

Barbara Riddell's speech to APPG June 27th 2017

At the end of our last meeting Jack Dromey MP eloquently summed up the 3 important elements of this APPG. The first that we have put ourselves in a strong position to learn what government is doing. Second that we learn from one another, and third, and, crucially, that we are an effective lobby.

We have persuaded the government that nursery schools matter and that they are too important to the whole early years sector to be allowed to wither. Indeed, apart from securing the supplementary funding, nursery schools featured in the statutory guidance to local authorities as system leaders and centres for family support and, most recently, in the conservative manifesto which promised academy status either independently or as part of a MAT.

As Jack said in March, the OFSTED assessment that 61% of MNSs are outstanding, and 100% are good and outstanding is the most remarkable achievement, BUT as he quite rightly counselled, what matters is winning the argument on a continuing basis as to why nursery schools and the services they offer are so vital.

We heard you Jack and we heard The headteacher of Sherringham, Julian Grenier, too when he said that if we appear to be defending what he described as fortress nursery schools by criticizing other kinds of nurseries we do nothing but damage to our cause.

So how can we do more to make common cause with the rest of the sector without diluting our fundamental beliefs and absolute commitment to offering the best early education to the poorest and most vulnerable children?

Cheryl Hadland, the founder of Tops Day Nurseries wants to establish a new APPG. The PLA, NDNA, CACHE and the Foundation Stage Forum are also on board. Mrs Hadland says “The new Parliament offers new opportunities for our sector to ask ministers to look again at key early years policies, and to work with us to ensure we’re able to deliver high-quality childcare in a financially sustainable way.’ ‘Establishing an APPG will be an important and welcome step towards ensuring that the views of the sector – and in particular, private and voluntary providers – are heard at the highest level. With so many significant early years changes coming into effect this year, building a united political presence is more important than ever.”

We agree Cheryl. We agree about high quality albeit that we prefer to call it early education and we agree about financial sustainability. We also agree that cross party debate and discussion is crucial. (I am afraid we don’t agree that an APPG focussed solely on private and voluntary nurseries is the best way forward but we do appreciate that you perceive our focus on the maintained sector as part of the problem)

Cheryl Hadland also told *Nursery World*, ‘I feel that our sector is still fragmented. We have no sector skills council, we have no historical professional traditions and financial advantages like schools and colleges; few colleagues are represented by unions; nursery owners’ and managers’ issues are not sufficiently understood by the DfE;

'The small group of 400 state-funded nursery schools have managed to achieve huge beneficial financial transitional arrangements through their APPG and I have high hopes for a more inclusive group achieving even more for all of us, focused on care and education in the early years sector, and indeed for the parents/carers, employers and communities we serve.'

We agree- well perhaps not about the description of the "huge" beneficial financial arrangement, but certainly about the shared ambition to achieve even more for all and indeed about the need for more inclusive meetings that do not separate the PVI from the rest of us. We want more shared debate and open discussion not less. A separate APPG is unlikely to achieve this.

But we also need to make it clear that We DO have professional traditions, we DO have a unionised workforce and we DO want to focus on high quality early education that is financially sustainable. What we are asking for is the opportunity to share these professional traditions with each and every other nursery AND to be allowed to maintain and develop our skills for the benefit of all. Of course we recognise the sharp and sometimes shocking differences in pay and professional support between our schools and most of the PVI and we want to change this.

The misunderstanding is that additional funding for nursery schools means less money for other parts of the sector. Maintaining funding for nursery schools and their expert staff is supporting the whole sector, is growing the skilled professionals the whole sector so desperately needs. What we want is the continued capacity to use these resources for the benefit of all and indeed to do yet more to support colleagues in other types of nursery.

We have said it many times before but we need to keep saying it. The whole basis of the funding formula is flawed. There is no level playing field and all children and all nurseries are not the same.

New Zealand has a very mixed early years sector. Private and not-for-profit nurseries are funded to employ qualified staff at qualified pay rates. They are all audited to ensure that such funding is being used for this purpose. This ensures that the playing field is, if not level, on a gentle gradient.

We don't want to quarrel with other parts of the sector. We know many of these hardworking colleagues, who want to gain better training and deserve proper salaries. But we must not be coy or embarrassed in saying it like it is.

