

Good Evening Councillors,

I stand before you to express deep concerns regarding the council's new Provider Agreement with Early Years Providers and its detrimental impact on our children's early education and well-being in BANES.

Risks

Nurseries and childminders across our community have come together, united in highlighting the very real and imminent risks associated with this Provider Agreement with regards to which the sector has not been consulted. Collectively, we serve well over 3,000 local families, and our unified voice reflects the widespread apprehension and potentially fatal risks we're expected to shoulder within our sector with less than 15 days notice.

Erosion of Parental Choice

Up until this point, parents could select early years settings that best suited their child's unique needs—be it enhanced SEND support, higher staff ratios, or specialized learning environments. By mandating that additional charges be optional, this agreement forces nurseries to eliminate these specialized services, leading to a homogenized system that fails to cater to individual children's requirements and takes away parental choice.

Compromised Support for SEND Children

Consider Child "H," who requires support beyond the provided Band B funding. Currently, our setting absorbs an additional £6,200 annually to ensure appropriate care. With 20 such children enrolled, the financial burden is substantial. The new agreement renders this level of support unsustainable, leaving vulnerable children without essential services and placing increased strain on local authority resources.

Increased Safety Risks

Financial constraints will compel nurseries to adopt a 1:5 staff-to-child ratio for toddlers, significantly reducing supervision. This compromises safety, especially during activities like eating, where the risk of choking or allergic reactions escalates without adequate oversight. Additionally, the responsibility placed on nurseries to manage food safety without clear guidelines further endangers children's well-being.

Impact on Looked-After Children

Looked-after children, already facing challenges such as trauma and developmental delays, rely on stable, high-quality early years experiences. The reduction in support services due to financial limitations undermines their chances for a positive start, contradicting the local authority's duty under the Children Act to safeguard these vulnerable individuals.

Undervaluing a Female-Led Workforce

This agreement reflects an outdated perspective that undervalues the predominantly female workforce in early years education. Expecting highly skilled professionals to provide essential services without appropriate compensation not only devalues their contributions but also threatens the sustainability of quality early years provision and drives the progression of women's rights back decades.

Violation of Children's Rights

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees the right to life, safety, and an education that supports full potential. By enforcing policies that compromise safety, reduce educational quality, and limit support for those with additional needs, the local authority is failing to uphold these fundamental rights.

Conclusion

This Provider Agreement undermines the quality and safety of early years education, disproportionately affects vulnerable children, and devalues the dedicated professionals in this sector. Your feedback today will be communicated to the families we serve, who stand with us in advocating for the best start in life for their children. I urge the local authority to reconsider this policy to ensure every child receives the safe, high-quality early education they deserve. Is the council actually prepared to risk April 1st arriving with limited or even no nurseries or childminders prepared to deliver the early years funded childcare, with huge disruption to children's learning and childcare arrangements.

Thank you.