



# Parents Response to the Consultation Document on Bright Start Nursery

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. About this document

This document has been written by a group of parents with children at Bright Start Nursery, Brighton, as a formal response to the consultation process on the closure of the nursery. It is intended to sit alongside responses from individual parents and does not replace any other document.

This document intends to take a holistic view of Bright Start Nursery and highlights the main concerns around the proposed closure. The business case is highlighted, however the dedicated 'Bright Start Nursery Viability Plan' looks at this area in detail and is available separately. The document highlights a number of areas that need to be fully addressed and responded to before any decision regarding the future of the nursery is made.

All questions and responses to this document should be sent to all of the email addresses shown below.

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## 1.3. About the Save Bright Start Nursery Campaign

The Campaign was founded, very recently, on 7th October 2010 when notification was provided that the nursery was in danger of consultation for closure. The Campaign was founded by the diverse group of parents that use the nursery and was then joined by additional supporters, past users of the nursery and people who had hoped to use the nursery in the future.

Recently, members of the local business community have come forward in solidarity to rescue the nursery resource that facilitates local commerce.

The Campaign has gained ground significantly since it was conceived, largely due to the weight of goodwill that the nursery generates through its exceptional standards and staff. However, the location of the nursery is also at the heart of the Campaign as there is no alternative nursery to use should Bright Start close.

The Save Bright Start Nursery Campaign does not have any allegiance to any political party although its members may have their own political opinions. Rather, the Group is a collection of individuals from the local the community that agree that a decision to close the nursery is premature, not thought through, legally suspect, just wrong or damaging to the local economy.

### **1.3.1. The online petition**

The online petition has been extremely successful and is available for signature and review at:

<http://www.petition.co.uk/savebrightstartnursery>

In the short period of time that the online petition has been established, it has already attracted nearly 1300 signatures (as of 03/12/2010).

### **1.3.2. The Save Bright Start Nursery website**

The Save Bright Start Nursery Campaign also has its own dedicated website, allowing the dissemination of information to the public in general. The website is available for review at:

<http://savebrightstartnursery.wordpress.com/>

### **1.3.3. Save Bright Start Nursery Campaign Facebook group**

The popular social network site, Facebook, has been used to great effect by the Save Bright Start Nursery Campaign with 480 members worldwide and growing daily.

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=147236258653644&>

The Facebook group means that people's social networks can be tapped into to increase public awareness in a way that was not available to a campaign only a few years ago.






### **1.3.4. Twitter**

The microblogging service, Twitter, has been used to great effect to spread public awareness and support for the site. Again, this is a new social network method of campaigning that could not have been utilised until recently. Twitter has been used to spread the reach of the petition and also to garner considerable local and national celebrity support.

## 2. Political Motivation

### 2.1. Were any options fully explored before the Council made its decision?

The Bright Start parents mobilised within hours of hearing a recommendation had been made to close the nursery. Despite coming from different political persuasions they quickly became united in the single issue to support their children's nursery. Many became frustrated to discover that they have been excluded from ongoing discussions that now only under legal pressure, have been made public. This has raised significant questions.

-  Why has there been no fee increase for four years, despite it being evident further revenue was needed?
-  Why weren't the session rates reviewed annually and increased along the lines of the council run Surestart nurseries in Brighton & Hove?
-  Why has the nursery never been provided with any in-house council PR support to attract more children when needed?
-  Why were the staff told to freeze recruitment instead of being encouraged to build the capacity to take more children?
-  Why did the council not use its own resources at Bright Start to make further use of national government's Early Years Funding for all 3 and some 2 year olds, but instead channeled parents to use private nurseries instead?

### 2.2. The £87,000 subsidy

The council subsidy of £87,000 is being used as a highly charged point in the current political climate to justify closure. It is indeed a significant amount, but when comparing it with other council costs, it can appear minimal. One example of the current administration's public spending is the £90,000 feasibility study commissioned to research a cycle lane along Old Shoreham Road that was never used. £87,000 to support exemplary childcare is a bargain by comparison!

A state nursery founded on the principle of providing childcare for employees would be expected to be subsidised as many parents, especially part time employees would need additional support to return to work after having children. In the same way council employees receive other subsidised benefits to encourage them to remain in work such as bicycle schemes or free workplace parking. However, if this subsidy had become such a problem why weren't the staff approached to look at cost cutting alternatives? Why weren't parents consulted earlier about fee increases? Why has the figure of a £1,500 per year fee increase per full time child been raised and yet never fully discussed with parents? Had the figure been broken down into a more practical calculation, considering most children attend nursery part time, the council could have approached parents to explain the potential of increasing fees by £10 a day. Why was this not done? Why was an opportunity for parents to consider increases disregarded?

### 2.3. Real intentions

For these reasons it appears that the consultation document is based largely on opinion, rather than research or fact. It looks as if the Conservative council's ideology has always been to discourage fee increases, restrict recruitment and resist PR, thus enabling them after a few dwindling years to say that the nursery is no longer viable. In fact the only PR the nursery

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appears to have received in recent weeks providing a negative image to parents and residents via the consultation document and press releases to the Argus. This ideology is further shown in the council's refusal to allow parents and staff to use the nursery premises for consultation meetings. Indeed the document states that the council is committed to private and voluntary nurseries, but makes no mention of state nurseries. This appears the crux of the consultation, a total lack of commitment to providing nursery care for council employees.

