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SENT VIA E-MAIL sec-of-state.ps@education.gov.uk

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
Westminster
LONDON
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Dear Secretary of State

Re: Covid safety in pre-schools and nurseries

With pre-schools and nurseries continuing to operate through the current lockdown, we are writing to ask your department to urgently publish evidence that it is safe for these early years settings to remain fully operational.

This sector provides a vital lifeline for families right across Birmingham and providers have been on the frontline throughout the pandemic, providing vital care and education. These providers and their staff deserve the same care and consideration as all education workers. They also deserve evidence that they are not putting themselves and their families at risk, but sadly 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.

It is a major concern that case rates in the 0-5 age range are now 217/100K - up from 59/100K on 9 December (a 268 per cent increase). So, taking into account the new variant of Covid-19, what evidence is there to support the Government's continued insistence that early years settings remain safe?

If unable to publish evidence reassuring the sector, the Government must surely consider the closure of pre-school settings to all but the children of key workers and those who are vulnerable. The safety and wellbeing of staff and children must be the key driver for any decision.

However, if conclusive evidence is provided and the sector remains open, it is essential that the Government provides the necessary financial support, both for those reliant on 'free entitlement' funding, and those reliant on private parental income, to enable settings to remain viable.

We therefore urge the Government to:

- Reinstating early entitlement funding support for settings that have been forced to close or have seen a fall in the demand for funded places.

A national position that supports funding being allocated to children signed up as 'on-roll' in a setting would ensure that all children can be offered remote learning opportunities. This is particularly important where parents are too anxious and scared to enable their children to attend.

This is especially important in areas where high numbers of children from BAME families are usually in attendance. We have evidence of some settings in such areas where all children have been withdrawn.

- And introduce targeted funding for providers reliant on private income who have suffered from falls in parental demand.

As you are aware, many providers have experienced a dramatic fall in the demand for places during the pandemic and they desperately need support. Birmingham City Council has played its part, supporting over 1,500 places at 224 early years and childcare providers with a Covid Emergency Support fund. Now we need Government backing to sustain these businesses through the latest, and hopefully final, lockdown.

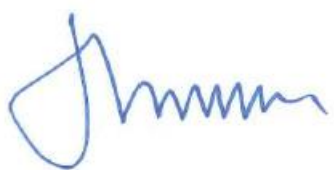
With the vaccine roll-out giving us cause for optimism, even at such a challenging time, the early years sector will be desperately needed to support working parents and carers in the economic recovery to come. Therefore every effort must be made at this stage to ensure they survive the coming weeks and months.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Ian Ward
Leader of Birmingham City Council



Councillor Jayne Francis
Cabinet Member for Education, Skills & Culture



Councillor Kate Booth
Cabinet Member for Children's Wellbeing