

Case Study

March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Background

In late January 2010 a small group of pre-school settings based in and around the Chilterns in South Buckinghamshire began to contact each other to discuss their concerns over the imminent extension to the free nursery entitlement and the new code of practice that governs it. It very quickly transpired that each nursery was extremely worried about the financial impact the proposed code and funding rates would have on them, and all agreed that the proposed rate of funding for Buckinghamshire (£3.75 per hour) was much less than the true cost of providing the place. Everyone agreed that this shortfall was so significant that it would force them to either close down or withdraw from funding altogether.

It was recognised that a unified approach was required and the South Bucks Nursery Forum (SBNF) was formed. Membership of the forum rapidly grew to over 12 nurseries within a 10 mile radius of each other, representing over 90% of early years sessional provision in their area. The group meets regularly and its membership continues to grow.

In the first two meetings the group decided that they were committed to withdraw from funding 'en masse' unless the code of practice was revised to allow them to recover the true cost of providing the service by charging parents the shortfall between the funding and their operating costs. It was then agreed that a letter would be sent to Buckinghamshire County Council (BCC) informing them of this intention. Although this would mean a potential reduction in each nursery's income due to the fact that some parents would inevitably be unable to afford the increased fees, members agreed that it was their only chance of survival. It was also decided that parents needed to be consulted on the impending changes from September and how they were likely to force the majority of local nurseries to withdraw from funding.

An online petition to Number 10 Downing St was set up asking the Government to reconsider: <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/saveournurseries>. Nurseries circulated this address to parents and other nurseries with a request that they also forward it on to any interested bodies in order to gain the maximum number of signatories.

Since then, the following developments have occurred:

- February - Parents consultation documents were distributed amongst all nurseries in the group, with a request for them to sign a supporting document which would be delivered to the local authority.
- February 9<sup>th</sup> - a letter was sent from the SBNF to BCC announcing the group's intention to withdraw from September 2010 if current proposals remained unchanged. This also asked how the council would fulfil their charge of ensuring sufficient, affordable, high quality early years education with the loss of so many funded places. The letter was copied to Nursery World, national media, and children's ministers.
- February 11<sup>th</sup> edition of Nursery World included a full page article on the group's actions. This also formed the focus of the Editor's View with such comments as 'Anecdotaly there are nursery owners across the country considering opting out of the free entitlement. The floodgates could be about to open.'
- February 21<sup>st</sup> - The SBNF received a response from Buckinghamshire County Council. Although it emphasised that the 15 hours free entitlement to parents must be free at the point of delivery, and that nurseries cannot charge 'top up' fees, it also alluded to nurseries being able to charge for 'additional services' but does not qualify exactly what these would constitute. The letter also indicated the procedure of withdrawing from funding. The group noted that a term's notice is required, which would force them to make their decisions about withdrawing in September well before the final code of practice has been issued.
- February 22<sup>nd</sup> - The SBNF requested a meeting BCC in order to clarify exactly what they may, or may not, charge for under the new code of practice. They received a response agreeing to a meeting on March 11<sup>th</sup>.

- February 22<sup>nd</sup> - The Telegraph Online responded to the group's letters and published an article about the SBNF with the headline: "Parents face childcare price hike as nurseries threaten to leave free places scheme"
- March 2<sup>nd</sup> - The SBNF met and collated the signed parents consultation documents. These amounted to over 90% of the total number of parents at their nurseries, demonstrating overwhelming parental support in the group's actions. These documents are then delivered to senior management at BCC in advance of the meeting scheduled for March 11<sup>th</sup>.
- March 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Nursery World follows up on the vagueness in the response from BCC and the difficulty providers face in making their decisions for September without a final code of practice in place.

The South Bucks Nursery Forum is resolved in its commitment to ensure parents understand the negative impacts of the changes to the code of practice, and to continue to show its unity in fighting these changes.