

OFFICER RESPONSE TO CALL-IN OF NURSERY CLOSURE DECISION

The “call-in” relating to the proposed closure of St. Martin’s Gardens Nursery and Radstock nursery asks four questions in relation to this decision. Please see below some commentary in response to the four questions.

Q1. The proposed decision has not taken into account, the impact on families and children in crisis, families with challenging children and children with disabilities protected under the 2010 Equalities Act.

All Private Nurseries and Child-minders are approved, equipped and staffed to cater for all children, regardless of circumstance and with the universalisation of 2 year offer, all nurseries are expected to respond to this. They are regularly inspected by Ofsted against the following standards and they have to demonstrate how they will:

- meet the learning and development requirements
- meet the safeguarding and welfare requirements
- develop and deliver the educational programmes
- identify children’s starting points and ensure that children make progress in their learning through effective planning, observation and assessment
- safeguard children
- work in partnership with parents, carers and others
- offer an inclusive service
- evaluate their service and strive for continuous improvement.

All nursery provision in Radstock other than the Council nursery is rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted.

The Council via the Children’s Centres will continue to work in partnership with Health Visitors and others as required to:

- identify these children
- provide essential home based Family Support and reach out to offer the appropriate support, either at the Children Centre or in the home- including Flying Start, Theraplay, Portage, Employment support, General Family Support as identified.
- ensure that all Early Years vulnerable children are assessed and if they are deemed to need additional support they will offer an enhanced package of support or refer on as needed
- offer Children’s Centre Placement (and exceptional circumstances) Funding to the most vulnerable Under 2’s
- further improve our reach, contact and work with local Early Years settings to support them with more vulnerable children – in terms of identification, awareness-raising and skills development.

Q2. Under the Children Act 2006, this Council is required to assess the local childcare market and to secure sufficient childcare for working parents. In Radstock the sufficiency figure is only 0.73 meaning that already there are fewer places than required.

The assessment of sufficiency is not an exact science. It uses the ratio of the number of available 15-hour places for 3 and 4 year olds within a children's centre catchment area, as compared with the total number of children who are eligible for the Early Years Entitlement (EYE). This does not necessarily correlate with need or demand for places in a particular locality as families will access providers that are convenient or attractive for different reasons. We know that local providers are constantly flexing their capacity in response to demand.

The sufficiency figure for St. Martins Gardens (1.35) shows that there are a high number of private providers that will be able to take children from St. Martins Gardens that still require a child-care place.

With regard to Radstock, many of the children that currently attend Radstock nursery come from the surrounding areas which do have good sufficiency levels. For example, half of the current users come from Midsomer Norton, which has up to 70 places of 'oversupply'. Since the proposal to close the Nursery was made, staff have been working with local providers to increase capacity specifically in Radstock. Two nurseries within the catchment area have confirmed that they will be expanding places.

It is also important to highlight that 33 of the children at the nursery will graduate into Primary School this year at their expected transition point. For the remaining children, the vast majority of families have identified alternative providers and applied for places for September.

Q3. The papers give no indication about how long the nurseries have been running at a loss.

These nurseries have been running at a loss for 3 years. One of the key contributing factors to these running costs is staff salaries. The Council pays higher than the private sector and this means that we struggle to compete financially. Due to the Council's employment terms and conditions of service for staff it means that we could not compete on a level playing field with the private providers, therefore there is no likelihood of the Nursery becoming financially viable in the future even if remodelled.

Substantial efforts have been made to explore a transfer of the nurseries to alternative providers but without success. This decision has to be taken in the context of the Council's wider financial position and the need to review the Council's involvement as a direct provider of a costly and loss-making non-statutory function.

Q4. The papers do not indicate how long the nurseries have been below numbers and whether the threat of closure has impacted on numbers.

The Nursery at St. Martins Gardens has seen numbers fall for the past three years, as the local private provision has strengthened.

The numbers of children at Radstock has remained steady over recent years, However, as previously highlighted above, these numbers are not sufficient for the nursery to remain economically viable.

Numbers have started to reduce since parents became aware of the proposed closures around Christmas time and we stopped admitting new children, but this has not been a contributing factor to the projections of financial sustainability.