

## Written evidence submitted by Ms Sandra Roles

I am the owner/manager of a single site, private day nursery/Forest School. I am located in a semi-rural position in Kent. The nursery is a large establishment and we take approximately 135 children per day and employ 63 staff. We are a Forest School, have 8 acres of land and 3 separate buildings on site as well as a large car park for staff and parents. We take babies from 3 months through to children of 4 until they go to school, all year round, Monday to Friday, 7.30am-6.30pm. We are closed on Bank Holidays. We also operate a holiday playscheme for children in reception until the age of 11 years.

We closed to all non-critical worker children on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March. All staff on the rota came to work on the Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> March and prepared the nursery to partly close. We moved the animals to the one building that we were keeping open, deep cleaned and moved all consumable resources to the one building left open. Over 50 staff were furloughed from the Tuesday and we prepared to rota only skeleton staff to take critical worker children. Initially this was 8 or 9 staff plus manager and one deputy but as numbers of children have decreased, more staff were furloughed. We currently have 4 staff, plus manager and deputy.

All parents had paid for March and even though we closed for the last week of March, we did not refund fees for this week as food etc had been purchased and many staff were still paid. All children of parents that were non-critical workers were advised to cancel their fees for April as we would not be charging and to suspend payment until further notice.

Initially we had 3 staff on rota as only 8-10 children were attending daily. Although this was correct to meet ratios, we felt that an additional member of staff would help with consistency and high levels of care for the children. We brought one more staff member back in. We have now started taking children from nurseries that have closed.

We were aware that we would receive the government free hours (these make up approximately 20% of our gross income), that our business rates would be waived for the year and that staff could be furloughed. We have a mortgage to pay, utilities, insurance and maintenance but the government free hours should cover this, even if we don't 'earn' during this period.

We were informed that if we took a 'funded' child whose nursery had closed, we had to absorb that child's free hours from the payment that we would receive from KCC and that we could not claim for these temporary children. I have challenged this with our LA as I felt that if a child was coming to me as their nursery was closed, that we should receive the free hours, not the setting that had closed. This is being reviewed by KCC. I am yet to hear anymore.

Potentially, even though we would not earn anything like we normally earn, we would be financially better off if we were to close. The free hours cover our mortgage and bills, my staff would be safer as they would not be working directly with children of critical workers (mostly NHS staff children) and we would not be struggling to buy provisions from supermarkets with hour long queues and no click and collect or delivery slots, plus staff would all receive 80% of their salary. However, we feel morally bound to care for our children

and for those whose nurseries have closed. By remaining open to so few children, we are marginally worse off financially as we are not breaking even after paying staff wages and food bills for how much fees we have coming in. Especially if we cannot claim the free hours for the 'temporary' children that we currently have.

We were approached directly by the HR department at Darent Valley Hospital and we have agreed to be the nursery hub for the hospital if their staff need childcare. We were also asked to potentially plan to remain open over the BH Easter weekend, if things escalated at the hospital and more staff were required to work. We agreed and we have notified our staff that this may happen, and they may be called in from furlough leave. As yet, we do not know if we are required to stay open.

We are likely to keep the current staff working until the end of April and then furlough these staff and bring some staff from furloughed leave, back to work.

Many nurseries have requested that parents pay a reduced fee in order to keep their nursery viable. I have not done so and do not intend to do so. If the lockdown lasts for many months, I may have to review the finances again but I imagine that I will be the one not to draw any salary during this period rather than ask parents to subsidise us.

We are eternally grateful for the furloughing of staff. My biggest worry when we were told we may have to close was for my staff. Many have mortgages or rent to pay and I feared for them, financially. Knowing that they would receive 80% of their salary allowed me to rest easy over this aspect of the business, at least. Equally receiving the government free hours and a business rate holiday means that we can pay the bills so, all being well, we will be in a reasonable position to reopen fully once this pandemic is over.

We intend to remain open to offer care to children of critical workers, even though we are not earning during this process. We are doing it to do our bit to keep the NHS and other critical workers working.

April 2020