Maintained nursery schools: hubs for quality in the early years
Early Education is celebrating 90 years since its foundation as the Nursery Schools Association. Our members now include childminders, maintained schools, private sector, voluntary and independent providers. All of these can offer high quality education to our youngest children, and our aim is to support them in doing so.

This report celebrates the particular role played by maintained nursery schools in leading quality in the early years, and explains why everyone who values high quality early years education should be concerned that this valuable asset is in danger of being lost.
Executive summary

Only around 700 maintained nursery schools still remain across the UK. Over the last decade nearly 100 nursery schools have been lost in England, more than half of those in Wales have closed, at least 11 have closed in Scotland and only Northern Ireland has managed to maintain numbers.

Because of their small numbers and not being a universal service, public awareness of the distinctive role and nature of maintained nursery schools is low. Given their high quality provision and their historical concentration in deprived areas, their role needs to be more widely understood so that short-term financial pressures do not lead to long-term loss of high quality provision.

Maintained nursery schools are beacons of high quality, with 58% of those in England having received an Outstanding rating from Ofsted compared to only 10% of other setting-based early years providers, and 7% of primary schools. This is particularly striking given that nursery schools face the same two-day inspections as maintained primary schools, not the half-day inspections applied to other early years providers.

Our survey of 127 maintained nursery schools across the UK found that just under half were operating on a stand-alone basis, 42% operated in combination with children’s centres, 7% were in federated arrangements with another setting and 9% operated various permutations of joint activity including children’s centres, daycare and federated leadership and management. Federated arrangements are on the increase as local authorities seek to make cuts and cutting headteacher posts is seen as a source of savings.

Maintained nursery schools play a leading role in developing the early years workforce. 80% of survey respondents were involved in offering training and placements, and 20% were involved in system leadership activity with the National College for Teaching and Leadership in England eg as part of a Teaching School partnership, as well as much involvement with local networks of early years and primary schools, and supporting local authority early years teams.

Nursery schools also have an important role to play in supporting families and local communities, especially in relation to supporting parents, working with children with special educational needs and disabilities and supporting vulnerable children and families.

More than 60% of the nursery schools surveyed in England were already offering funded places for 2-year-olds under the government’s scheme, and more were gearing up to do so. If the government’s 2-year-old funding is to have an impact, children must be placed in high quality settings, so the involvement of high quality nursery schools is important both in terms of direct delivery and helping to build capacity within the early years sector.

Despite the current priority for providing high quality affordable early education and childcare, current funding mechanisms and the pressure to cut local authority budgets are putting maintained nursery schools at risk. 74% of respondents were concerned about their future viability and 4% faced imminent loss of independence. Only 12% were confident about their future. Uncertainty was caused by current funding levels and formulae, the unpredictability and short-term nature of funding settlements, systemic inequalities in matching funding to obligations, and succession issues where headteacher posts were vulnerable to cuts.

One third of respondents in England were not adequately funded under the Single Funding Formula, and 60% were unsure whether funding would continue to be adequate in future. Particular issues raised included the need for funding to be appropriately linked to deprivation levels (a pupil premium for the early years) and insufficient funding for children with special educational needs and disabilities. Further uncertainties for settings combined with children’s centres arose when children’s centre contracts were up for renewal.

While headteachers were engaging in much entrepreneurial activity to make budgets balance, there were restrictions on their ability to innovate which need to be reviewed to allow maintained nursery schools to develop to meet current and future needs.
Maintained nursery schools: a hidden asset

Maintained nursery schools are one of the UK’s unique educational assets, and yet remain a largely untold story. Most families know about nursery classes attached to primary schools, nurseries run as private businesses and volunteer-run playgroups. Far fewer know there are maintained (that is, state-funded) nursery schools, or what makes them different from other early years provision.

