

## Some Hampshire Nurseries under Threat

*A letter to the Herald, March 2008*

Sir

Improving access to high quality childcare is a critical government aspiration that Conservatives also support. We welcome the government's pledge to increase the funding for nursery places by some £340m. The extra money is ear-marked to extend three- and four-year-olds' entitlement from 12.5 free hours a week, to 15 – which will be great news for many parents.

With this laudable ambition, however, may come unintended consequences, for the implementation of the plan is flawed.

The highly-respected Day Care Trust says that some independent nurseries report having to charge top-up fees because government funding alone is not enough to cover their costs. This can be all the more so in areas of relatively high costs, such as East Hampshire, and/or for nursery settings with higher staff-to-children ratios.

At the same time as extending the free hours provision, the government plans to tighten up rules preventing the charging of top-up fees. On the face of it, this could be good news for parents. But for some nurseries, who would end up making an unsustainable loss, it can present a stark choice of either opting out of the government scheme and charging full fees, or even closing altogether – either of which would be bad news for the parents affected.

We do not know exactly how many will be adversely affected by the new rules, but best estimates suggest that in Hampshire it could be at least one in five independent nurseries (depending on their current costs and hours of operation). If a substantial number do go totally private (or even close) then more parents could be left without a high-quality, affordable nursery in their locality.

A number of independent-sector Hampshire nurseries have clubbed together to create [nurserycampaign.com](http://nurserycampaign.com) where parents can find out more about what's happening. Mums with children who will be 3 or 4 years old in a couple of years' time may want to ask their local nursery if they expect to be affected by the new rules.

It does look like the government have, perhaps inadvertently, miscalculated on this – I am sure they don't want to see a reduction in accessible nursery places any more than we do. But they are still pressing ahead with the changes, which are due to be complete in Hampshire within two years.

The government's overall aim to extend free nursery provision, and thereby support mums who want to return to work, is right and proper. But the Children's Minister should call a pause in implementing the current changes, to allow a proper assessment of their impact on all types of nursery setting.

Yours

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