Proposed APPG on Nursery Schools and Education

- The central issue is this: Although the government is committed to extending free childcare to support working families far less attention is being paid to the quality of that care and the consequent impact on educational and developmental outcomes for young children. **Nursery Education** appears to have been subsumed into Childcare.

- The evidence is clear. It is the quality of early education that makes the difference in raising achievement for the most disadvantaged children and which justifies such large government investment in early intervention. Quality is determined by the level of qualifications of Early Years staff and teachers are the single most significant determinant of quality. **Nursery Schools** and **nursery classes** in primary schools are the only part of the early years sector that almost always employs qualified teachers.

- The 2015 OFSTED Early Years report endorses the consistent evidence of other national research that the most effective early education is provided by Nursery Schools.

- The most recent OFSTED early years judgement recorded at maintained school inspections between 1 September 2014 and 31 March 2015 records that 60% of nursery schools were judged outstanding.

- The central issue is to raise understanding and awareness of why nursery education matters so much and why government policy to increase free and tax free childcare must not be regarded as the same thing as nursery education.

- Nursery Schools in particular are at increasing risk of closure. Only some 400 remain open. Their employment of nursery teachers and highly qualified staff make them more expensive BUT they offer excellent value because they engage with large numbers of children with SEND and complex needs and their role extends far further than the children and families they serve. As Early Years Teaching Centres and Teaching Schools there are now c100 nursery schools involved in supporting, training and teaching staff in
all sectors of early years including private nurseries, playgroups and other maintained schools. The sector as a whole urgently needs to retain the expertise and skills of these experienced practitioners to raise standards in the sector as a whole and at a time when training provided by local authorities has declined sharply.

- The key issues are as follows

  1. Why does nursery education still matter?
  2. How can nursery schools fulfill the vital role of supporting quality across the whole early years sector?
  3. How can the legal/organizational structure of nursery schools be changed to secure their future?

These three themes might form the basis of the agenda of three meetings of the APPG to take place in December 2015, February and May 2016.

- APPG officers
  Graham Stuart MP (Chair)
  Baroness Tess Blackstone (Vice Chair)
  Mark Pritchard MP (Treasurer)
  Tom Pursglove MP (Secretary)

- Secretariat
  Pen Green in collaboration with Early Education
There are few politicians and indeed few parents who would not agree that the single greatest determinants of good education and high levels of achievement are strong and expert school leaders and good teachers. Well trained and properly paid graduate teachers supported by excellent head teachers are what makes the difference.

There is one group of schools where consistent evidence shows that effective and skilled leaders with highly qualified staff make the greatest difference to the most disadvantaged children. 55% of these schools are judged outstanding by Ofsted and 41% are good (this compares to 17% of Primary Schools judged outstanding by Ofsted) The current Chief inspector of Schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, recognises that, in his words, the best outcomes, for the poorest children, are found in these schools. The Chair of the Education Select Committee, the conservative MP Graham Stuart has called them “rare, peculiar centres of excellence that do a brilliant job and that are found to be doing so by everyone who looks at them.”

So which are these schools and why is the Government not celebrating their extraordinary success? These schools are Nursery Schools and, far from being celebrated and cherished by the Government, they are in serious and imminent danger of being destroyed.

So what are Maintained Nursery Schools and why do they matter so much?

Maintained nursery schools are local authority schools. They provide education and other services to children under 5 and their families both during school terms and frequently beyond. Two thirds of nursery schools are in the 30% most deprived areas of the country; many are also large and complex Children’s Centres and offer care and education to under 5s for extended hours all year round, as well as a host of professional services for children and families. They are run by qualified teachers and early years educators who have specialist expertise in supporting young children. Nursery schools have pioneered the idea that integrating
care, early education and family support services for children and their families supports the best outcomes for young children.

So why are these most successful schools in clear and present danger?

Nursery Schools are in jeopardy all over the country because the qualifications of their staff and the leadership of head teachers means that they cost more than any other sort of nursery. The current system of funding Early Education or what is now more usually called Childcare, assumes that what every nursery offers is broadly the same. Thus all nurseries whether in the private for-profit, the voluntary not-for-profit or the public sector are now funded on the same formula.

Successful governments for more than two decades have been trying to persuade parents that childcare, preschools, playgroups, nursery schools and classes, childminders and day nurseries in the public, private and voluntary sector are the same. Funding, regulation, curriculum and inspection have all supported this. First vouchers and then the extension of the nursery education grant to all nurseries allowed the government to claim, and parents to believe, that nursery education or childcare was the same wherever their child attended. The current funding mechanism, the Single Funding Formula is based on the myth that there should be a ‘level playing field’ for all nurseries. Funding is based on the principle that every child is funded on the same basis.

Sir Michael Wilshaw has argued that parents, especially the poorest, cannot distinguish between the “bewildering choices offered”.