This lack of public profile is not because they are a new phenomenon. Pioneers such as Rachel and Margaret McMillan set up nursery schools a century ago seeking to bring better health and educational opportunities to young children and their families. They used ground-breaking approaches such as a focus on play, outdoor activity and the holistic development of the child, many of which are being rediscovered today in ‘new’ developments such as forest schools. This legacy of social reform explains why so many maintained nursery schools are located in areas of high deprivation where they continue to act as a unique resource for local families.

“Our school, Children’s Centre and under 3s provides places for the most vulnerable. 90% of our school population are taken from the top 10% of most deprived children according to the IDACI banding, We also take children with significant special educational needs (often who have been asked to leave a private or voluntary setting). The outcomes we demonstrate are outstanding as children often start with us well below the average for their age (OFSTED).”

The low profile of nursery schools may be because they are far from being a universal service and are few in number. According to the DfE1, 14% of 3-4 year olds in 2012-13 were using nursery school provision in England. Their importance goes beyond the number of children directly enrolled. As this report shows, they have a key role in providing a range of services for families and local communities, and training early years practitioners for the benefit of the sector as a whole.

In Northern Ireland investment has kept numbers steady, with 97 now operating compared to 95 in 2000.

In Scotland, 142 nursery schools currently exist but at least 11 have closed over the last decade, and several more will soon be lost through merger with local primary schools.

Only 428 maintained nursery schools remain in England, compared to 520 in 1999.

At a time when the demand for high quality education and childcare is increasing, the historic resource of high quality nursery schools in many areas is under threat.

Unique features of the nursery school

“We are a very popular Outstanding school and the majority of children in the immediate area and a good percentage from surrounding villages attend. We believe that this is because we have maintained an outstanding status over the past 10 years and parents appreciate the value of an educationally based setting.”

The most distinctive features of maintained nursery schools are their specialist nature, highly qualified staff and role as a hub for services to local families and communities.

They are publicly funded schools specialising in the 3-5 year old age range (although many take younger children too). Like nursery classes attached to primary schools, they have a high proportion of graduate staff. Unlike nursery classes in primary schools, they have headteachers who are early years specialists. This means that the focus can be on delivering play-based age-appropriate education to children at a crucial stage of development, which requires a quite different set of approaches to later primary school.

“Kirklees now only has one stand alone maintained nursery school. The other two including ours have federated and are losing identities and are in danger of becoming diluted reception classes.”

They are inspected under the same Ofsted criteria as primary schools, rather than those used for early years settings in the private and voluntary sector, with longer inspections, and yet they have a far higher proportion of Outstanding judgements than primary schools or the rest of the early years sector – 58% of nursery schools compared to 10% of other setting-based early years providers2.


2 Ofsted statistics for Maintained schools inspections and outcomes September 2012-August 2013 and Early years and childcare inspections and outcomes September 2008-October 2013
Crucially, many maintained nursery schools do far more than offer early education to young children. Over the years many have also taken on the running of children’s centres, working with health visitors, speech therapists, social services and other services for families. Some offer wraparound care and after school activities. Many are involved in the training and development of the early years workforce.

Our members tell us that while some local authorities continue to value and support their nursery school provision, in a time of austerity and continuing cuts, many nursery schools are at risk of closure. Once lost, it is hard to rebuild this vital resource for supporting quality in the early years and addressing social inequalities for the most disadvantaged children. This report therefore seeks to identify the current state of health of the nursery school sector, the challenges it currently faces and the wider contribution it makes, which will be lost if short-sighted cuts fail to recognise the value it provides.

Survey findings

The survey was conducted online in December 2013 and January 2014 and was publicised to Early Education members, and to non-members via partner organisations. We received 127 responses from across the UK. Despite some differences of policy across the four nations, the situation of nursery schools shared many common features across the UK. Findings refer to the UK as a whole, unless otherwise indicated in the text.

Table 1: Location of survey respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>answered question</strong></td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The nursery school offer

“Our nursery is the lead agency for two children’s centres and will soon bid for a further two as the local authority clusters... We also have a daycare unit which offers wrap around care to the nursery school parents and funded places for 2-year-olds.”