# 3. The Quality of the Nursery

Parents will chose a particular nursery for a range of reasons: Because they like the quality of care, the facilities, the location, the hours, the price and that the days available suit their working hours. All of these things have to be right. It would not be a simple task for parents to find another nursery should Bright Start close.

## 3.1. Ofsted

The last Ofsted inspection was done in June 2007 - another one is due at any time. Below are examples of statements from that Ofsted report

-  Children at the nursery are happy, relaxed and confident. They enjoy and learn from a range of activities and experiences that help to encourage their learning and development.
-  Staff know each child well.
-  Staff are enthusiastic in their interaction with them, and their genuine caring nature helps children to thrive in the nursery environment.
-  Overall, children are motivated, keen to learn and are enthusiastic in their play.
-  Children are treated with respect and are made to feel good about themselves.
-  Children are well behaved and benefit from regular praise and encouragement from staff to help build their confidence and self-esteem.
-  Partnership with parents is good.
-  Parents are very happy with the care provided and particularly like the consistency of staff and the nurturing environment.
-  Staff have a good knowledge and understanding of their roles and responsibilities. They are dedicated, and show a genuine care for the children in attendance.
-  The designated special educational needs co-ordinator has a very good understanding of her role and responsibilities and has attended the relevant training.

The overall rating given was 'Satisfactory', which is surprising considering how many positive comments that were made. Suggestions for improvement focused primarily on recording, assessment, planning and observations. These and other recommendations of the 2007 report have now been put in place.



### 3.1. Facilities

The children benefit from a range of play equipment appropriate to their age and developmental needs, including an outdoor play area. These “are organised to encourage children to take the initiative and develop increasing confidence and independence as they are easily accessible at all times. .... The outdoor area is well resourced with a variety of equipment to help encourage their physical development. Climbing bars, slides, bridges, stilts and pull along trains are just some of the examples of the equipment available.” (Ofsted 2007)

The outdoor space is loved by the children and provides them with the chance to have exercise and fresh air, which is so beneficial for the children particularly in a central Brighton nursery.

This view was shared by one parent who wrote:

*“We live in the city centre and have only a very small patio, rather than a garden. This is not a choice – as public sector workers we do not earn enough to raise the money for a larger mortgage for a larger property. It is very important to us that our son has the opportunity to play outside during the days he attends nursery, when we are unable to take him to the park ourselves. I believe this is a very important part of his development and supports the 'Be Healthy' outcome of the Every Child Matters agenda.”*

A detailed response to issues regarding the building has been provided elsewhere in this report.

### 3.2. The care provided

The key consideration for any parent choosing a nursery will be the quality of the care that their child will receive there.

One parent said:

*“Changing the layout may improve the environment of the nursery (Bright Start) but it would not improve the quality of the childcare and I feel I must stress again that this is one of the key features of the nursery. My children love the nursery as it is because of the people and are not worried about a suspended ceiling reducing natural light!”*

It is well known within child care theory that strong attachment relationships between babies and toddlers and the adults who care for them are critical to early brain development and that being able to explore from a secure base of trusted adults leads to the ability to learn confidently and develop good interpersonal skills later in life. Therefore the childcare workers abilities in carrying out this crucial role can have a direct effect on the child's development.

Here is an example of one family's experience of Bright Start, which shows the positive relationships being made:

*“My son has been at Bright Start Nursery since he was 9 months old he is two next week. He loves his nursery, so much so he wanted to invite Wendy to his birthday party next week. He is quite shy and reserved and takes his time to settle to places and warm to people but we regularly hear about "Tiny Emma", "Beth" and "David" at the weekend. The staff at the nursery really are part of our everyday life, they give so much time and patience to him and all of the children they really do go above and beyond, our son really does see them as part of the family he would be heart broken if the nursery closed.”*

### 3.3. The structure and experience of the staff

At Bright Start there are eighteen nursery workers employed on both a full and part time basis. The nursery has two male workers. The manager is a qualified teacher. Most of the staff are trained to a level three childcare certificate and one member of staff is working towards early years professional status. There are three members of staff who have done special educational needs training and all the staff have recently had training on effective assessment, observations and planning.

The staff are the strength of the nursery. They are an established, experienced, team who work together well in part due to the length of time they have worked together. They have developed working relationships that enable the practical tasks to run smoothly and effectively so that maximum time can be spent with the children and attending to their needs. This is evident both from the Ofsted report of 2007 and upon each visit to the nursery.

### 3.4. Continuity of care

One worker has been at the nursery for 20 years, many have been there longer than 7 years and the newest worker was employed about three years ago. The last person to leave, who had to leave due to ill health, left approximately three years ago. The nursery's use of agency and bank staff further confirms the nursery as both a pleasant place to work and with a commitment to good practice for childcare: The same bank staff are requested when needed in order to provide continuity of care and they are happy to return. Thus there are bank staff that are also well known to the children. The continuity of care that is possible at Bright Start is essential for the care of the children and the peace of mind of parents. It is this that makes Bright Start stand out as special. Parents who have had more than one child at Bright Start have found that the same staff that looked after their first child are still there to care for subsequent children.

