

Written evidence submitted by Post Pandemic Childcare Coalition

About us:

Post Pandemic Childcare coalition is a group of early years workers, childcare providers and parent campaigners, concerned that the hostile environment, workers rights, and the importance of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision, are often ignored or side-lined in terms of early years policy.

In early 2021, during the second big lockdown, we sent an open letter to ministers raising the urgent need for improved terms and conditions for early years workers and inclusive, accessible, high quality early years education and care for all children. The letter raised the need for recognition of unpaid and informal childcare work; the exploitation of migrant nannies, au pairs and unregistered childminders; and how the increasingly chain-dominated childcare market has failed to support key and NHS workers, forcing them to rely on “informal” (unpaid) childcare arrangements. Among urgent demands, the signatories called for an “conditional, funding injection for the whole Early Years sector, which increases local democratic control of settings, with no bailouts of big childcare chains, unless they ensure Real Living Wage, and no dividends or share buy-backs while in receipt of funding.”ⁱ

The letter was signed by hundreds of parents, guardians and early years workers – nannies, social workers, Support for Learning staff, childminders, SENCos, Nursery School and Primary School teachers, Montessori teachers, teaching assistants, NEU, Unite and Unison reps, specialists in Early Childhood Studies and Professors of Inequalities Analysis, independent nurseries from Deptford to the Isle of Wight, NHS and key workers, nurses, radiographers, doctors, GPs, and Helen Pankhurst. Organisation signatories supporting these demands included: United Childcare Workers (UWV), Kalayaan, The Voice of Domestic Workers, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, Nanny Solidarity Network, Greenwich NEU, the New Economics Foundation, UK Women’s Budget Group and the Institute for Public Policy Research.

Short summary of evidence (over 3000 words):

In response to this call for evidence we have gathered testimony from parents’ nursery campaign groups engaged with our coalition, alongside individual responses to a quick call out we sent to our network of parents and early years workers.

All comments are dated January 2023.

Testimony describes how council-run nurseries, integrated with children’s centres, have provided affordable high quality childcare and education, and crucial SEN support.

Parents describe issues with the private sector – limited availability, increased cost, and decreasing quality – including issues with staff consistency, staff training, room sizes, and lack of outdoor space.

The evidence particularly underlines the crucial importance of early identification and support for children with additional learning needs, and shows how parents feel let down by the current system

from early years onwards. Sadly, parents of disabled children describe feeling that early years settings can see them as a burden. They also raise what happens when early identification is missed for children with additional needs, and how important investment in early years staff is, particularly for children with SEND "who need trained staff, different ratios, and consistent key persons."

This evidence was collected at short notice and is by no means comprehensive.

We hope that the inquiry will be in touch with us for more information. We also hope they will be considering and seeking testimony from organisations such as the Voice of Domestic Workers, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, and Nanny Solidarity Network, about the grey sector – where some of the most exploitative childcare working practices happen.

The inquiry should also seek to hear from PACEY (re: Childminders) and the relevant unions, including: Unison, NEU, UVW: United Childcare Workers, GMB among others.

Section One: Childcare Entitlements

Terms of reference: How affordable and easy to understand is the current provision of childcare in England and what steps, if any, could be taken to improve it, especially in relation to families living within the most deprived areas in England? Are the current entitlements providing parents/carers with sufficient childcare, and to what extent are childcare costs affecting parents/carers from returning to work full-time? Are the current Tax-Free Childcare scheme, and support for childcare from the benefits and tax credit system, working effectively or could these subsidies could be better used?

'SEND Crisis Tower Hamlets grew from a campaign to save the remaining three local authority run day nurseries in Tower Hamlets – John Smith, Mary Sambrook and Overland Nursery, which had specialist deaf unit. Tower Hamlets then, as now, is one of the most unequal and deprived areas of England. In 2020, 51% of children in Tower Hamlets were living in poverty – the highest rate in London.ⁱⁱ

We were concerned about the impact on early identification, and support for children with additional needs across the borough with the proposed loss of the service, and the affordable care and support it provided. At Overland nursery all the staff were trained in sign language, and children could access one-to-one sessions with specially trained teachers as well as speech and language therapists, to aid development of sound and speech. The fees were the lowest in the borough, the nurseries were integrated with the children's centre offer, and staff were trained to educate and nurture children with complex needs. They prioritised places for children with special educational needs, children in care, and the children of lone parents, parents on income support and Jobseekers. They were noted by Ofsted for their work supporting those learning English as a second language – vital in our borough.

At the time (2018), the council claimed parents could make use of private voluntary sector provision instead, and so our campaign looked at the local offer, and found that 27% of the PVI (private, voluntary and independent) Day nurseries listed on the Tower Hamlets Local Offer were reported by Ofsted to be inadequate, require improvement, have no report or be closed down.