- Nursery schools and classes admit children on the basis of need. This is different.
- Nursery schools and classes pay staff on national rates of pay and terms and conditions. We are schools.
- We employ teachers with QTS who share the same professional status and pay scales as their peers in other phases of education. We welcome opportunities for staff who gained EYP or more recently EYT qualifications BUT we don't support moves that mean these colleagues do not have the same pay or conditions. If we expect QTS in reception class we should expect it for nursery children

- Nursery schools and classes have a far higher proportion of children with disabilities and special needs because we have the specialist skills and expertise to support them
- Nursery schools and classes provenance is as the first phase of education. So too were playgroups and some private nurseries. That is why the term childcare market grates although of course we contribute to it. What we want is the best possible quality of education organised to meet the needs of working families AND all other families. The Government's aim of ending "differences in funding between parts of the market" makes little sense if we risk the loss of the very nurseries that do so well for the poorest children. Equal funding is only fair if everyone is playing the same game, by the same rules, on that famous level playing field.

The tension would not be between the maintained sector and the PVI or between the not-for-profit and the for profit sector if we had a system that used indices of quality such as staff qualifications to assess funding and then properly audited its use. Funding needs to be far more transparent in terms of what it is paying for.

We need to campaign for a change to the current formula. We want a formula that is designed to drive higher levels and rates for qualified staff and better outcomes for children. We do want to work as professional colleagues with other types of nursery and we do want to abandon any last remains of "disseminating good practice" and all the other cloying clichés. We do embrace joint and shared practice development (another cliché I fear) and we have plenty of evidence of the benefits of such collegiate and inclusive support BUT it can't come free.

So to the manifesto we wrote for all parties at the last election- our cross-party plea.

"Government investment in the early years has increased over the last 20 years, but clarity about the intended outcomes of this funding has decreased. There is currently no strategy to link early years funding to outcomes for children.

The greater the level of government investment, the greater the need to ensure that every pound of taxpayers money is directed at ensuring the highest possible quality of early education – and the best outcomes for children."

This is echoed by last year's Rowntree Report on creating an anti-poverty childcare system

"Our proposals seek to deliver a universal pre-school childcare system; that is, a system that delivers guaranteed access to high quality childcare at a price parents can afford. We have not recommended a universal free childcare system. The state cannot, in the near future, afford to subsidise both generous free entitlements for all families and meet pressing antipoverty investment priorities. An excessive focus on free childcare risks locking the

UK into a low quality funding model, distracts policy-makers from investment in early intervention services and will not address fundamental access and flexibility challenges. Whilst targeted increases in free provision can be justified, large extensions to universal free childcare are likely to undermine rather than support anti-poverty policy goals.”

I can't forget a recent note from a nursery headteacher. A parent who is not currently working is asking whether she qualifies for the 30 hours because she could do a couple of hours work as a consultant and would earn at least the equivalent of 16 hours at the minimum wage. Indeed she does qualify since her joint income with her partner is £199,999. If she chooses to go to the gym so be it. And of course if she buys extra hours beyond the 30 hours she can claim tax free childcare. The same headteacher is desperately trying to find ways of giving a 30 hour place to one of her most vulnerable 2 year olds who of course only qualifies for that place because he lives in a family on income support. Such children, some of whom live in appalling family circumstances are not eligible for the 30 hours.

The private nursery down the road serves a more affluent community. They intend to charge an additional £1.50 per hour for what is called additional services. Parents are asked to sign a contract agreeing to this. I am not unsympathetic to the claims by the PVI of inadequate funding for the 30 hours but it does put another large pothole in our level playing field. Is anyone going to challenge this? Certainly we know that current top-up fees go unchallenged.

Our priority is clear. We must make common cause but be clear that we are distinctive and different. We are schools and want to be recognised as such. We want to continue to have a selective admissions policy that gives priority to the children who need us most. We want to work with their families and within our communities. We want to share our professional skills and work towards a future where there is broad pay parity and higher qualifications for the whole sector.

So let us be optimistic and positive. We want friends and colleagues that are honest and straightforward and that is what we will strive to be. We do have more in common than that which divides us- the welfare of our children.

We are not just a narrow lobby for nursery schools. We are a campaign for Early Education.