In many cases, nursery schools are hubs for integrated service provision. While just under half of the respondents represented maintained nursery schools operating on a stand alone basis, 42% also operated one or more children’s centres and other arrangements included federation with one or more other nursery school, integrated daycare services and/or children’s centres.

Table 2: Prevalence of integrated services and federated arrangements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arrangement</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standalone Nursery School</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery School and Children’s Centre</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federated with another school or setting</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (included various permutations of nursery school/daycare/children’s centres and various federation arrangements)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>answered question</strong></td>
<td>127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: totals >100% as respondents were able to tick more than one answer

Responses to the open-ended questions in the survey indicate that the number of nursery schools in federated arrangements is likely to increase in future, as local authorities seek to make savings by sharing one headteacher across two or more settings (as discussed later in the report).

The number of integrated nursery schools and children’s centres, however, may decrease if the fears are realised of some nursery schools which are currently having to re-tender for their children’s centre contracts. The report will show that there are many benefits to integrating nursery schools and children’s centres, and we would recommend to local authorities that the criteria for children’s centre tenders ensure these are taken into account.

“Both schools and centres (we are federated) are Outstanding. We have been able to develop a good leadership team in both, through sharing the salary of the head and senior admin. There have been great benefits in working closely together: shared training; shared research; benchmarking; peer support; close co-operation in planning and policy development; building future leaders.”

Quality

“Maintained Nursery Schools are, and always have been, providing the best Nursery Education in the country, Ofsted data shows this clearly. The government and other professionals will insist on referring to Nursery Education as ‘childcare’....yes
we can provide the childcare as well, and many of us do, but that is not our core purpose. Specialised Education of the youngest children is our purpose, which is why we employ the highest qualified staff, invest in inspiring training to inform practice, use high quality resources, promote self evaluation and challenge ourselves. We do this because we believe we can make a real difference to children's lives. In my LA [Local Authority] alone, four maintained Nursery Schools have closed in the past three years. In the interests of ‘best value’ including the outcomes for children, Nursery Schools should be expanding not closing.

Nursery Schools are inspected under the Ofsted criteria used for primary schools, rather than those used for early years settings in the private and voluntary sector, with inspections lasting two days rather than half a day. Most are rated as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, reflecting their highly qualified staff and high quality provision (58% rated Outstanding compared to 7% of primary schools).

Many respondents expressed concern that this was not widely understood:

“The inequality of the Ofsted frameworks harms nursery schools significantly: parents do not understand the difference between the school and early years frameworks and will compare judgements between private providers and nursery schools.”

There are also issues about the burden of Ofsted inspections for some nursery schools, as those which are Nursery Schools and Children's Centres and take under 3s may find themselves subject to three different types of inspection, imposing an unnecessary administrative burden, and providing potential confusion for parents trying to understand different ratings based on different sets of criteria.

While technicalities about Ofsted judgements might not be widely understood, there was plenty of anecdotal evidence of nursery schools being highly valued by local families, integrated teams and – in some cases – their local authorities:

“Feedback from local professionals (Children’s Centre staff, health visitors, IDSS teachers, social care) indicates that our nursery is their nursery of preference when referring families due to the quality of our education and care.”

Workforce and sector development

"We are the only maintained nursery school in the whole of north Edinburgh, and are instrumental in organising and supporting nursery classes and private partner nursery staff through the local early years forum and cluster group. We also have lively partnerships with other local voluntary organisations which benefit both parties."

The vital role of maintained nursery schools in building quality across the sector is clear from the range of activity in which they are involved. 20% of those in England are currently part of a Teaching School partnership or were designated under other NCTL schemes, and over 80% were involved in training and placements, usually of multiple kinds including initial professional development of apprentices, early years educators, early years teachers/professionals, PGCE students; continuing professional development for staff already working in the sector; and staff in related roles such as health and social services.

Nursery schools were also offering specialist expertise such as forest schools, and working with 2-year-olds.

“The Oxfordshire Aspiration network builds on the work of the Chipping Norton Ace Centre as a Teaching Centre. Oxfordshire entered into service level agreements with the six remaining nursery schools in Oxfordshire, under which we are funded to support other schools and settings in our localities. We are also exploring possibilities for formalising our partnership as nursery schools, with a view looking at to other ways to support practice and influence policy in the County as the central LA services reduce or are externalised.”

The survey responses showed that nursery schools have responded enthusiastically to the drive for early years system leadership and have built up broad and wide reaching partnerships, including

► working with other nursery schools and children’s centre locally and nationally

► supporting staff in local private, voluntary and independent early years providers through local forums and cluster groups

► offering support and development opportunities for childminders

► supporting visits from other settings

► working with local primary and infant schools through local collaboratives

► supporting students and apprentices from local colleges and universities, including Teaching School alliances, SCITTs

► engagement with research into effective practice in the early years eg projects on 2-year-olds, wellbeing
supporting local authority early years teams
offering training for local parents

“The school supports local preschools and recently helped a preschool that had failed an inspection gain a good rating when re-inspected.”

“We try to challenge all of our staff to keep developing so our practice stays outstanding.”

Services for children, families and communities

“I know the governors are aware that we are vital to this deprived area.”

“Nursery Schools across the city provide a role in safeguarding that has a huge impact on the lives of those in our local community.”

Another clear finding from the survey was the extent to which nursery schools offer significant additional services to their local communities (and sometimes beyond) including some which schools and private sector providers are able to provide, but also going beyond those.

These included:
- Wrap-around care, flexible and extended hours
- Family Support teams and Health Visitors on site
- Work with parents on children’s learning
- Supporting parents’ learning
- Providing for vulnerable children and families or those with complex needs including inclusion and social care referrals
- Expert support for children with special education needs (despite not necessarily having access to additional funding)
- Supporting high proportions of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL)

“The range of early intervention strategies to encourage families into the building certainly help eg Child Health Clinic twice a week; on site local library co-facilitating groups for parents and younger children; active sessions for parents with young children; plus all the Come and Join us activities that nursery schools offer to families to engage them in their child’s learning. We also work hard to maintain links with our adjoining and local primary schools with whom we have good relationships. Nursery Schools have to be seen as a hub in their community both for families.... I continue to be concerned that our Local Authority opened Children’s Centres with separate staff teams and management systems, creating in effect some duplication and another ‘silo’ rather than using the expertise in well-established Nursery Schools.”

2-year-olds

Nursery schools were actively supporting national and local agendas to extend funded early years provision to 2-year-olds. 63 nursery schools already offered places under the 2-year-old funding in England, and more were in the process of developing provision. Some which did not offer 2-year-old places themselves had provision elsewhere on site, either through daycare centres or partnerships with private or voluntary sector providers.

As the recent Sutton Trust report points out3, the expansion of funded places to the most deprived 2-year-olds will only help narrow the achievement gap if the quality of provision is high, so the involvement of high quality nursery schools has an important contribution to make to this key government policy.

But, as the recent NDNA insight report4 demonstrates, even Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) nurseries are making a loss on 2 year old provision in 40% of cases. If funding levels are not realistic, even for PVI settings which often have lower overheads than maintained nursery schools, and which may already have facilities for two year olds in parent-funded places, it is unlikely that they will be adequate for maintained nursery schools, especially where 2-year-old provision is not already in place.

Some respondents who wished to develop 2-year-old provision lacked suitable rooms and were struggling to access capital investment, although one had managed to raise private funding. There was also a mixed picture in terms of whether local authorities were actively supporting 2-year-old places in nursery schools.