Nonetheless, these nurseries were closed, and there is now no council-run day nursery provision in the borough.

Comments from our Tower Hamlets SEND parents group about the early years provision recently, raise a number of issues: difficulty with availability; long waiting lists “I put her name down in the womb!”; independent nurseries being brought up by chains and losing experienced staff; as well as unaffordable, and rising, fees. A full time place for a child under 3 at one of the big multinational super-chain nurseries – Bright Horizons Spitalfields – costs over £2000 a month.ⁱⁱⁱ

Research from UCL published in 2022, showed how the English nursery sector is being damaged by large corporate takeovers – while non-profit and good quality nurseries that try to be affordable for parents struggle and close through underfunding, they are being brought up by large multinational chains, which do not invest in staff whilst charging higher fees to parents. The report found that “while the private-for-profit sector cite aims to foster ‘child- centred practice’ and provide ‘quality care’” there was “a lack of explicit reference to care for vulnerable or disadvantaged children”.^{iv} This research chimes with the experience of SEND parents in our group, who have described the issues they have faced at some private nurseries in Tower Hamlets – they talk about how important investment in nursery staff is, particularly for children with SEND – who need trained staff, different ratios, and consistent key persons. It seems obvious to us that protecting and expanding existing council-run early years provision, would be a more inclusive, fair, approach to investing in childcare and early years education, than the current system of entitlements, and confusing government tax subsidies, that end up profiting private companies.

In Tower Hamlets around 8,000 children and young people have been identified as having SEND.^v Following the closure of the council run nurseries, SEND Crisis Tower Hamlets has continued to raise issues with SEND provision locally. In 2019 we organised a large public meeting to oppose plan cuts to specialist teachers at schools, further reducing support for children in early years. We have also raised issues relating to access to the Tower Hamlets Holiday Childcare Scheme. This is vital affordable childcare for SEND children – considering private options are often inaccessible, and those that have appropriate ratios or staff with SEN training too expensive for many parents.

A recent Ofsted Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Inspection for Tower Hamlets (2021) noted identification of children’s needs in the early years is “weak” and raised “gaps” in the support for children with social communication difficulties age 0-5 in Tower Hamlets.^{vi} We believe these issues have been exacerbated by the closure of our Local Authority Day Nurseries, as well as other cuts to Early Years services in the borough, including the cuts to children’s centre staff, and venues, in 2017.

Considering the impacts of the pandemic, and the exclusionary costs of quality early years childcare and education, we are very concerned about a generation of children whose needs will not be identified early, and will miss out on vital developmental support.’

– [names redacted], parent organisers, SEND Crisis Tower Hamlets, London

'My child attends one of three public/council-run day nurseries in Hillingdon. There are only around 370 odd of these nurseries left in the country, yet our council tried to close ours down last year.

The settings are "Good" Ofsted rated, they have highly qualified and experienced staff, and my daughter loves the nursery and her key person. However, I know many are at a point in their career where they do not feel appreciated – especially after the threatened closure – and are looking at alternative careers with less responsibilities and better pay.

Rather than letting the situation worsen, closing down services, we need to be expanding this Council run provision, for parents, not closing it down.

The importance of local council run day nurseries in Hillingdon can be evidenced by a survey our campaign ran in August 2022. Following the announcement of the closure of Uxbridge Early Years Centre, Nestles Avenue Early Years and Children's Centre and South Ruislip Early Years and Children's Centre, we surveyed 42 parents who had begun looking into, or already moved their children from the council run nurseries to alternative provision.

We found their costs had/ or would go up from around £300-900 a month, with comments such as "three times more than what we are paying now". Some parents had reduced the hours they were using for this reason, and at least 2 mentioned leaving work as there was nothing suitable. For parents with more than one child at nursery the cost implication was worst.

Regarding the alternatives – parents commented that quality and availability were a major issue. One parent had found everything local had at least a 12 month waiting list, another noted that the two nearest private nurseries were recently evaluated "inadequate" by Ofsted.

The parents of a child with SEN raised how private nurseries lacked experience and wouldn't "take them on", and also issues with distance of other options due to problems travelling with health conditions. Parents also raised the lower quality of other places available – in terms of room size, outdoor space, staff training for SEND, and food.

The inquiry should look to council-run day nurseries as a model for providing quality early years locally – not least they are also a fast track to other crucial Council services.'

– [name redacted], parent, Save Hillingdon Public Nurseries, Hillingdon, January 2023

'Childcare is unaffordable. I was paying £600 a month for two days a week in Surbiton. Once I was able to get 15 hours free it only reduced it to around £450 a month. I work part time and had to work from home with a pre schooler. The nursery was a franchise, the staff were great but it was frustrating to see the company making profits from what should be a public service. They just put the fees up by 16% this year, I expect because of increased heating and staff costs.

