

Back to school

The drive for young children to attend school-run nurseries is causing some concern, but could it be an opportunity for the PVI nursery sector? *Meredith Jones Russell* looks at the pros and cons

The enthusiasm for basing early years provision in schools has caused hackles to rise across the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) nursery sector since the publishing of Ofsted's first standalone annual early years report in April.

The non-ministerial Government department called for more formal, structured learning in England's private nurseries and playgroups, and advocated school as the best place for two-year-olds.

Chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw said the reason for this was that children are often unprepared for primary school, with only a third of England's poorest children reaching a good level of development in pre-schools.

However, education experts are concerned that if schools are pushed to set up their own nurseries the play-based approach championed by many in the sector could be sacrificed in favour of teaching-based activities,

to the detriment of both children's development and PVI settings. Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA), says, 'We are really concerned about the political drive to push this agenda. The only thing coming from Government is that nurseries should be situated in schools, with nothing about putting money into PVIs.'

'This is all about economies and while we're not opposed to nurseries on school sites in principle, I would question whether that is in the best interests of children in general. The Government knows it has a problem in terms of lack of places so it wants to pack children into buildings. We as a sector need to question this.'

Caroline Jones, early years lecturer at the University of Warwick and owner of five nurseries on school sites, says she is concerned about any move towards 'schoolification'. 'The expertise has really been built up by us in the early years sector. Schools don't have the same training or experience,

and their focus is education whereas ours is more on the holistic child,' Dr Jones explains. 'I would be concerned about twos in particular, unless the provision schools provide can be flexible and developed appropriately.'

The Department for Education (DfE) announced in November 2013 that it would remove the requirement on schools to register provision for two-year-olds separately with Ofsted, meaning school Ofsted inspections will also incorporate their early years provision. This step was taken to encourage more schools to offer nursery places to meet the Government's target for 40 per cent of the most disadvantaged two-year-olds to access 15 hours a week of free care from this September.

Under proposed changes to the Schools Admissions Code, primary schools would be able to give priority in their admission arrangements to disadvantaged children eligible for the Early Years Pupil Premium, the Pupil Premium or Service Premium (for children of parents serving in the

CASE STUDY: ACORN CHILDCARE

Acorn Childcare, a social enterprise, owns nine nurseries in Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, three of which are run as private entities on school sites. Managing director Zoe Raven says a school setting is a 'mixed blessing'.

She explains, 'The number one benefit is definitely the low cost of setting up. There are no planning permission issues and no conversions needed. You also have a captive catchment, because parents who are already associated with the school will use you.'

There are similar benefits for the school. 'If the school is

struggling to recruit, we can provide it with a steady flow of children outside its catchment area. In one of our settings a third of children in the school are from outside the catchment area because they've come through the nursery.'

However, she acknowledged there can be difficulties. 'The lack of security is definitely the biggest issue. You usually don't have a lease but a licence. We're actually just about to be kicked out of one of our schools because it's expanding and wants the space back. Luckily, the council doesn't want to lose the nursery so it's finding us alternative premises.'

Ms Raven will not provide wraparound care to two-year-olds attending provision at school rather than in her setting. 'It's too disruptive for them at that age and that's not right,' she says. 'But the two-year-old issue is definitely looming. So far, many schools are just not that interested in taking them. They'd have to employ more teachers to cover the ratios and I don't imagine they want to do that. But they might change their minds.'

Establishing a good relationship with the caretaker is 'critical' for any nursery provider setting up on a school site, Ms Raven says, and

nursery and school staff should be encouraged to mix wherever possible, such as at after-school clubs.

'Then they see things from both sides,' she explains. 'Otherwise there can be a kind of "them" and "us" mentality, with the school sometimes looking down on the nursery.'

Overall, the nurseries have been a success. 'I would definitely recommend it, as long as the school has the willingness to work with you and you have the same goal in mind. It's all about communication. You have to make sure you don't let little niggles grow in to big moans.'



armed forces) and who have attended a nursery that is part of the school.

The Government has said that the change will allow for continuity of education for disadvantaged children, while promising to ensure that there are still sufficient places available in Reception classes for children of local parents who choose not to send their child to the school nursery.

Mr Leitch has called this a 'generic "it'll be alright on the day" statement', saying 'there appears to be little thought behind the mechanism that would need to be created to ensure all local parents will get equal access.'

The PLA is concerned that such arrangements may disadvantage families who have recently moved to the area, and those who have opted for other providers.

It has also suggested this may make parents feel they have to enrol their child at the school before they really consider them to be ready, to gain a place at the school.

It has also raised concerns about a lack of consistency between inspections for PVI providers and those for school-based early years provision. Ofsted has confirmed that the new separate inspection judgements for school-based early years providers will be based on the same criteria that schools are currently judged by – achievement, quality of teaching, behaviour and safety, and leadership and management.

In contrast, the judgements of providers on the Early Years Register (ie, non-schools) are based on how well provision meets the needs of children

who attend, the contribution of the provision to children's well-being, and leadership and management.

In its evidence to the House of Lords Affordable Childcare Committee, the PLA wrote, 'This difference would seem to contradict plans to make frameworks consistent, unless Ofsted and the DfE are planning to change the criteria for inspections of providers on the Early Years Register.'

However, many PVI providers have nonetheless been able to take

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advantage of the push towards school-based provision by opening new settings for those schools that have facilities ready to use and are reluctant to take on the business of providing early years care themselves.

Purnima Tanuku, chief executive of National Day Nurseries Association, says the emphasis on school-based provision could prove mutually beneficial for PVI providers and schools, if they can establish clear and effective working relationships.

'There are a number of benefits to both schools and PVI nurseries working together, but the relationship must have a firm and contractually sound foundation,' she explains.

'Before a nursery is set up on school grounds there needs to be a clear understanding of what each party sees in the long term, with leases and contracts to reflect that. For the PVI provider, business security must be foremost in their minds with a long-term rather than rolling contract. A continuity plan must also be in the contract in case there is a change in the school's situation.'

'There are clear benefits for schools to having a early years provider on site. The majority of schools are already overstretched and may not have early years specialists. With a quality early years expert providing correct facilities and trained staff, schools can confidently offer parents early years provision.' ■

CASE STUDY: DARTMOUTH ACADEMY

Dartmouth Academy brings together the former Dartmouth Primary School and Nursery with what was Dartmouth Community College to provide education and care to children aged between three and 19 years old. It is registered to care for up to 26 children in the nursery at any one time.

Nursery teacher Emma Heard, who has Qualified Teacher Status, says, 'We get to benefit from facilities like the hall and the library, and we're very much a class in the school. We attend one assembly a week with the rest of the primary phase, and the nursery children wear the school uniform.'

She says nursery children do not get an advantage when applying for places in the school and adds that becoming part of the school's foundation stage unit has embedded the nursery further in the school ethos. 'I plan with the Reception teacher and children get used to the physical environment of the unit and also the structure of the day, which prepares them for their Reception year.'

'Transition became much smoother when we became a unit. The children know the Reception teacher and use her classroom so it isn't a huge change for them.'

'My view may be slightly

biased, but as a teacher I can see only positives of being part of a school. Children are taking part in continuous provision with constant access to outside alongside Reception children, therefore they are able to experience a lot of play-based learning each session,' she says.

'All my teaching is focused on *Development Matters* and what specific children need but professionally it helps me to be working alongside an experienced Reception teacher. You feel part of a community in a school and it's nice for nursery-age children to see their older siblings and take part in wider school life.'