

# **Ministers warned on potential for nursery closures a decade ago**

**The Scottish Government was warned by West Lothian almost a decade ago that new childcare policies could create to an “unsustainable” service for nursery children.**

Councillors on the Education Executive are set to discuss proposals to close nine nurseries in August to address the falling numbers and the high number of surplus spaces currently within council nurseries.

At this week’s council budget meeting the opposition SNP group called for a halt to the plans and for further consultation.

The party claimed that the closures would hurt those in the most deprived areas where people have fewer opportunities to travel to other facilities.

Its budget plan said: “As no decision has yet been made, this proposal is flawed and therefore merits further scrutiny by this council within the context of wider ELC planning.

“This decision also risks widening the poverty related attainment gap. In the interests of transparency and of this Council’s stated desire to work with the Scottish Government to close the poverty related attainment gap, this process must be planned in a way which takes the views of parents and the wider community into account.”

Andrew McGuire, Executive councillor for Education told the Local Democracy Reporting Service that Holyrood ministers had been advised on potential difficulties as far back as 2016, when the council first responded to consultation on the Funding Follows the Child policy.

Private nurseries have boomed across the county as parents have been given the opportunity to choose facilities, and more have deserted council nurseries

Ahead of a crucial meeting next week Councillor McGuire said: "The 'Funding Follows the Child' policy may have benefits but there are two sides to this issue. There are only so many children and the birth rate in Scotland is declining."

The numbers cast light on the way nursery provision has changed. The council has capacity for over 6,814 nursery children. This year, the council has over 2,000 more places than is required, which is nearly 30% more than is needed to meet demand.

Even with fewer nursery buildings, the council would still have more than enough capacity to meet demand in each of the community areas affected given the availability in local alternative nurseries.

The decline in demand for council run nurseries has grown steadily since the introduction of 'Funding Follows the Child' as the number of privately run nurseries has boomed.

Many parents now choose to use their funded nursery provision at private nursery providers and childminders.

When the national policy was introduced in 2019 there were seven private partner providers in West Lothian for 4,290 eligible children (88.4% of those came to council settings).

There are now 32 private partner providers for 4,084 eligible children (78.0% of those come to council settings).

Councillor McGuire said: “There are only so many children and the birth rate in Scotland is declining.

“The Scottish Government knows this, so it cannot come as a surprise to them that councils need to look at reducing the number of nurseries where supply significantly outstrips demand for places.

“Councils are rightly expected to operate efficiently and manage local public finances, particularly when we’re facing such significant budget pressures.

“This isn’t only an issue in West Lothian.”

He added: “The reality is there is far more flexibility than there was before, which many people will welcome. Parents and carers can now have publicly funded nursery places at a variety of options – both council run and privately run.

“However, we recognise that many of the parents who have contacted us would have liked their children to attend the nurseries that, locally, feed into the schools their children would later attend.

“Although nurseries are not bound by catchment, the council understands that desire from parents, and education officers have made this point consistently to the Scottish Government and included it in our response to their consultation as far back as 2016.

“It is for this reason that the council has continued to invest in high quality provision which is, of course, the only provision which can offer this smooth educational and social transition from Early Learning and Childcare to Primary 1 which is desired by so many parents. “

Councillor McGuire continued: “Council officers again advised the Scottish Government in 2018 that a model founded on unfettered choice, would be likely to prove unsustainable, and

to the detriment of all eligible children and their parents/carers.

“The council recommended greater emphasis on the financial sustainability of the model, and the potential impact of unfettered choice on financial sustainability would help ensure the ability of authorities to ensure a high-quality service is offered to all children.

“Unfortunately, Scottish Ministers have chosen not to act on the points and concerns that have consistently been put to them regarding nursery provision, with the consequence that there has been a major diversion of funds to the private sector providers.

“The result is that it is not possible to maintain the same level of services that offer maximum continuity and ease of transition into primary schools.”

The nurseries that are being recommended to close in August are:-

- Deans North Nursery School, Livingston
  
- Fauldhouse Nursery Class
  
- Glenvue Nursery School, Livingston
  
- Ladywell Nursery School, Ladywell, Livingston
  
- Linlithgow Bridge Nursery Class
  
- St Anthony's Nursery Class, Armadale

- St Joseph's Nursery Class, Whitburn

Two further nurseries are currently inactive and are included in the planned closure. These are Bathgate West Nursery School and Our Lady's Nursery Class, Stoneyburn.

If patterns of parental choice were to change and this led to greater demand for council nurseries in specific communities then nurseries could be re-opened in future.

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter