



2021-0005655VFPO

Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP

By email: george.howarth.mp@parliament.uk

10 February 2021

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your email of 13 January, enclosing correspondence from your constituent, about making early years safe during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

May I begin by wishing both you and . well in these challenging times.

The government immensely values the selfless dedication that early years and childcare staff demonstrate in their work every single day. Keeping children and staff safe is our utmost priority.

Early years provision should continue to remain open and should continue to allow all children to attend full-time or their usual hours. The reason schools have been restricted is because additional measures are needed to contain the spread of the virus. The wider significant restrictions in place as part of the national lockdown to contain the spread of the virus in the community enable us to continue prioritising keeping nurseries and childminders open, supporting parents and delivering the crucial care and education needed for our youngest children.

The earliest years are the most crucial point of child development and attending early education lays the foundation for lifelong learning and supports children's social and emotional development. Time out of an educational setting is likely to be more detrimental to the youngest children, given the evidence that investments in children's learning tend to accumulate and consolidate over time.

We continue to prioritise keeping early years settings open for three main reasons:

- Firstly, early education gives children the communication and social skills which set them up for life. You cannot care for a very small child online and you cannot get those months back;
- Secondly, current evidence suggests that pre-school children are less susceptible to infection and are unlikely to be playing a driving role in transmission, partly because young children have lower rates of contact with others outside of their household;
- And thirdly, the evidence at the moment is that the confirmed case rates of COVID-19 amongst young children remains the lowest of all age groups.

We are funding nurseries as usual and all children are able to attend their early years setting in all parts of England. Where nurseries do see a drop in income from either parent-paid fees or income from the department, they are able to use the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS).

We recognise childcare attendance has been affected by COVID-19; we saw attendance rise over the autumn term from 482,000 on 10 September to 759,000 on 17 December. On 17 December the government, therefore, announced a return to funding early years settings on the basis of attendance. In line with the existing and unchanged statutory guidance local authorities (LAs) should ensure that providers are not penalised for short-term absences of children, for example sickness, arriving late or leaving early, or a family emergency through withdrawing funding or because of parental concerns of COVID-19, but use their discretion where absence is recurring or for extended periods, taking into account the reason for the absence and the impact on the provider. Further information is available at: tinyurl.com/f9wtl1te.

We will fund LAs in the 2021 spring term based on their January 2021 census. If attendance rises after the census is taken, we will top-up councils to up to 85% of their January 2020 census level, where an LA can provide evidence for increased attendance during the spring term. This will give LAs additional financial confidence to pay providers for increasing attendance later in the spring term.

We continue to work with the early years sector to understand how they can best be supported to ensure that sufficient safe, appropriate and affordable childcare is available for those who need it now, and for all families who need it in the longer term.

We are planning to spend over £3.6 billion on our early education entitlements in 2020-21.

Looking further ahead, the government continues to support families with their childcare costs. The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced on 25 November a £44 million investment in 2021-22, for LAs to increase hourly rates paid to childcare providers for the government's free childcare entitlement offers.

In 2021-22 we will increase the hourly funding rates for all LAs by 8p an hour for the two-year-old entitlement and, for the vast majority of areas, by 6p an hour for the three- and four-year-old entitlement. This will pay for a rate increase that is higher than the costs nurseries may face from the uplift to the national living wage in April. We are also increasing the minimum funding floor - meaning no council can receive less than £4.44 per hour for the three- and four-year-old entitlements.

With regard to maintained nursery schools (MNS), the government recognises that MNS are an important part of the early years sector and provide valuable services to disadvantaged children. The government's commitment to the long-term funding of MNS, made in October 2019, is unchanged. MNS have always been funded in the same way as other early years providers, as well as receiving supplementary funding. We also provided circa £60 million in supplementary funding for MNS this year, and we have re-confirmed that funding, nationally, for financial year 2021-22.

All nurseries and MNS have benefitted from the continuation of early years entitlement funding during the outbreak. Further, MNS, like private nurseries, typically rely on private income for a significant proportion of their income, unlike most state-funded schools. Therefore, we have ensured that access to the CJRS is also available to MNS, in line with published guidance. MNS were also able to access free school meals vouchers via Edenred.

The government continues to consider what is required to ensure a clear, long-term picture of funding for MNS and remains committed to their long-term funding. Any reform to the way they are funded in the future will be accompanied by appropriate funding protections.

Early years providers are able to access an extensive range of business support, including the CJRS; all providers who have seen a drop in their overall income are able to furlough any staff (who were on payroll on or before 30 October 2020) and who are not required for delivering the government's funded entitlements. The updated CJRS guidance is available at: [tinyurl.com/12P0kGte](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-jobs-retention-scheme). Providers should consult the scheme in full before submitting a claim.

Childminders may use the Self Employment Income Support Scheme and further information is available at: [tinyurl.com/3auc9f6k](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/self-employment-income-support-scheme). The sector has also benefitted from business rates holidays and business loans.

An employee is eligible for furlough if they have caring responsibilities resulting from COVID-19, such as caring for children who are at home as a result of school and childcare facilities closing, or caring for a vulnerable individual in their household.

I would like to thank [redacted] for all [redacted] is doing to support young children at this deeply challenging time.

Thank you for writing about this important matter. I hope this reply is useful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vicky Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Vicky Ford MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families