One parent wrote:

*"Bright Start is the best nursery I have ever experienced. The same, brilliant staff were there for all three of our children. Brighton council – try rewarding excellence with jobs rather than punishing them for rising above your normal mediocrity"*

Another families experience was:

*"The standard of care provided and commitment of the staff to ensuring the safety and happiness of the children is outstanding. It is a difficult thing to do to hand over your baby into the care of others. When our daughter started nursery earlier this year it was a decision that we did not take lightly. The choice of Bright Start as the nursery was crucial to us being able to know that she would be safe and cared for. It was very reassuring to see that the same staff were still there from when our son left in 2007. We knew we could trust them. The staff are mature people who provide a nurturing environment."*

It is well known that continuity of care is an essential criterion for good childcare. Research in the Early Child Development and Care journal states that:

*"The practice of keeping a group of infants with their primary teacher for a 3 year period is highly recommended by the staff of the Child and Family Research Center for other infant programs because it is developmentally important for very young children.....Theory and research support the need for continuity of caregiving for infants and toddlers, yet current practice*

*often ignores that need.*" ('Continuity of care for infants and toddlers'. Early Child Development and Care Vol 148: Essa, Favre, Thweat, Waugh.)

The importance of continuity of care as essential criteria in good child care practice is further backed up in an article for the National Children's Bureau quoted here:

*"...turnover in the children's workforce is especially important compared to other sectors. This issue has a strong bearing on continuity of care: children and young people are particularly vulnerable to changes in relationships built up with adults."*

Cooper, A (2005) The Children's Workforce in England: A review of the evidence. London: DfES. Access to practical tools and materials for service and practice.

### 3.5. A nurturing environment

The fact that many of the staff have families of their own gives an extra layer of experience that is not often present in nurseries staffed mainly by younger people who are recently qualified. Many of the team worked at the nursery before their maternity/paternity leave and then returned to work afterwards. In many cases their own children then attended the nursery and were cared for by their colleagues. This contributes to the nurturing qualities in the care that all the children receive.

One parent said:

*"The staff at Bright Start cannot be congratulated enough for the dedication that they bring to their role. Since my son began at Bright Start at eight months old, they have done everything they can to integrate him and celebrate his achievements. He is not a child who relishes change, and I know he would find the disruption distressing for a long time. It is a great wrench to leave a child for the first time, yet since the very first day I have had total confidence in the ability of the staff to not only care for his immediate needs, but support him with his play, encourage his interests, and make him feel special and secure. For this reason, he quite simply loves them. I cannot offer a more honest and valuable endorsement. To lose these staff, who are an asset to the city and to the profession, would be an absolute travesty and break the valuable trust and bonding that my child has made."*

### 3.6. The cost of the experienced nursery staff

The Children and Young People cabinet agenda item 34 document refers to the need to cut costs and gives as an example the high cost of the nursery staff. It is notable that the issue of higher rates of pay for Bright Start nursery workers compared with private sector has been dropped from the formal consultation document. Perhaps the council did not feel comfortable with the prospect of trying to defend such a weak argument.

The reason for this 'high cost' is because the nursery staff are experienced people who have stayed in their jobs and have therefore reached a high point on their pay scale. The starting salary at Bright Start is £17,161 rising to £19,126 over four spinal points. Therefore, those who have stayed at Bright Start for longer than four years have a salary that has remained - and will continue to remain - at around £19,000 – hardly a high wage. It also points out that they benefit from pensions making them expensive compared to nursery staff without these 'perks' in private nurseries.








Despite the consultation document stating that the proposed closure 'is not a reflection on the quality of the nursery or the hard work and commitment of staff to the children in the nursery,' the attitude of the council shown in agenda item 34

suggests otherwise. It is unacceptable to undervalue staff that we parents are expected to entrust with the care of our children and this attitude does not seem appropriate from a council that purports to be an 'investor in people'.









### 3.7. Partnership with parents

Another strength of the nursery outlined in the last Ofsted is the good working relationship between the parents and the nursery and that the parents are happy with the nursery. Since the threat of closure parents have showed their love of the nursery by actively supporting the campaign to save Bright Start. No parents have removed their children as a result of the consultation process and, in fact, two new children have joined the nursery in this time despite the threat of closure because those children's parents had heard of Bright Start's good reputation and liked what they saw when they looked around.

