

Yes, Minister (or no?)

The publication with a flourish by the Department for Education (DfE) of *More Great Childcare*, subtitled *Raising quality and giving parents more choice*, has opened the floodgates. NMT asked two of the sector's representative bodies and directors from a representative range of nurseries to give their views



Neil Leitch

Chief Executive Officer
Pre-school Learning Alliance

"The Under Secretary of State for Education and Childcare has completely disregarded the views of practitioners across the country. She has stressed that

the ratios are maximum limits and that 'no settings will be obliged to use higher ratios' – but let's be realistic. In an ideal world, all settings would maintain existing ratios, ensuring that every single child receives the individual care and attention we all know to be vital to early learning and development. In reality, this won't happen. Eventually, settings will bow to market pressures and accept more children per adult in order to remain competitive.

"It is disappointing that the Government cannot see that their proposals will create a two-tier system where those parents who can afford high-quality childcare with high staff ratios and a safe, stimulating learning environment for their children will pay above the odds, while those who can't are forced to settle for settings where one-to-one adult-child interactions are the exception.

"The irony is that children living in deprived areas are more likely to require more individual care and attention. Who can support a policy that promotes social inequality? When it comes to the early years, the child should always be the priority. The sector wants to ensure this remains the case."



Ros Marshall

Chief Executive Officer,
Kidsunlimited

"Kidsunlimited unequivocally welcomes the government's intention to raise the quality and reduce the cost of childcare. Both are vitally necessary.

"As a company, we invest heavily in the training and development of our staff. We therefore applaud the drive for a better qualified workforce in the early years.

Training and study for qualifications can equip even the most talented practitioners with an enhanced repertoire of high-level professional skills. In this phase, as in all others, there is no substitute for intelligent, well-qualified teachers sensitive to the needs of children and able to bring to their task a strong sense of what works best.

"We also welcome the opportunities offered by the proposed changes to the statutory ratios. It seems to us right that responsible providers should have increased power of decision in this matter. It is a flexibility we propose to use cautiously, always in the interests of children and only after consultation with parents, as the level of qualifications of our staff rises.

"A flourishing early years sector is vital to the nation, and it is obvious that much needs to be done to build on the great strengths already there."



Andy Morris

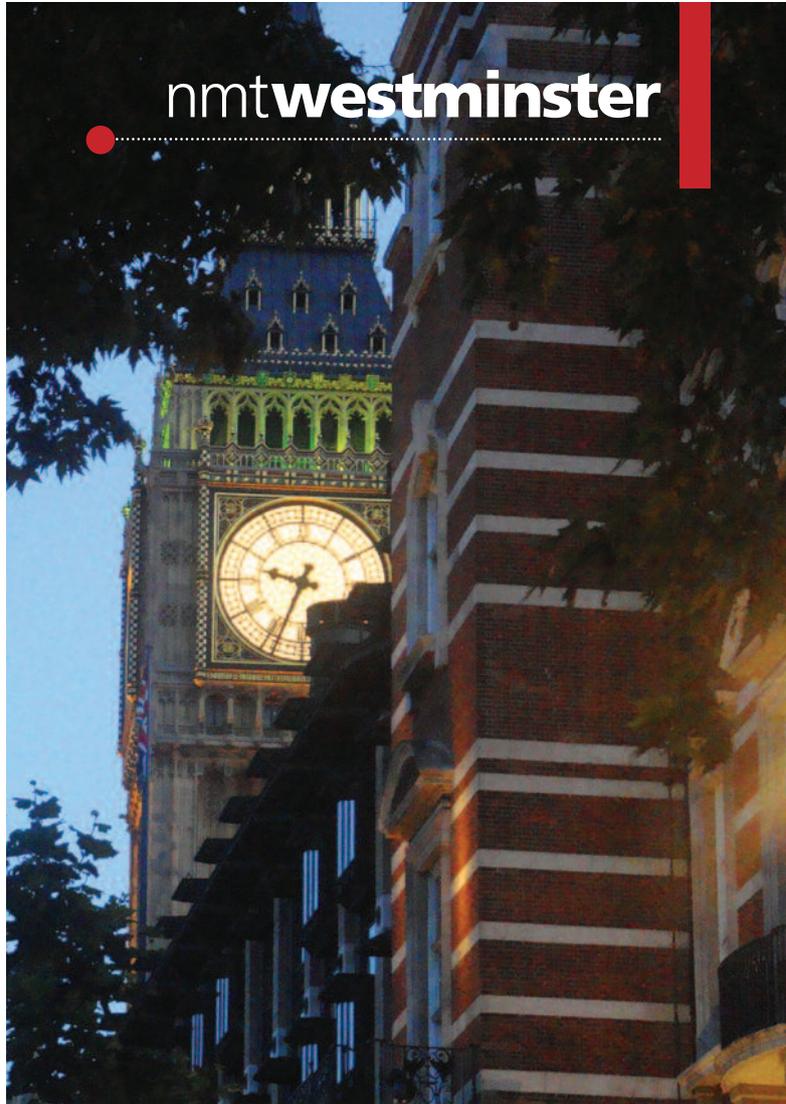
Chief Executive Officer
Asquith Day Nurseries