“Maintained Nurseries have to secure the 2 year olds to ensure these children are receiving quality care and education. We are disappointed that the Local Authority are reluctant to support placement

3 Sound Foundations, by Sandra Mathers, Naomi Eisenstadt, Professor Kathy Sylva, Dr. Elena Soukakou and Dr. Katharina Ereky-Stevens from Oxford University published 22.01.14 The full report is available at http://www.suttontrust.com/our-work/research/item/sound-foundations
of 2 year old funding in our Outstanding setting (2 consecutive Ofsted judgements) but are willing
to fund in a setting which are judged ‘Requires Improvement’. Also the LA say we will be in
competition with a local private provider if we also have 2 year olds despite the LA giving the local
provider permission to go ahead and receive the education grant for 3-4 year olds which in essence
put them in competition with us!”

Nursery schools saw benefits in extending their age-group to include 2-year-olds to meet demand
from parents who wished to have their children in one setting for several years, rather than having
to move them around, and also who were keen to have places in nursery schools because of the quality. Some were keen to ensure they had a mix
of funded and paid for 2-year-old places to achieve a social mix, which has been shown to be far more
beneficial for children. Taking 2-year-olds also had the potential to create a more predictable stream of
children into their 3- and 4-year-old provision.

However, funding was often only confirmed at short notice. There were comments that the current system for approving 2-year-olds for the free funding meant that parents did not know until 6 weeks prior
to the start of term if their child was eligible for a funded place. This made it difficult for providers to run waiting lists, and to manage their planning and budgeting.

The commitment of nursery schools to high quality provision was also evident in that some were
involved in research around quality practice for 2-year-olds.

Fears for the future

Despite all these positive contributions nursery schools make to their local communities, 78% of respondents were concerned about future viability or faced imminent loss of independence. While none faced imminent closure, only 12% were confident about their future.

Table 3: Views on future viability (all respondents)

| Which of the following best describes your assessment of the future viability of your Nursery School? |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| I am confident about our future                              | 15                                              | 12%                 |
| I am concerned about our future viability                 | 94                                              | 74%                 |
| We face imminent closure                                   | 0                                               | 0%                  |
| We face imminent loss of independence eg amalgamation with a local primary | 5                                               | 4%                  |
| Don’t know                                                  | 4                                               | 3%                  |
| Other (please specify)                                     | 9                                               | 7%                  |
| answered question                                           | 127                                             |                     |

The key issues that were raised were:

- Funding levels, and how these were calculated
- Unpredictability of funding which made it difficult to plan, especially re staffing
- Systemic inequalities such as being expected to meet the obligations of schools, without access to the funding sources available to schools
- Succession issues where local authorities chose not to replace headteachers, leading to a loss of independent status and a resultant loss in early years expertise
**Funding**

Of those based in England, 107 responded to the question about funding under the Single Funding Formula (SFF). Although two-thirds felt that they were adequately funded for the present, 60% had concerns about whether this would continue to be the case, and one third already considered their funding under the SFF to be inadequate.

**Table 4: Viability under the Single Funding Formula (English respondents only)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Are you concerned about your funding next year under the Single Funding Formula?</th>
<th>106</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We are adequately funded under the Single Funding Formula and are confident this will continue</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are adequately funded under the SFF at present, but have concerns about whether this will continue</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are not adequately funded under the SFF, and have ongoing concerns about funding</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While both Northern Ireland respondents were confident about their future funding from their local authority, three out of the four Scottish respondents were concerned about funding, and one faced imminent loss of independence. Of the Welsh respondents, two faced imminent loss of independent status and the remaining two had concerns about funding. Although the response numbers were too small to be statistically significant, they do reflect the wider trends in each country. Whereas the number of nursery schools have held steady, or even increased slightly in Northern Ireland, the number in Wales has halved over ten years, and Scotland has lost quite a few of its stand-alone nursery schools.

**A level playing field?**

“Maintained nursery schools need the consistency of an appropriate level of early years funding which recognises their unique, specialist role and acknowledges that they are a school just like any other.”

