

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
Westminster
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Ms Vicky Ford
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
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3 January 2021

Dear Mr Williamson and Ms Ford

I am writing to you to express my deep concern, frustration and anger around the omission of the early years sector from important discussions around the operation of education providers in England during the spring term.

At a time when there are such serious concerns about the new strain of Covid-19 in particular areas of the country, it is completely unacceptable that to date, there has been zero reference to the early year sector, other than confirmation that providers are expected to remain open in areas where their primary colleagues have been advised that it is not safe to do so.

If the Department for Education is to advise early years providers to continue to provide care while instructing other education providers to close, it simply must provide a clear and unequivocal scientific basis for doing so. So far, this has not happened. If this evidence does not exist, then the government cannot and must not put the safety of providers at risk and instead must provide the substantial financial support that settings need to restrict their operations as is necessary to keep themselves and the children in their care safe.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, the early years sector has been, to put it frankly, at the very bottom of the pile of Department for Education priorities. They have been excluded from additional financial support for both cleaning costs and staff absences, and from the provision of home testing kits offered to their school and college colleagues. Despite the close contact that early years staff have every day with young children who do not – and are not expected to – socially distance, there has also apparently been no consideration as to whether childcare practitioners should be prioritised for Covid-19 vaccinations to help protect the health and wellbeing of the workforce and their families.

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Add to this the ongoing lack of financial support being offered to providers at a time when the closure of so many sectors means that demand for early years care and education is likely to remain significantly reduced, and it is clear that the early years sector has been – and continues to be – treated appallingly. The decision to remove early education funding support at a time when other schemes such as the Job Retention Scheme have been extended is particularly indefensible, and given the likely impact of the heightened restrictions on demand for childcare services, it is vital that this support is reinstated as soon as possible.

Early years providers have been on the frontline through this crisis. They have put themselves, and their loved ones, at risk to do what the government has asked and provide vital care and education to the children and families that need it. It cannot be that nurseries, pre-schools and childminders are treated as education providers when they are needed by the government and dismissed as private businesses who have to fend for themselves when they are not.

The early years is an integral part of the education sector in England and must be treated as such, and the Department must address all these issues as a matter of priority.

What is being asked of the workforce – to continue operating in the middle of the second wave of the pandemic with little support, even less information and no acknowledgement from the Department that is supposed to represent them – cannot continue.

I would be keen to arrange an urgent meeting to discuss the concerns outlined above.

With regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neil Leitch', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Neil Leitch

Chief Executive, Early Years Alliance