Parents have continued to support the nursery with a vigorous campaign over this period to try and ensure its survival. The nursery has received a vast amount of supportive emails from past and current parents and from former Bright Start children since the start of the threat of closure. Below are a few examples out of the hundreds that have been received:

-  *"My daughter has been at Bright Start for two years now and has thrived under the care and attention of the staff at Bright Start. She is a happy and confident little girl"*
-  *"This closure impacts us all. Bright Start is one of the few city centre nurseries and is a crucial resource for parents living and working in central Brighton."*
-  *"Our children are the most precious people in our lives and therefore we do not want to scrimp on their care. We are appalled by the idea that it is acceptable to undervalue people that we parents are expected to entrust with the care of our children."*
-  *"This is a service that can't be cut and would be devastating for all if it was. I visited a number of nurseries before I settled on Bright Start because it had well thought out facilities and such friendly staff. I felt confident to leave my 8 month old there and he thrived in his time there. The staff are so dedicated and patient in their role. They deserve praise for their efforts not a threat of closure and redundancy!"*
-  *"Please don't close the nursery it is key to supporting hard working families in Brighton and Hove."*
-  *"I used Bright Start for both of my children. My eldest is now 14 and still has fond memories of his days at Bright Start. The nursery enabled me to continue working and keep up to date with training and working practices after having children. Without this resource would have had to give up work and he council would have lost all the investment they had put into my training before having children. Apart from enabling parents to continue with their career, it is also of a very high standard and gives the children in its care a very good start in life skills and education. The staff are very dedicated to the nursery and the children in their care. It would be a great loss to the council in many ways if Bright Start closed."*
-  *"Please don't underestimate the value of a happy functioning nursery. It's the children's future after all."*

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-  *"The staff at this nursery are amazing and have given both our children a fantastic foundation to starting school – it would be such a shame to lose this valuable resource for families in the city."*
-  *"Bright Start is a fantastic nursery with incredibly dedicated and skilled staff. I am not an employee of B+H just a parent who has been impressed by the love and care they gave my child. One can only ask why a service that works so well should be cut, when the cost of subsidy is relatively small."*
-  *"Bright Start should absolutely not be closed – it is a fantastic nursery and provides peace of mind for staff to be able to fulfil their work knowing that their children are well cared for."*
-  *"Bright Start is a wonderful nursery, my daughter has thrived under their care and to lose the nursery would be enough to make us leave Brighton altogether."*
-  *"My daughter has been at Bright Start since she was 10 months old, and she loves all her friends and carers there. I would like her to stay there til she starts school. We love Bright Start, please don't close it down..."*
-  *"I attended Bright start from 6 months until I started school. I am now 18 years old and still have fond memories of my time there. I also was able to do work experience there – the staff are fantastic. Bright Start cannot close."*
-  *"Please keep this nursery open it is essential to the smooth running of many family lives".*
-  *"Bright Start is fantastic and provides a secure and happy environment allowing the children's parents to do their jobs – many of which involve providing essential services for thousands of residents in the city."*

## 4. The Nursery is Viable

The stated aim of the Council is to reduce the subsidy for Bright Start Nursery (Bright Start Nursery Options Paper, 16th July 2010, obtained under the FOI act). It has been demonstrated via the Viability Plan (produced by Bright Start Nursery parent Liam Sheerin in conjunction with members of the Brighton Business Forum) that there are numerous options open to the council that will remove the subsidy either via growing revenue or controlling costs. The key priority is to grow revenue through increasing the number of children using the nursery.

### 4.1. Growing revenue

The primary reason for the low number of children in the nursery is poor awareness of the nursery in the local community due to lack of marketing. As a part of the Viability Plan proposal, marketing services to the value of c.£30,000 over the next 3 years that will be provided to the Council free of charge for use to drive awareness and ultimately the number of children attending the nursery. For full details, please refer to the Viability Plan document.

The nursery is uniquely placed to take advantage of the concentration of employed members of the community (i.e. parents more likely to use a nursery service) due to its city centre location.

The government's announcement to roll out 15 hours of free childcare to disadvantaged two-year-olds is further evidence of an imminent increase in demand. The consultation document states that the recent trial of funded places boosts occupancy in less popular sessions and are charged at a higher rate (£4.85 per hour). A further benefit is that the current trial offers 10 hours per week, the increase of this entitlement to 15 hours per week across the current base of 7 children is equivalent to an additional £8,657.25 potential revenue to the nursery (7 children at £4.85 per hour x 5 additional hours per week x 51 weeks).

Due to the uncertainty of the future of this free nursery provision scheme, the nursery has not accepted new applicants for 6 months. It is the view of the nursery that if they had continued to accept applicants over the past 6 months then they would have 14 children in total on this scheme. This is an additional £25,971.75 revenue opportunity (7 children at £4.85 per hour x 15 hours per week x 51 weeks). The revenue opportunity of these two points combined (based on current awareness of the nursery) is an incremental c.£35,000.




### 4.2. Cost control

The primary cost of running the nursery is staffing. This is the main area of focus for cost control.

The public sector pay freeze until 2012 for staff earning over £21,000 and flat rate pay rise of £250 for those below the threshold (subject to further criteria) gives good inflationary control to the council over the next 2 years.

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The nursery currently does not employ Nursery Assistants or trainee positions to care for the children. The introduction of these positions would have multiple benefits for the Council.

-  The average cost per employee would be reduced as the assistants or trainees would be employed on a significantly lower wage than the current nursery staff (potentially free via students on vocational courses).
-  The level of skill, experience and care in the nursery staff make it a 'centre of excellence' in parent's eyes, therefore the quality of training received in the nursery would be second to none which would lead to even greater levels of quality in childcare in the city.
-  The opportunity to train new recruits in childcare will be rewarding for the staff in the nursery. This will increase their job satisfaction.