My daughter now uses her 15 hours at a local authority nursery linked to the infants school. This makes it free, I don't have to top up the funded hours - but it means she's at home more when I'm

working. The years of financial stress and working without proper childcare have impacted my mental health, and knocked my confidence and abilities at work.’

– [name redacted], Kingston and Surbiton, January 2023

Section Two: Early years provision

What challenges do early years providers face in terms of workforce, including recruiting, and retaining qualified staff, and the barriers faced by individuals joining the profession? To what extent has the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated workforce challenges?

The Nanny Solidarity Network have raised that “Nannies & au pairs are some of the most poorly treated workers in the UK. We are not represented in mainstream childcare advocacy, many of us earn less than minimum wage, and—if we are live-in workers—we are denied even basic worker's rights.”^{vii}

We hope the inquiry will be considering and seeking testimony from organisations such as the Voice of Domestic Workers, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, and Nanny Solidarity Network, about the grey sector – where some of the most exploitative childcare working practices happen.

We also hope the inquiry will seek responses from PACEY (re: Childminders) and the relevant unions, including: Unison, NEU, UVW: United Childcare Workers, GMB among others.

“The 30 hours funding leaves childminders out of pocket because their hourly rate is higher than what the government offers. They simultaneously market it as "free" childcare to parents. The way we were treated during the pandemic was really bad – overlooked and no clear guidance or support. Generally, childminders are treated like babysitters however they are pretty much nursery EYFS manager level.”

– Former childminder, now primary school teacher, Croydon

Whether the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system is meeting the needs of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and the improvements that could be made to better support young children with SEN within early years provisions. To what extent does the early years system adequately prepare young children for their transition into primary education, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds?

‘My experience with childcare for an autistic child was a mixed bag. My son started at a Barnados nursery at 5 months which had great reviews, but a number of senior staff left, and he was mostly with ever changing bank staff. We then moved him to a childminder at 8 months – he was happy there, but they did not have the skills to support a neurodiverse child and would say he was “not normal”. Just before he turned 2, we were lucky to get a place at a local authority/council run day nursery and it was the best place for my son – with trained, caring and empathetic staff, he made good progress, had a lot of support, and was able to start at our local primary school.’

– [name redacted], Tower Hamlets

‘My son, [name redacted], has quadriplegic cerebral palsy and is registered partially sighted. Trying to find support and help from an early years childhood education and care setting was non-existent.

To get support early on was crucial, not only to support his early development but also because I was suffering with severe PTSD and anxiety due to his diagnosis.

When looking at settings for him, each time we were faced with rejection. Private childminders were unable to care for [name redacted] due to him needing 1-1. This restricted the amount of children they could take on and therefore reducing their income.

Private day nurseries in my area were unsuitable as the settings didn’t have access or space for his equipment and the staff were not trained and/or experienced to deal with his needs. Finally, the local Sure Start centre had been shut, which isolated me even more.

This rejection carried on through to finding a preschool nursery. We were rejected from three school nurseries as they each felt they couldn't meet [name redacted]’s needs. This was despite one of them being a new setting with enough space and even hoists already fitted. Schools were too worried about how caring for [name redacted] would affect the learning for other children – basically implying my child is a burden.

When I challenged the local council on this, I was told because he was only 3 years old, the schools didn’t legally have to take him until he started Reception.

Eventually we put [name redacted] in the local special needs school, but after two weeks we had to pull him out as the care was abysmal and he was suffering emotionally.

We eventually moved the length of the country to find an outstanding special needs school ready to teach and not just care for [name redacted]. For the first time we felt part of a community, we felt accepted and supported. Our lives started to change for the better and I was finally able to start to accept my son’s diagnosis.

In summary, this is my experience of barriers to finding early childhood settings for children with SEN:

1. Lack of training for staff
2. Older settings have physical barriers such as smaller spaces to facilitate equipment, i.e wheelchairs walkers standing frame etc.
3. No hoists or appropriate changing areas for toileting.
4. Lack of specialist/trained staff in the community to support our children; vision teachers, OTs, speech and language therapist etc’

– [name redacted], Cheshire (formally in Tower Hamlets)

'I often wonder how things would have been different had my son's educational needs been met earlier. Although my son was at nursery from 0-4 when he transitioned to primary (in Tower Hamlets), there was no early identification, and he did not get a diagnosis at that stage. My son's behaviour was first clocked by the educational psychologist in reception (age 5), who was there to observe another child. This was merely said to me in passing. But it should have been a red flag and something should have been acted on. Instead, we had years of him increasingly struggling with writing, following rules, etc.

Getting him assessed and diagnosed with ASD at age 6 was the first hurdle of many. The school SENCo did not appear well trained or qualified for the role, and delayed the process for many months because the father was in denial about the problem. I then had to fight hard to get the school to support my request for an application for an EHCP. The SENCo only capitulated when I involved a social worker in our meetings. We didn't get the EHCP until 2019 (he was aged 8), and by then the information in it was massively out of date as his behaviour had deteriorated yet further.