One of the main challenges for maintained nursery schools in England in recent years has been the introduction of the Single Funding Formula. Designed to level the playing field between maintained and non-maintained sectors, it fails to take account of the fact that maintained nursery schools have higher staff costs due to the higher qualification levels of staff and in meeting their obligations as state schools.

Respondents pointed out that while they were judged on the same criteria as other schools when it came to Ofsted, they were not treated the same when it came to eligibility for the pupil premium or free school meals (despite being expected to provide free school meals for some children). They were not a priority for local authority capital expansion, but nor were they eligible to apply for lottery funding, being maintained and on local authority land.

“In the last four years this Nursery has faced cuts totalling £216,000.00; half our budget in 2010. We cannot continue to exist without some financial security, quite bluntly I have no idea how much our income will be in 2014-15 and neither does the LA. Funding arrangements need to be reviewed urgently. Nursery Schools need to have access to a core funding in addition to an element associated with a head count, a model that is common for most Primary Schools.”

Generally nursery schools said they were able to make the single funding formula work when they had a supportive local authority which recognised the extra costs they faced, but such arrangements were constantly liable to review and change.

Factors which added to the uncertainty were:

- fluctuating local populations - for example where housing stocks in the area were being regenerated,
- changing funding formulas from year to year,
- funding on a term by term basis, making longer term planning hard
- seasonal fluctuations including the dip in autumn term enrolments caused by single-form entry and losing up to 75% of children at the end of the summer term with knock-on uncertainty about numbers for the autumn
- competition on unequal terms when local primary schools or private providers were able to open new provision without seeking local authority permission, while nursery schools could not

In the absence of a pupil premium for early years, some local authorities did provide a measure of funding relating to deprivation, but the measures used did not necessarily reflect the demographics of the children enrolled. Yet, as discussed above,
children with complex needs were particularly likely to be referred to nursery schools because of their expertise and additional services.

“Although we get a good rate for each individual child, we only get it per child on roll and until 2 years ago we were funded per total number of places regardless of actual children on roll. This meant we could plan for the full year, have good quality staff and resources. Now, we get our budget term by term, depending on actual numbers in, which makes strategic planning difficult, as although we can estimate how many children will come in, we can’t be exact. So, we estimate our funding and then have to change if we have more or less children in. This January, I am 10 children down on our estimate and am not sure if I can keep a very good NQT on. Working this way is extremely frustrating!”

SEND funding was a particular difficulty as by the time children had accumulated the required evidence to demonstrate the need for funding, they had often moved on to school. It remains to be seen whether the new arrangements for Education, Health and Care plans from 2014 will be able to address this issue.

“Our EYSFF is flawed and only takes account of 2 nursery nurses for 25 hours a week - we are 80 places for 3 and 4 year olds and have 36 2-year-olds... but government blames the LA and the LA blames the DfE so we are stuck in the middle. We receive NO SEN funding - 22.5% of the current cohort has additional needs.”

A further uncertainty arose for those nursery schools which were also children’s centres if the local authority decided to re-tender for the children’s centre contract. Combined centres may have been very well placed to deliver the services, but unlike some other organisations bidding for the contracts centre heads had no source of support and expertise in putting together complex tender documents.

“Current recommissioning of children’s centres within Hertfordshire is leaving us feeling vulnerable. Without being Lead agency we could be much less secure and will need to be looking at creative ways to ensure sustainability if we are not successful in our tender bid. As yet we do not know what we are tendering for and therefore cannot be sure about the future/know the impact on the nursery school. “

For those operating on split sites, this provided additional costs which were not recognised, and local arrangements could be further complicated when nursery schools were part of arrangements between local authorities and other bodies such as academies.