The nursery currently is forced into using a fully qualified nursery worker to man the kitchen rather than employing a kitchen assistant at a significantly lower wage. This is a clear cost saving that could be immediately implemented.

As highlighted in the cost scrutiny section, the nursery currently pays £14,200 in rent to the council despite both the building and the nursery being council owned. This is a opportunity cost of the building rather than a true cost to the council. It is cost that will not be saved in closing the nursery and should therefore be excluded from the decision making process.

# 5. Critique of Consultation Report Numbers and Costs

The consultation document contains a number of costing and financial claims that deserve further scrutiny. It also overlooks significant costs that will arise from closing the nursery.

## 5.1. The level of subsidy

The claimed £87,428 subsidy is questionable. Documents obtained under FOI indicate that 'the nursery pays rent of £14,200 a year for the use of the building. This would be lost unless another tenant was found' (Bright Start Nursery Options Paper, 16 July 2010, point 18). This sum is not individually accounted for in the figures used to calculate the subsidy, and is presumably part of the £38,967 Premises Related Costs. Even if the income is received into a different budget, the Council cannot claim this £14,200 as a meaningful part of the subsidy. In real terms, the subsidy would appear to be £73,228.

## 5.2. Additional costs of closure

Closing the nursery will carry additional costs. Redundancy and redeployment costs have already been identified by the Council as totalling approximately £60,000 in 2011-12. But this figure does not include the wider economic cost of making staff redundant. Although difficult to quantify, each redundancy will create the additional burden of lost tax revenue, an increased benefits bill, and reduced consumer spending in the local economy. Similar costs will be incurred as a result of those parents who are unable to find alternative child care and give up their jobs as a result.

## 5.3. Claimed administrative cost savings

The report highlights administrative costs of £6000 that are incurred in 'management and finance' support for Bright Start. This is a figure that is presumably derived as a representative proportion of existing Council expenditure in this area. In itself, closing Bright Start is unlikely to result in this saving actually being made unless it can be demonstrated to be a viable saving through further aggregated cuts.

## 5.4. Transparency of occupancy rate data

There is some ambiguity in the claims made of the occupancy rate. It is claimed that 'staffing in the nursery has been reduced to better match the number of children in the nursery'. Yet potential occupancy is determined by staff levels as much as it is by physical space and resources, so it is unclear that this move has resulted in a greater net income. Moreover, it is uncertain whether the occupancy rate is spread evenly over the working week or has identifiable peaks and troughs. In spite of the 76% occupancy rate for October 2010, the nursery only has the equivalent of one full time place available.



# 6. The Old Slipper Baths Building

## 6.1. The building is already 'Fit For Purpose'

The consultation document's suggestion that £230k needs to be spent on the building and Councillor Vanessa Brown's comments regarding the necessity of this building work in The Argus' 'Nursery cuts defended' article (Monday 14th November) are deliberately misleading. Minutes from 12th May 2010 cabinet meeting, obtained under the FOI act, state that the building is in fair condition for its age. The consultation document states that maintenance would 'ensure that the building remains fit for purpose' (therefore confirming that the building is already 'fit for purpose'). As this funding is not required all references to it should be removed from the consultation process and the any decision made must not take these building alterations into consideration.

## 6.2. Maintenance costs

Repair of urgent maintenance issues have already been funded out of this year's budget. The report highlights that £5,000 is already budgeted for in 2010 to ensure the heaters and lighting works and to replace the flooring in the toilets. This covers the urgent issues using the standard building maintenance provision within the nurseries budget. Building maintenance is a requirement in any building (including all nurseries) and therefore is not an exceptional expense for the nursery.

Regular comments are made throughout the Councils documents regarding the need to improve the lighting level in the building, however the lighting level in the building is above the required standard. The lux reading recommendation according to The Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers is 500 lux in a room where writing takes place, or 300 lux in a room where the main task is less demanding. No attempts have been made by the council to confirm whether the building conforms to this standard and no complaints have been received regarding the light levels. Until such time that performance vs. the advised light levels is established the view should be taken that the lighting level that has been sufficient for the past 20+ years is still sufficient.

Where maintenance is required to the building, City College has offered to donate their services. The benefit to the nursery is a substantial reduction in the maintenance cost. The benefit to the College is experience for students on vocational courses.

## 6.3. Benefits of The Old Slipper Baths building

The central location of the building is a key benefit to the users of the nursery and a suitable location is a key requirement when choosing whether a nursery is suitable for consideration by parents. The nursery is the only nursery remaining in central Brighton. The Council's opinion (as stated by the legal advice given at the call in on 21st October) that a nursery anywhere within the council's jurisdiction meets the needs of for childcare as required under the Childcare Act 2006 (i.e. the suggestion that it is acceptable for a parent to travel from one corner of the city to the furthest corner of the city) is questionable. This is covered in more detail in section 8.5.

One of the key features of the building is the outside space. This helps children to benefit from a healthy and active lifestyle, building in exercise into the daily routine of the children from an early age. The outside space helps separate Bright Start from some of the other nurseries in the city.

