to stop funding the early years sector on pre-COVID levels and to revert to funding the early education entitlements on the basis of attendance. This decision must be reversed as a matter of urgency. The decision to change the funding model was taken when it appeared likely that occupancy would be approaching normal levels this term. It is now clear that will not be the case. In many cases parents are opting to keep their children at home due to safety concerns, so numbers attending are in some cases only a fraction of numbers on roll.
6. Many settings are not able to open to all children due to staff absences where staff are ill, self-isolating or clinically extremely vulnerable, or due to risk assessments that they cannot safely open to all children. In such cases they are continuing to provide support for home learning for those children not able to attend, so it is not the case that they are not providing education for those children, and it would be unjust not to fund the setting for continuing to support children at home, as well as those in the setting.
7. Even if all children on roll were fully funded, in most cases this would reflect a fall compared to their usual numbers as many eligible January starters' parents will have held back on taking up a place. This is putting pressure on already overstretched budgets. Without urgent confirmation of full funding of early entitlement places, early years providers will not be able to remain open for all children. Funding for the sector is already on a knife-edge, with huge loss of income over the past nine months and additional costs which have not been covered by government support.
8. The amendments to the CJRS scheme are welcome, but not sufficient – and they will need to be extremely well publicised, especially to the maintained sector where there is a strong perception that schools are not eligible to use the scheme.
9. We are hearing a varied response from local authorities who are clearly trying to balance their understanding of these challenges with the government guidance on funding and opening. We urgently need a clear national policy so that settings and schools are not dependent on their local authority's sympathy and instead can expect a consistent approach to support and funding.