The EHCP process is completely opaque and unclear to parents as to the process, what timelines we should expect, who should be involved, and what our child's rights are in relation to accessing education and the required support to make that viable. In our case, the school SENCo was looking at us parents for a steer as to what to put in the EHCP. We are not the experts. There has been a striking lack of input from healthcare professionals with expertise in autism, and not only that, but seemingly nothing on how to support children who show PDA traits. This total lack of support, in spite of my reaching out for help, enabled the deterioration of my son's mental well-being and educational experience. By year 6 he was on a 2-hour timetable (the rest of his day was at home), and by the end of the year the head teacher said he was at high risk of permanent exclusion.

My son's dad and I have experienced serious difficulties in having to handle a child at home while working full time. Having desperately sought advice from the TH PAC team, I connected with CAMHS to get advice and support but this was slow to get off the ground as they are overworked. Meanwhile the SEN team at Tower Hamlets still had our son's funding level at B, when he clearly needed to be on D due to his high needs. After much pressing via phone calls, emails, meetings and input from the head teacher, a permanent exclusion and police involvement, they agreed to the higher banding. Things should not have to become a full-blown family crisis before the SEN team provides the correct support that was needed years earlier.

In summary, the support available has been patchy, slow and clearly not co-ordinated into one holistic, joined up case management approach across the various agencies and institutions involved. This is even more crucial when the parents are separated and yet share the parenting of a SEN child (one week dad, one week mum).

In terms of after school and holiday childcare – I think parents like me dread holiday clubs because we fear the staff there, while well-intentioned, won't be adequately able to handle / support / anticipate the needs of our children. Speaking personally, I couldn't possibly send my son somewhere as it would be too risky and a meltdown would be highly probable. That said, my son is very into football and I have seen the PE teacher at Bowden House (the boarding school we hope to place him in) manage and de-escalate my son's behaviour so well. With the right expertise and strategies,

amazing things can happen. It was like watching a super hero in action – that is what I believe parents and their SEN children need access to – this inquiry needs to consider that our children can thrive beautifully in the right environment.

Without access to support like that, parents can't facilitate their children to engage in the activities that other children can access so freely. Instead, our children are likely to turn in on themselves and retreat into gaming as the only safe space where they feel they can interact with the world.

Being unable to get the right help and advice, and in a timely and joined up way, means our children are paying the heaviest price. We are raising a generation of hugely let down children, with compromises on their mental well-being, educational attainment and safety. Meanwhile their chances of experiencing the criminal justice system or entering into highly harmful self-harming behaviour has flourished.'

– [name redacted], Tower Hamlets

The extent to which the reduction of Sure Start Children's Centres has affected children and families, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the role of Family Hubs?

'I remember how I crumbled one day when I came late to Meath Garden's Children's Centre. I was having trouble making it in time for sessions. Felt like all the odds were stacked against me as a new mum with a child with disability, no family support nearby, and a husband in denial. The staff came to my AID in that moment. I became someone who could do with some extra support. It was both humbling and nurturing.

I eventually got counselling and I met with other mums in the sensory room who became my circle of support. I was definitely at risk of postnatal depression but learning that so many parents were going through the similar things at stay & play made the extraordinary circumstances of my son's rare condition far less exceptional. I don't know how things would have turned out had it not been 5 minutes from my home.

It makes me sad that so many mothers aren't able to get the support I experienced in 2015, since cuts to Sure Start centres in 2017 have meant shrinking services and reduced staff numbers. Many friends locally who had children later just didn't have access to the same service as I did – the timetables of sessions shrunk drastically. The Sure Start children's centres focused on the early years, and I worry about any new approach that potentially waters that down. A child's early years really have so much potential. The pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis means many more new mums have suffered isolation when they truly need as much help and support as they can get.'

– [name redacted], Bethnal Green, Tower Hamlets

January 2023

Endnotes:

- ⁱ <https://www.postpandemicchildcare.org/post/open-letter-to>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/boroughs/tower-hamlets-poverty-and-inequality-indicators>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Email response to parent enquiry, June 2021. Spitalfields Day Nursery and Preschool (7:30am - 6:30pm) "Under 3s, Full Day - £117.70, Half Days - £58.90, Full Time Monthly - £2,038.83 Registration Fee - £200 - non-refundable"
- ^{iv} <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2022/jan/nursery-sector-risks-being-damaged-large-corporate-takeovers> & <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10142357/7/Childcare%20Main%20Report%20010222.pdf>
- ^v <https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s123818/5.11a%20Appendix%201%20-%20SEND%20Strategy%20final%20draft%20v1.2.pdf>
- ^{vi} <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50169855>
- ^{vii} <https://nannysolidaritynetwork.co.uk>