Despite these challenges, some headteachers were clearly doing extraordinarily well and turning around the finances of their schools:

“I have been Executive Headteacher of two Nursery Schools with daycare and one Children’s Centre, for 15 months, following the retirement of one of the existing heads. My original school is facing a growing in year deficit (£100,000) caused by a regeneration of the local housing stock and my second school has a historic deficit of £170,000 which under the previous Headship was never challenged by the LA. I have had to restructure both the Nursery Schools and the second daycare and now both LA daycare provisions should be in budget and the second school should be in 2014-15 with a slight increase in numbers. The EYSFF locally is predicated on an all year round occupancy of 80% and even then would only just cover the costs if we were full for two terms.”

Nevertheless, some were frustrated about constraints on their ability to innovate to survive.

“We have tried to look into extending our provision to seven from birth to five. We have been told by the local authority (who have followed this up with the Department for Education) that maintained Nursery Schools cannot extend their provision legally under section 18 (4). However, state primary schools can take 2-year-olds and probably will take birth to 2-year-olds soon under the 0-18 continuum. We are now looking at the Free Schools model as a way of sustaining our provision.”

Leadership and staffing issues

A recurring theme in the report was about succession planning. Many headteachers had had taken on the management of two or more settings when local authorities either could not, or would not, replace retiring headteachers of other nursery schools, or replaced them with a head of centre without a teaching qualification. Others had been told that they themselves would not be replaced when they went. There were also reports of difficulties in recruiting, perhaps due to salary levels or to the complexity and challenging nature of the role.

While some had found positive benefits to federation, and had actively managed processes of federating nursery schools with one another, other nursery schools faced the prospect of federation or amalgamation with local primary schools, leading to a loss of early years expertise. In some cases, headteachers fully expected their nursery school to be closed after they left.
Governors were, in most cases, very supportive, but they were not always able to avert cuts from the local authority.

“There are of course benefits to [federation] such as CPD opportunities for staff, economies of scale and the possibility of wider influence in the city. The potential for greater recognition as a provider of high quality early education and care within the region could also be developed by a ‘federated model’ of working across both Nursery Schools. However, short term economic arguments rarely take sufficient account of ‘quality’ and the long term benefits it has traditionally brought for young children and their families, particularly in areas of high deprivation.”

Some respondents expressed concern about the impact of losing more highly qualified staff, and about the widening ratios between staff and children, especially in cases where children’s needs were complex.

“Now there are two FTE teachers term time (plus Headteacher/Head of Centre who works to an all year round contract) and we have 120 children on roll. Each teacher has a level 3 trained member of staff and up to two level 2s. In what other sector of primary schools would a teacher have responsibility and maintain records for so many children?”

**Viability**

A continuing theme in the survey was the vulnerability of nursery schools to volatile local authority policies. While a small number of local authorities such as Reading and Lancashire were celebrated for supporting the sector, respondents understood that the current financial climate, and the changing role of local authorities, made it likely there would be difficult decisions ahead.

“Our local authority has to date been very supportive of Nursery schools although there are very few of us (6) in a large geographically spread county. We have tried to work collaboratively with the authority and other schools and settings within the authority but we are now anxious as funding to the local authority is diminishing - and indeed the role of the LA - that our future is at risk.”

In the majority of cases, local authorities were reported to be failing to provide support or actively seeking to close down nursery schools, in one case telling a headteacher that maintained nursery schools were an “unaffordable luxury”. Being non-statutory, early years services, and nursery schools in particular, were seen as vulnerable to cuts.
End words

The difficulties faced by nursery schools and the enormous contribution they make to local communities are eloquently summed up by the two case studies below. It is time for nursery schools to stand up and be counted for the extraordinary work they do, it is time for local and national politicians to recognise their value, and for every parent to ask why their children should have anything less than the best quality education that nursery schools can provide.