# 7. Impact of the Nursery Closing on Parents and Children

## 7.1. Impact on equalities

It is widely recognised that the provision of child care is a key element of reducing gender inequalities in the work place. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission's 'Meeting the Gender Duty in Employment' (2007), an advisory document for public sector bodies, observes that 'over a third of mothers and more than one in ten fathers have given up or turned down a job due to their caring responsibilities'. Removing the provision of child care will clearly affect working parents, and will have a disproportionate impact on working mothers.

'Working Towards an Equal City', Brighton & Hove City Council's Equalities & Inclusion Policy 2008-11, identifies both 'lone parents' and 'people employed on a part-time, temporary or casual basis' as Social Inclusion Key Groups. A significant number of parents who use Bright Start fall into one or both of these groups. It is likely that the proportion of parents who are in part-time, casual or temporary employment is rather high, particularly amongst working mothers: according to a 2008 study by the Office of National Statistics, 'women are more likely than men to work part time, particularly if they have dependent children' (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1655>). The Council has a statutory obligation to conduct an Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) into changes in policy, and has committed to preparing an EIA as part of the consultation process. In order to provide a fair and accurate assessment of the impact of closing Bright Start, it must actively gather information from the parents and children who use the service in order to sufficiently understand the equalities implications of closure.

Closure is also likely to have a more indirect impact on equalities. Even if one accepts the consultation paper's argument that sufficient child care facilities can be found within Brighton & Hove, it is clear that few of these places are in the city centre. Parents working in the city centre will find themselves having to reduce working hours in order to accommodate the additional travelling time between the work place and the new nursery. This will result in reduced income, a diminished ability to take part in working life, and an environmental cost in increased transport use.

## 7.2. Impact on children's development

A change in child care arrangements will prove disruptive for both parents and children. This will be particularly distressing for the children, who have learnt to trust the environment and are developing friendships. The closure will be especially disruptive to those children who are due to start school in September 2011. It is an unnecessary burden on children to change their place of nursery care just a few months before the transition to school. It is also far from certain that alternative nurseries will be willing to take new children for the sake of just a few months.

### **7.3. Staff retention**

It should also be noted that the parents who use Bright Start have developed a valuable trust in the nursery staff. Much of this trust is founded on the good rate of staff retention, even though this is identified by the consultation document as a financial weakness. The benefits to children of continuity of care have already been established in section 3.4. Leaving children in nursery care is not easy for parents/carers; good quality childcare is not only beneficial for children but also for working parents and their employers.

### **7.4. Equalities impact assessment**

The Council's Equalities & Inclusion policy states that it is 'a commitment against which the council can be held accountable by our employees, residents, service users and communities of interest. It provides guidance for our officers, partners and contractors and underlines our responsibilities and duties and how we intend to meet them.' Yet it is conspicuous that equalities issues have not been given due regard in the decision made to consult on Bright Start's closure. Documents obtained under FOI reveal that no adequate consideration of equalities has been made in the discussions leading to this decision. The council has a firm duty to address this by conducting a thorough Equalities Impact Assessment, and considering the potential closure of the nursery against its own published policies and statements.

# 8. The Council's Childcare Strategy and Parents' Alternatives if the Nursery Closes

## 8.1. Where will Bright Start Nursery children be 'reoused' if our nursery closes?

The consultation document claims that there are a wide range of alternative childcare providers from private, voluntary and the independent sectors offering almost 500 vacancies across all age ranges in the whole city. However it is far too simplistic to present the number of total nursery places and the number of vacancies across the city as a whole.

The document gives the impression that there is plenty of alternative childcare available should Bright Start close but the reality is that vacancies will not necessarily be in the right location or be on the required days or be at an affordable price. No detail is given whether these figures a full or part time places. Part time places that are included in these figures will not necessarily match the needs of parents' working hours. One parent writes:

*"The only nursery I have found that might take my daughter in September is in Seven Dials, more expensive and can't promise the hours I need. All a bit unhelpful. I am praying Bright Start won't be closed and I would have to consider giving work up in the week."*

Parents have chosen Bright Start over and above other nurseries for a combination of reasons, such as the excellent standard of care and central location. Even if an alternative nursery can be found it still has to instil confidence in the parents before it could be considered a suitable alternative. The consultation document gives no consideration to the importance of the existing relationships that the children have with the staff at Bright Start and the fact that these take time to develop.

The consultation document states that by the nursery remaining open until the end of April 2011 'this will provide a reasonable time for parents to change their childcare arrangements.' We argue that this is not sufficient amount of time to find alternatives given that a final decision will not be made until January 2011. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that indicates parents often have to wait many months before a vacancy arises in a suitable nursery.

One parent said:

*"All change for children at this age could be potentially damaging and needs to be handled sensitively. Simply saying that this gives us time to find alternative arrangements does not take into account the whole picture. To tear them away, at this point in the year, from an environment in which they are all so familiar and doing so well could be truly catastrophic."*

Parents of Bright Start

Another parent, whose oldest child is due to start school in September, has been told by an alternative nursery that they could only accommodate their older child from July and that their youngest might have to wait until next year for a place.

