

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
Westminster
London
SW1P 3BT

Ms Vicky Ford
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

8th January 2021

Dear Mr Williamson and Ms Ford,

We are writing to you as the Early Childhood Studies Degree Network to express our concern and disappointment around the omission of the early childhood sector from important discussions around the operation of education providers in England for the next few months.

As a network of universities providing Early Childhood Studies degrees to approximately 15,000 students, we work closely with a wide range of early years providers and we are hearing how abandoned, scared and disillusioned they are currently feeling. We would like to better understand why these providers have been left open when all other sectors of education have been asked to close to all but key worker and vulnerable children. We understand the crucial role that the early childhood sector plays in caring for and educating all young children, as well as ensuring that parents can work. However, what is completely missing from the debate is the role of the early years settings in the midst of a pandemic, and the governmental responsibility to keep the youngest children in our society safe, alongside their families and, moreover, the committed professionals working with them.

We are in agreement with the statement from the Early Years Alliance that 'If the Department for Education is to advise early years providers to continue to provide care while instructing other education providers to close, it simply must provide a clear and unequivocal scientific basis for doing so'. The government cannot and must not put the safety of young children, their families and professionals at risk.

Following on from the pandemic, there is a significant risk to the current and future 'quality of early care and education'. Some parents are understandably electing to keep their children at home due to financial or safety reasons. Consequently, this is having a financial impact which leaves us concerned that many high-quality private, non-profit and voluntary providers will not be able to survive. In our view, the Government must provide substantial financial support for these settings when they need to adjust due to low number of children and taking measures necessary to keep themselves and the children in their care safe. The ongoing lack of financial support being offered to early years providers at a time of a national and international pandemic is extremely disconcerting. As The Early Years Alliance state 'the decision to remove early education funding support at a time when other schemes such as the Job Retention Scheme have been extended is particularly indefensible, it is vital that this support is reinstated as soon as possible.'

The continued commitment of the early childhood sector is one that must be recognised urgently by the Department for Education and yourselves. The lack of understanding of the key roles these providers play in the fabric of our society, and the misunderstanding of the term ‘care’ needs to be rectified. There are many current and future undergraduates watching what is happening to the sector and considering if this is how they wish to be treated as a profession. These are the future graduate professionals who deserve to be valued for their deep understanding of early childhood alongside those currently working as practitioners.

With the new employability and competency initiative ‘the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies’ (ECGPC), many ECS degrees have increased placement expectations for students. With growing numbers of universities offering ECGPC, the hope was to further support and work with the sector in developing graduate competencies and mentoring, strengthening a low valued sector. We hugely value the experiences that our students gain whilst in practice, the time that early childhood providers take to support them and what we all learn from the practitioners’ expertise. In working with Universities and offering undergraduate and postgraduate placements, the early years sector and universities can gain strength in knowledge and skills required to support our youngest children and their families. Following the experience of the past few days it is a deep concern that we will lose practitioners, providers and future graduates from an already underfunded sector.

Signed on behalf of the ECSDN



Philippa Thompson (Co-Chair of the ECSDN)



Alexander Sabine (Co-Chair of the ECSDN)