“In our county there are 9 maintained nursery schools (some currently combined with children’s centres). Currently, we support each other and work quite closely together. With changes to funding and the outsourcing of our children’s centre, we are finding it more and more difficult to balance our budget. We are no longer funded from the “schools block” in our local authority, but from the early years block. We have constant pressures on our budget, including increasing numbers of children with additional needs and EAL. Within the EYSFF there is little recognition of the additional costs incurred by nursery schools. Our staff are all qualified to level 3 or above, which is not always the case with private providers. We are receiving diminishing support from our local authority, which itself is shrinking due to the increased academisation of schools in our county. We do not have many of the advantages of primary schools, such as the pupil premium, even though many of our children would meet the criteria. We are often caught between a “rock and a hard place”, as sometimes we count as “schools” and sometimes we do not.

“The nursery school has been in the community since the 1940s and has an excellent reputation and strong links with many generations of families within the local community. Underpinning these, and strong relationships with partner agencies, is the ethos and expertise of the setting, with the children and families at the heart of everything. Due to the excellent practice it also developed extended services with a children’s centre.

The headteacher took up post to support the school with transition because the school would have a licensed deficit as a result of budget cuts within the next five years and the school would not be able to sustain funding a headteacher. She has been working to find a way forward with a view to collaborating with another school. The school is fortunate that it is very supported by the local schools, with a view to preserving the early years knowledge, expertise and ethos.

Data regarding vulnerable children supported by the setting (including vulnerable the 2-year-olds) evidences improved outcomes in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) due to the expertise of staff in the setting. The school has supported training of social workers and teachers. The recent OFSTED was graded the nursery school as Outstanding. The inspection especially noted the ethos as a key to the success with the children and families, and the impact this had on families achieving positive outcomes.

“Nursery schools are steeped in the knowledge and history of early years and the expertise cannot be underestimated. However, what they achieve is complex, although it appears simple. It is sometimes hard to define and unpick the implicit knowledge that is within each setting because the staff work
The school supports local preschools. The nursery school coordinates meetings for lower schools and preschools on behalf of the community of schools. Feedback from a setting has been very positive regarding the support given to it. The nursery school has promoted Forest School (FS) within the community of schools and the local pre-schools and now many have FS status. Currently it is researching land that could be used by all of the community to support FS sessions. A member of staff from the setting also assisted Bridgewater College with a presentation on Forest School. In addition to this, training has been delivered for fathers in conjunction with Bridgewater College. There are regular Dads Days (the last one welcoming 50 fathers).

Parents’ of the setting have spoken publicly about the value of the setting and the positive difference it made to their lives. The headteacher and staff have been involved in delivering a variety of early years training. The staff work closely with Children’s Services supporting vulnerable families. They have also recently begun joint 2-year-old checks with Health Visitors. They offer individualised courses to parents in the home. They also provide support for breastfeeding mums and support both health visitor and midwife clinics. The key to success is being able to respond quickly to parents when they need help, also working closely with other professionals who can also offer support. In addition they run a number of groups for families aimed specifically at improving outcomes in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Another key aspect to success is the excellent transitions through the setting due to the holistic approach.

The school and centre have supported the local schools with addressing concerns in the community as a result there is a more cohesive approach among the schools, including other early years settings in the community. A member of staff has also co-ordinated the delivery of training on supporting families with domestic violence. The centre works with a women’s refuge and supports programmes to support victims. It also delivers very successful parenting programs (there is a waiting list for the course due to the benefits, which are conveyed by word of mouth). The headteacher is raising the profile of maths within the community of schools and training will be organised which will also include other early years settings.

so intuitively and instinctively with each other, it is completely embedded in the holistic approach that is at the heart of what they do. This needs to be captured, preserved and disseminated to ensure that the quality of early years provision continues to survive and develop in the future.”
**Acknowledgements**

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**About us**

Early Education (The British Association for Early Childhood Education) is the leading independent national charity for early years practitioners and parents, campaigning for the right of all children to education of the highest quality. Founded in 1923, it has members in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and provides a national voice on matters that relate to effective early childhood education and care of young children from birth to eight. The organisation supports the professional development of practitioners through publications, training, conferences, seminars and access to a national and regional branch network.

For more information on the work of Early Education visit [www.early-education.org.uk](http://www.early-education.org.uk)