## 8.2. Consequences on parents

If a parent cannot find enough suitable alternative childcare provision then their choices are going to have to include: heavier reliance on informal childcare arrangements that are less structured and reliable; reducing their working hours (some parents work 16 hours a week in order to qualify for the childcare element of Working Tax Credits), or – if those parents cannot find enough childcare to maintain their 16 hours then their only real alternative will be to stop work completely. The same parent wrote:

*"I would find it hard to relocate my 21 month old daughter to another nursery that is in walking distant from my work, North Laines. Also the cost of another nursery higher fees and then bus ticket means I will have to cut down hours."*

It is apparent that some parents with more than one nursery age child may be unable to find an alternative childcare provider than can accommodate more than one child in the family on the days required, presenting a logistical nightmare for them. Does the council expect parents to send their children to different childcare providers across the city in order to try and secure sufficient childcare to cover their working hours?

## 8.3. Consequences on the city

The result of Bright Start closing would be fewer working parents in the city making a full contribution to Brighton and Hove's economy at a time that the city needs as much economic productivity as it can get. Such a short-sighted move would result in an increased demand on other services such as the Local Housing Allowance and Council Tax Benefit.

Bright Start nursery is an asset for the entire city and should be protected for future generations. Brighton and Hove would be a poorer place without it.

## 8.4. What childcare provision is there going to be for those parents whose children are due to start school in 2011?

One parent said:

*"Our daughter will start school in September 2011 and Bright Start is preparing her really well for this. If the nursery closes in April this will mean there will be four months where she will have to start at a new nursery, either with or without her sister, before starting school which will be a big wrench for her and potentially very unsettling. Just because our children are not from disadvantaged backgrounds does not mean that their needs are any less important."*

The consultation document refers to the Family Information Service as a source of useful information for parents.

Another parent writes:

Parents of Bright Start

*"We looked into alternative nursery provision with the help of the Family Information Service. We discovered there are no suitable nurseries for us. There is one nursery that may have space for our daughter in a location that allows us to still get to work on time. However, it is closed for seven weeks of the a year and as they only take children from the age of 2 and our daughter is 18 months old, it would be June before she could start. Even if we do manage to find a nursery, finding a physical space for our daughter is not the only or the main consideration. As a parent, it is having confidence that your child will be safe and happy that is key"*

The same parent found that while the FIS were very approachable and were able to provide tailored information on an individual basis, they declined to provide a clearer breakdown of where the nursery vacancies quoted by the consultation document are located. It is surely not beyond the means of Brighton and Hove city council to have provided a breakdown of nursery places by location. This would have presented a more transparent account of alternative nursery provision.

## **8.5. Brighton and Hove City Council's obligations under the Childcare Act 2006**

Brighton and Hove City Council have acknowledged that they are under a statutory duty under the Childcare Act 2006 to ensure that there is sufficient childcare places to meet the needs of parents. In the Brighton and Hove Children and Young People's Trust Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (Refreshed October 2009) it clearly states that:

*"The data shows that there are some areas of the city where there are more settings than others **currently unable to meet the extension of free early learning entitlement** for three and four year olds to 15 hours a week"*

This demonstrates that the council is not able meet the needs of the parents in the city, When this information is coupled with the recently announced extension of the free childcare to disadvantaged two-year-olds, it is clear that the Council will not be able to meet their statutory duty if childcare provision is reduced even further.

We would argue that the offer of alternatives such as the new Supersaurus nursery in Cromwell Road means that the Council are following the letter of the law and not the spirit in which it was written. The extra time it would take for parents living / working in Brighton to commute across the city at some of the busiest times of day to drop off and collect children will make such 'opportunities' completely impractical for all but a few.

For those parents who live outside the central Brighton area but work in the city centre, having a nursery close to hand is important because this allows parents to get to their child quickly in case of illness or an emergency and it also allows them to work a full day without the need of leaving the workplace early in order to travel across the city to collect their child at the other side of town. Another parent wrote;

*"The dual reassurance that my children are in the safe hands of staff who I trust completely with their well-being and the ability to get to them quickly in an emergency is key to my being able to return to work."*

Parents need and deserve to have nursery provision in central Brighton. If Bright Start were to close there is no other nursery in the vicinity that could provide an alternative to this crucial resource.

In an article published in the Argus on 29th November 2010 a managing director of a Hove-based early years child care provision warned that unless government funding increases for free child care for three and four year olds, nurseries are at risk of going out of business. The vulnerability of private nursery provision in the city was highlighted by two sudden closures earlier in the year, making the need for a council run nursery all the more important.

## 8.6. Can parents afford alternative nurseries? Where will parents find the extra funds from?

The consultation document gives a breakdown of city wide average price for nursery care as £42.13 a day for 0-2 year olds and £36.63 for 3-5 year olds. What it doesn't tell you is the very wide range of prices ranging for nursery provision within one mile of Bright Start. Costs for the 17 nurseries in this catchment area range from a low of about £35 up to £48.60 a day for two year olds and between £31.00 and £46.00 for three to five year olds. The majority of other nurseries are priced in the mid-to-high end of the price range. Therefore, if parents are able to find a nursery they may discover that the alternative is not affordable, particularly given the economic situation and the council pay freeze effecting many of its employees. The table below a quick comparison of these widely varying fees, based on an 18-month-old child in nursery 3 days a week. You will note the only nursery will full vacancies does not accept children under 2. You will also note the considerable financial impact for each child.

