

Counting the cost of high-quality

Nursery owner **Alexandra Skvortsov** explains why the government's advice to stick to minimum staffing ratios to provide more free hours is unworkable

DURING 2015 the government called for evidence on the cost of providing childcare ahead of introducing its policy of doubling the number of hours of free early education that some families will be entitled to.

I submitted my views and took part in several surveys and questionnaires, all seeking to quantify the cost of caring for our young children.

I found the process confusing and cumbersome, and the government seemed to agree with me. Its report analysing the responses, published in October 2015, was "unable to determine from the responses what providers' unit costs were".

However, by the time that report had been published, the government had already figured out what I and many other nursery owners like me were doing wrong, and why we couldn't manage on the funding we received to deliver the free entitlement.

The DfE believes that we can solve our cash flow problems simply by being more efficient in how we staff our provision. I would like to briefly address this from the perspective of my full daycare nursery, located in West Yorkshire.

The DfE analytical reports tell me that I can save money and make my nursery more affordable for parents by sticking to the minimum staffing ratios at all times, and changing the mix of staff used, within the limits set out in the regulations. Furthermore, I should adjust my staffing level according to variations in my occupancy levels.

Let me address one of these suggestions in more detail: I should always stick to the ratios as laid out in the statutory guidance for the Early years Foundation Stage.

In my two-year-old room, this ratio is one adult for every four children. The nursery is open from 7.30am to 6pm, to provide flexibility for working parents, and the five staff in this room have different start and finish times as all the children do not arrive at once.

I do already try to staff according to my occupancy levels, though this can be difficult as it is not always possible to predict when a child will arrive early, or when a road closure will mean they are collected late.




To maximise my staff ratios, as suggested by the DfE, I would have to go further, and only admit children to this room in groups of four. In this way, eight children could start at 7.30am, as two staff members start work then.

The next group of four would have to wait until the next staff member started, and so on. The same would have to happen at the end of the day, with children departing in neat bundles of four every time a staff member finished their shift.

The children's birthdays would pose another problem as they would have to change groups – and therefore staffing ratios – in bundles of eight (the ratio for the next age range is 1:8), so I would need eight of them to have a birthday around the same time. However, I'm not sure how I can manage this, as the children move into this room from a ratio of 1:3, so in bundles of three,

which doesn't go very neatly into eight.

If you're not confused enough yet, remember the hourly rate that nurseries receive to provide the free entitlement doesn't take into account the cost of an admin person (or bouncer) to ensure that children arrive and leave on schedule in their ratio-related bundles.

So it's likely someone will be trying to figure all of this out in between changing nappies, singing nursery rhymes and planning educationally enriching activities. 

Alexandra Skvortsov sits on Prospect's early years national committee.



USEFUL LINK:

http://bit.ly/gov_cc_costs

DfE's *Analysis of responses to the call for evidence on the cost of providing childcare* and *Review of childcare costs: an executive summary of the analytical report*.

childcare



■ **Alexandra Skvortsov:**
government consultation
'confusing and cumbersome'

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GOVERNMENT NURSERY FUNDING PLEDGES DON'T ADD UP

The childcare minister wants nurseries to get behind the 30 hours 'free' childcare offer, but many providers can't afford to get involved

NURSERY OWNERS and managers in Prospect have called on education and childcare minister Sam Gyimah to listen to their concerns about the lack of funding behind government plans to offer 30 hours of free childcare to three- and four-year olds.

They point to a survey by the National Day Nurseries Association, which found that fewer than half (45 per cent) of nurseries in England are likely to get involved in the government's scheme because it is unaffordable. See: http://bit.ly/NDNA_30 The government currently offers 15 free hours a week to three- and four-year olds of working parents in England, and eligible two-year olds. From September 2017 it plans to double this, with pilots starting this autumn.

In an article in *Nursery World* magazine – http://bit.ly/NW_Gyimah – Sam Gyimah suggested that instead of getting behind the government, the early years sector was "manufacturing outcry".



Claire Dent, Prospect negotiator for members in early years (left), said: "Nursery managers are already working with the government to deliver the current free childcare provision that

parents who use the service demand. But many are only managing to offer the current 15 hours by plugging the shortfall in government funding themselves.

"Even with the increased funding, providers are not going to receive what it actually costs to deliver. The sector is not

'manufacturing an outcry', as the minister suggests.

"One nursery owner tells us that with the introduction of the national living wage to all staff in October, and the need to enrol eligible staff on the workplace pension scheme, the wages bill has increased by 20% but the funding rate has only gone up by 5%. Clearly this does not add up.

"Our members are in favour of more support for parents and children, but the reality will be a shortage of places unless the government provides the funding needed."

Prospect welcomed the minister's acknowledgement of the need for a skilled workforce, when he said that "parents and providers alike let us know that it was vital to keep the quality of the workforce high".

But, Dent added: "We would remind him that although many nursery staff have trained as early years professionals and early years teachers, they still remain without any professional recognition, as they are denied qualified teacher status and the graduate salaries that would go with it."

The NDNA's survey used evidence and data from nearly 500 nurseries in England. It is the organisation's seventh annual survey and says "underfunding of free places has been a key issue every year".

Chief executive Purnima Tanuku said: "We all want to make 30 free hours childcare workable and sustainable. To achieve this, the sums have to add up. Urgent steps must now be taken to bring about the funding reform promised by the government, so an economically viable hourly rate for high-quality childcare reaches the frontline." ◻

IN BRIEF

■ **Childcare Expo** – Prospect will have a stall at the Childcare Expo in Manchester this summer on 17-18 June. The event will include seminars, workshops, exhibitors, a shopping village and more. Attendance is free for anyone working in the childcare sector. See www.childcareexpo.co.uk/manchester/

■ **Inspections** – The regulator Ofsted will take control of the selection, training and management of early years inspectors from April 2017. Inspections are currently carried out by two companies, Tribal and Prospects, whose contracts run out in March 2017. The change will bring early years inspection into line with schools and further education and skills.



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■ **Skilled nursery workforce deserves professional recognition**