The confusion is less amongst parents than among successive governments promoting all nurseries as the same and indeed using the terms childcare and education to mean the same thing.

There has also grown up a commonsense assumption that we have to choose between the polar opposites of formal instruction or child initiated play. Sir Michael says we let poor children down by our attachment to a ‘child centred approach’. This both attributes false meaning to the term and defies the evidence. Maintained nursery schools have achieved their successful outcomes for the poorest children by continuing to adopt this very approach.
Local Authority nursery schools admit children from all backgrounds, give priority in allocating places to the most disadvantaged and those with Special educational needs and disabilities, and involve parents in their children’s learning. They are child centred and they do teach children: it is how they do so that is so effective.

Children’s earliest learning takes place within individual families situated in specific social, economic and cultural contexts. They bring with them to their first nursery their own particular understandings and experience, skills and interests. It is the responsibility of their first teachers to discover and extend these, and to support children in making links between individual and collective forms of knowledge.

Local authority maintained nursery schools have developed these distinctive methods of teaching for this formative stage in young children’s lives. The evidence shows that it is highly effective for all children and does not underestimate children’s intellectual powers. The narrow definition of skills necessary for ‘school readiness’ is crude in comparison with what we might expect from three and four and year olds and what they achieve in nursery schools.

So how do nursery schools so effectively promote children’s learning and development and their subsequent progress in school?

They have buildings and outside space which together provide a planned and well resourced learning environment. The simultaneous use of indoor and outside space which is an essential element in nursery school education is already lost to many three and four year olds in the nursery and reception classes of primary schools and in some of the private nurseries that operate without any outdoor space. Nursery schools remain places where children can take time to develop ideas and carry out tasks without arbitrary timetabling. (For many four or three year olds this is not so and their time is splintered in a planned rehearsal for the next stage of education).

In this form of early education all aspects of a child's development are regarded as equally important and to affect each other. Each child's individual rate of development, knowledge, experience, cultural and linguistic identity, persistent interests and learning
style is acknowledged and close collaboration with parents and the support of families is an established feature of nursery school practice.

Children are recognized as active learners, attempting from infancy to make sense of the world and to communicate, and able to represent their thoughts and feelings in many different ways if they are given the chance.

These formative ideas influence all aspects of nursery school practice, from the curriculum and the ways in which learning and teaching is planned, to daily routines and working practices. The curriculum balances what very young children have a right to know with their own persistent interests. Nursery practitioners need a good grasp of what young children ought to learn, an understanding of how they best learn, and a corresponding ability to recognize children's own intentions for learning and to initiate experiences and activities that will sustain and develop these.

No externally imposed curriculum framework can compensate for this expertise. A system of observation and formative assessment based on children's individual learning needs is used to plan for each child's progress. A process in which parents are fully involved. Because every child receives this concentrated attention, nursery schools offer the most inclusive environment for those with special and additional needs.

And all this demands skilled and well qualified staff who are paid more than their colleagues in the for-profit and not-for-profit sector. The NDNAs own survey of their members reveals that only 12% of private nurseries are paying their staff the living wage. Sam Gyimah the Minister responsible for Early Years and Childcare recently tweeted the latest average salaries in the private childcare sector. He was celebrating the 2.8% rise. Rise to what? Nursery Assistants average hourly rate is £6.21-less than the minimum wage. Only 12% of nurseries pay all their staff the living wage. And yet the prevailing argument is that the Single Funding formula is not equitable unless the same is paid to all nurseries. The non-maintained early years sector is lobbying hard for more money on the basis that the hourly rate paid to them in respect of the free entitlement to nursery education is less than the real cost. The private sector lobby has been a persuasive and energetic advocate and the latest House of Lords review on Affordable Childcare recommends raising the level of grant paid to
them. Little attention has been given to the widespread practice of top-up fees whereby these nurseries charge a much higher rate for any hours over and above the 15 hour free entitlement and only sell places for a minimum number of hours over 15. For some children the free nursery entitlement is really reduced cost childcare.

Equitable is not the same as equal. Equity for all children means doing more for those with the greatest needs. Maintained Nursery Schools should receive more. They do more. They don’t provide the same service or serve the same children and families as most other nurseries. They give priority to those in greatest need and with disabilities and additional needs. They have the skills and resources to do so and to do it outstandingly well. Nursery Schools have another equally important role. They train and educate other early years staff in all other nurseries. Some are already Teaching Schools and the majority have a vital role in demonstrating and supporting good practice in their own areas.

The Government is investing over £5 billion in Early Years. The evidence that it is having a significant and sustained impact on improving the education and life chances of our children is clear. Unless the quality of the nursery is high, impact will be difficult to discern. The cost of continuing to fund poor or mediocre quality nurseries makes far less economic sense than retaining and expanding Nursery Schools.

Barbara Riddell, Education Consultant @ Pen Green Centre for Children and Families