	Vacancies?	Minimum Age	Full Day Cost	Annual Impact (based on 3 days for 18 month old child)
Bright Start		6 months	£35.00	£0.00
Phoenix Nursery	yes	2 years	£46.00	£1,683.00
Joyland	afternoon only	2 years	£34.20	-£122.40
Pepperpot Nursery Ltd	afternoon only	1 year	£36.50	£229.50
Little Oaks Nursery	Fridays only	3 months	£44.00	£1,377.00
Elm Grove Pepperpot Baby Unit	limited	3 months	£40.00	£765.00
Playcare Nursery	limited	1 year	£41.00	£918.00
Orchard Day Nursery	limited	6 months	£40.00	£765.00
Sussex House Nursery	minimal part time	3 months	£36.90	£290.70
Happy Days Nursery	minimal part time	1 year	£40.00	£765.00
Sunshine Day Nursery	part time only	birth	£44.00	£1,377.00
Young Sussex Nursery (Dyke Road)	unconfirmed	birth	£48.60	£2,080.80
Strawberry Hill Nursery	none	3 months	£38.80	£581.40
Blueberry Nursery Early Learning Organisation	none	18 months	£46.09	£1,696.77
Tarnerland Nursery School	none	3 months	£42.00	£1,071.00
St Georges Neighbourhood Nursery	none	3 months	£43.00	£1,224.00
The Children's House	none	2 years	£35.00	£0.00
Hopscotch	none	birth	£41.00	£918.00

Fig1: Annual impact of nursery move, based on an 18-month-old child attending nursery 3 days a week. Please note that for comparison, where a nursery does not accept 18-month-old children the price for the youngest age the nursery does accept has been used.

A childcare costs survey for 2010 carried out by the 'Daycaretrust' (Registered charity no. 327279) found that "Average childcare costs for 25 hours per week are £88 in England, which is more than half gross average part-time earnings of £153 per week." This would equate to 2½ days (5 sessions) a week at Bright Start (8.00am to 6.00pm). Weekly fees for lower-paid Council employees for 5 sessions are £87.50 (5 x £17.50) and £100 for higher paid council employees and community (5 x







# 9. Effect on Brighton & Hove City Council Services and Employees

The consultation document does not consider the effect Bright Start's closure will have on the Council's staff or its business activity.

## 9.1. The nursery as a benefit

It has been argued that the availability of nursery places for BHCC staff should be considered a benefit rather than a term of the staff contract. Yet there is good evidence to suggest that it should be considered a term of contract as implied by custom and practice. The government's [direct.gov.uk](http://direct.gov.uk) website provides sound advice in this area. It lists three factors that help determine whether a regular practice should be considered a term of contract: 1) 'how seriously it has been treated'; 2) 'how clear it is'; and 3) 'how long it has been in place' (<http://bit.ly/dwCubW>). Considered against these criteria, it is clear that the provision of subsidised child care at Bright Start is a term of employment. The nursery is a Council run facility, with a number of places reserved for Council staff, and is advertised as such on the Wave, the Council's intranet service. It was specifically established for the purpose of providing child care for its employees, and has been running for 21 years. Given how fundamental this provision is to Bright Start's structure and purpose, and the length of time it has been in operation, it can hardly be considered a temporary benefit. As such, the consultation process should have been broadened to include all Council staff, and followed the procedures required for changing existing staff contracts.

The offer of subsidised child care by an employer is not a simple act of generosity. There are strong business reasons for the Council to provide this. Most obviously, it is a means of enabling the Council to retain trained and experience staff. Such staff are crucial to the Council's ability to provide reliable and effective services for the people of Brighton & Hove. The consultation document claims that a subsidy of over £1,500 a year is required for each full time place in the nursery; yet, in so far as this figure applies to Council employees who use the nursery, it seems a reasonable sum for the Council to invest in the retention of valuable staff. Furthermore, if considered against the recruitment and training costs of replacement staff, this subsidy is likely to be far lower in real terms. It may even represent a significant saving.

## 9.2. Effect on vulnerable children

Moreover, according to the consultation document, 'the Council must ensure that its resources are focussed on those vulnerable children with the greatest needs'. Yet there is clear evidence that the closure of the nursery will indirectly diminish these resources. To give just one example, two of the authors of this report work in front-line services providing care to vulnerable children and young adults leaving care; both are likely to be forced to leave employment should the nursery close. It is likely that other key Council personnel are amongst those parents who use the nursery. This problem will also be exacerbated as a result of the Council's present budget strategy. In response to ongoing and future financial pressures, the Council is presently 'controlling recruitment and only making permanent appointments in exceptional circumstances' (agenda Item 123, Cabinet meeting 9 December 2010). As such, we have to assume that such employees will not be replaced, and this will have a detrimental effect on service delivery to young and vulnerable residents.