"This proposal to increase the number of babies and children that can be looked after by a single carer is seriously flawed – and it seems there will need to be a

tragedy before it will be reviewed. To me, this ill-conceived scheme is more about buying the Government votes than it is about properly caring for the nation's children. Liz Truss talks about the need to improve quality in the sector – but the death of a child will not be a price worth paying for cost savings.

"We are not babysitters; we are early years educators – but having fewer staff look after more children neither enhances safety nor allows the child to reach its full potential. People talk about the Danish childcare model but the Danes pay much higher tax rates than we do here.

"People say childcare is expensive. But what price do you put on a child's safety, well-being and early years development? Parents with children at a premium day nursery are getting high-quality care in a safe and secure environment, educational development from qualified staff and excellent nutrition."



Purnima Tanuku OBE

Chief Executive, NDNA

“More Great Childcare proposes that it will be made easier for schools to offer early education to under-threes. This proposal has received little media coverage, but is of concern to NDNA. Under-threes need

a great deal of individual care and attention and schools rarely have the skills or expertise to provide for such young children. The UK has shown significant improvements in the quality of its early years provision – now ranked third in the world by the Economist Intelligence Unit. This is largely via delivery by a mix of private, voluntary and independent provision that specialises and has expertise in provision for the very youngest children.

“Moves towards encouraging schools to offer early education for under-threes could potentially reverse the significant improvements made. If schools are to offer provision to under-threes, the full EYFS must apply, to ensure age-appropriate provision.

“There is great capacity in private and voluntary nurseries, with on average around 25 per cent of places vacant, and many are willing to get involved in the two-year-old offer. NDNA believes that resolving funding shortfalls for free places would open up this capacity and prevent the need to waste investment and duplicate existing places.”



Linda Baston-Pitt

Managing Director
Old School House Nursery

“More ‘great childcare’ but at what cost. I agree wholeheartedly with the professionalisation of our sector, and believe that the continued learning and

development of all staff is crucial to maintaining quality. However, comparing qualifications and childcare in the UK with Europe is misleading. It fails to take into account that colleagues in Sweden, for example, who are all qualified early years teachers, do not handle detailed child assessments and excessive paperwork.

“What’s more, costs can’t be reduced by simply paring down what the Government now perceives we ‘no longer need’: staff. Nor can we classify staff simply on the basis of qualifications. A degree doesn’t confer super-powers on individuals. I am dismayed that this is all the Government think-tank could come up with when searching for ways to reduce childcare fees by 20 per cent.

“Obvious alternatives that don’t affect quality and growth within the sector would be for the Government to reduce the massive overheads we pay to the utilities companies and to disentangle the complex funding streams that rarely reach the intended source. In the words of Elizabeth Truss, these actions would give providers ‘the incentives and the flexibility they need to deliver the best for children’.”



Sarah Steel

Managing Director
The Old Station Nursery Group

“After two years of consulting on the opening of an envelope, Liz Truss has announced the biggest changes to childcare for 10 years without any

consultation and against united opposition from the sector. My frustration is the smoke-and-mirrors briefings to the media, which lead parents to believe that this is about making childcare more affordable.

“Let’s see what comes out of the promised budget announcements, but a significant increase in employer childcare vouchers really would make a difference to many working families. Instead, this relaxing of ratios makes providers seem like the bad guys, rather than the Government, by suggesting that it will allow us to reduce fees. That’s after we’ve increased quality, paid staff a better wage, subsidised the inadequate EYE funding and all the other things that this change is supposed to achieve.

“I am concerned that this will lead to a two-tier system: discerning parents who can afford higher fees will use nurseries and childminders who maintain or exceed current ratios. Those in most deprived areas, where nurseries are already struggling to survive, will have to embrace lower ratios, possibly at the cost of quality.

“To use the alarmingly accurate parody in *Yes, Minister*, I don’t know where Liz Truss’s Sir Humphrey was when she made these plans, but he was definitely snoozing.”