

pennywell

early years centre

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To whom it may concern.

We are writing as Head Teacher and Governors of Pennywell Early Years Centre in response to the formal consultation to close Hetton le Hole Nursery School.

It is of great concern that Sunderland Council members do not appreciate that all Nursery Schools are the jewel in the "Education Crown" of the LA and have longstanding OFSTED judgements at Outstanding and Good levels. They have provided the highest standards of education and care for children and families in areas of vulnerability and need for many years and have not faltered in their services to their communities throughout the pandemic.

At a time when the government are acknowledging the impact of the highest quality early education on improved life chances for children, it seems short sighted to close an outstanding provision which the community want to save. Additionally, as we emerge from the pandemic the need for the highest quality Early Years Provision, judged at the same level of expectation for schools not private providers, is needed to narrow the gap for the neediest children and continue to ensure that Sunderland's key workers are able to continue working.

We agree with the following points raised by Hetton le Hole Nursery School: -

- Hetton le Hole Nursery School is the only early years provision/nursery which is graded as outstanding by Ofsted within its locality. No other setting currently can match the standard of the provision provided.
- The nursery has a qualified SENCo who is an early years specialist and is able to support all children who have additional needs to make outstanding progress during their time at nursery.
- Other provisions are less accessible or have no places to accommodate the wide range of needs.
- Children and parents have suffered immensely as a result of the COVID pandemic and do not need this type of upheaval.
- Key-workers need support during this pandemic. They do not need to worry about the council closing their child's nursery.
- Children in nursery schools are less at risk during a COVID pandemic than those in a primary provision. The government re-opened nurseries long before primary schools so children had a smaller break in their education. The pandemic is still ongoing and there is a possibility that we may need to go into full lockdown again. All Sunderland Nursery Schools have remained open throughout and have managed their services very efficiently and safely.



- The council has not provided any COVID-19 relief funds, despite having received many millions of pounds from central government. Hetton le Hole Nursery has incurred £76,000 of COVID-19 losses this year, however despite this the closing deficit (in year) was £58,449. The nursery was unable to furlough staff due to them being council employees.
- Limited staff may have the opportunity to gain employment at Hetton Primary, but it will not be all, especially the leaders, so expertise will be lost.
- The council is allocating in excess of 5 million on a new build. In the consultation report it mentions further funds to be spent on ICT, furniture and demolition, which is predicted to be in the region of £2-£12 million. The council will not clear the nursery deficit or provide adequate funding. Leaders and governors have worked extremely hard to balance the budget in difficult circumstances.
- Year on year budget cuts have been made to the nursery funding, making it impossible for it to be financially stable. The leadership team have completed extensive restructures and the Head Teacher has taken on many roles to reduce costs and demonstrate a high level of efficiency.
- It has been acknowledged in documented meetings that the financial vulnerability of the Nursery is not due to mismanagement of funds but due to the methodology behind the funding formula and the unavoidable costs associated with a Maintained Nursery School.
- Funding decisions about Maintained Nursery Schools have not been made by parliament and the government is urging local authorities to hold off making decisions about their longer-term futures.
- The council are arguing that the nursery has a deficit of up to £200,000 that they do not have the capacity to clear and they cannot support financially moving forward. It is also reported that the nursery is de-stabilising the other maintained nurseries because of the lower contribution and higher outtake of the lump sum. The main reason put forward for this closure is financial, however there are significant underspends in both the Early Years Inclusion Funding and Pupil Funding budgets. The combined underspend in the last three years amounts is significant (Freedom of Information Act information)
- Such underspends have resulted in a direct impact on the budgets and survival of all of the Maintained Nursery Schools. The council could utilise those underspent funds to save the maintained nursery sector in Sunderland who are currently being disadvantaged by surplus funds not being used directly for the youngest children in the city.
- The local authority is yet to provide the governors or parents with alternative options that they have considered before planning a full closure. In discussion with the school and governors it was made clear there are no alternatives, despite leaders being open to suggestions.
- DfE guidance states that Maintained Nursery Schools should not be closed solely because of a deficit budget position.
- Nursery Schools are required to provide high quality early education, led by specialist Head Teachers and delivered by qualified teachers, especially in deprived areas and to put parents and families at the centre of their work. DfE guidance (November 2019) stipulates that the decision maker should give the greatest weight to responses from those stakeholders likely to be most directly affected by a proposal, especially parents of children at the affected school. The decision makers are expected to adopt a presumption against the closure of maintained nursery schools. The pre-consultation received 541 responses in which 92% of those responding did not agree with plans to close Hetton le Hole Nursery School.
- In the government guidance for opening and closing maintained schools it also makes it clear that proposers should be aware that decision makers are expected to adopt a presumption against the closure of maintained nursery schools. It states:

This does not mean that a maintained nursery school will never close, but that the case for closure of a maintained nursery school, the proposer should set out:

1. Plans to develop alternative early years provision clearly demonstrating that it will be at least equal in quantity and quality to the provision provided by the nursery school with no loss of expertise and specialism; and
2. The replacement provision is more accessible and more convenient for local parents.

There are several reasons why it is felt that the proposal does not meet either of these points. There are no other Ofsted rated outstanding provision in Hetton. The baby room provision is being lost and the flexibility of term time only element of the provision will not be replicated at the primary school. There are no opportunities for the highly qualified and specialist leaders to move across into the alternative provision, so specialisms will be lost. Parents feel that the accessibility is a safety concern and the alternative provision is not more convenient.

- The nursery is not alone in this financial vulnerability. The implication of the Early Years Funding formula is now impacting across the wider Maintained Nursery School sector. Financial Benchmarking data reveals that in the last two years the number of maintained nursery schools in Sunderland ending the year with a deficit balance is on the increase. In the funding year 2019-2020 five out of eight maintained nursery schools ended the year with a deficit in-year balance. Reserves are diminishing as maintained nursery schools are having to endure funding shortfalls each year, and this paints a bleak picture.
- Nursery schools are expected to operate in a competitive market without having the same freedoms as their private competitors. Sunderland City Council has permitted unfair competition by allowing a private nursery to open within 0.5 miles of Hetton Lyons Nursery School, will this have a similar effect on their fate?
- The plan allows the only Ofsted graded outstanding nursery in Hetton to be lost in the interest of short-term cost saving. The long term impact of the lump sum being shared amongst the other maintained nursery schools will be significant.

Every nursery school in the city has provided the highest level of education and care for its local community. Through the Partners in Pedagogy actions they have trained many students at degree and vocational levels to continue to provide the best for Sunderland's children into the future and provide employment for individuals within these communities which include training to further develop their skills. All North East universities and colleges acknowledge the quality of the placements provided for their students from each Nursery School.

We ask that you value their contribution for the whole city over many years and support their continuing existence.

We are proud of our unique contribution to the families of Sunderland and all nursery schools are embedded in Sunderland's educational heritage.

Yours sincerely



Claire Nicholson
Head Teacher

Margaret Parsons
Chair of Governors

