

Evidencing the effects of maintained nursery schools' roles in Early Years sector improvements

A TACTYC funded report

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Glossary of terms

EY	Early Years
EC	Early Childhood
ECEC	Early Childhood, Education and Care
EHCP	Education Health Care Plan
EYE	Early Years Education
EYEC	Early Years Education and Care
EYPP	Early Years Pupil Premium
EYTS	Early Years Teacher Status
HoC	House of Commons
IHCP	Individual Health Care Plan
LA	Local Authority
MNS	Maintained Nursery School
PVI	Private, Voluntary or Independent
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND/i	Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusion

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Executive Summary

Background

This TACTYC funded research set out to examine the contribution of the Maintained Nursery School to Early Years Education and Care noting, especially, its contribution to generating improvements within and across the sector.

It is set within the context of other recent reports about the past, present and future of the Maintained Nursery School (Bertram and Pascal, 2019; Early Education 2014, 2015, 2018; Paull and Popov, 2019). These reports demonstrate the capacity of the Maintained Nursery School to have transformative effects on educational opportunities and outcomes for the children and families that they serve. They also alert the reader to the significant challenges maintained nurseries face due to acute structural pressures that are beyond their control. This report accords with the findings of earlier reports and makes specific recommendations based upon the empirical, largely qualitative, data generated for this particular study.

Maintained Nursery Schools have, historically, been located predominantly in urban areas of high social and economic deprivation and need. Such remains the case. Maintained nurseries are distinctive in the current mixed-economy of Early Years Education and Care (ECEC) provision, as they are legally constituted in the same way as a statutory primary school, with similar rigorous Ofsted inspection criteria and requirements. These inspections differ from those applied to other private and voluntary-aided early years providers. A Maintained Nursery School head teacher is required to have an early years educational specialism, and at least one other teacher within the setting should have qualified teacher status. Maintained Nursery Schools are provided with a devolved budget from central government which a board of governors oversees. There has been a steady decline in the number of Maintained Nurseries over the last thirty years from 600 to just over 390 (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 6).

Our research involved survey feedback from 115 practitioners, in-depth interviews with 21 Maintained Nursery Leaders (predominantly head teachers) and 6 setting visits in two areas of England. The data were generated from schools within the West Midlands and 'the South' (which included coastal areas and London). The combination of the survey and interview data provided a wealth of information, including personal accounts of experiences that demonstrated the impact of Maintained Nursery Schools upon the most disadvantaged children and their families. The data also demonstrated how Maintained Nursery Schools support neighbouring ECEC settings, private and maintained, and contribute to the work of local authorities.

Summary of Findings

- Our respondents were concerned that the ECEC agenda had 'slipped off the radar' of national government priorities. They felt the role of the Maintained Nursery remained hidden and misunderstood. Many lamented that, in general, the public (including local authorities) simply did not 'get' how the Maintained Nursery School differed from other Early Years providers. Many respondents shared their own experiences of feeling undervalued, working long hours, receiving low pay and coping with a wage culture that does not remunerate many hours of unpaid labour.

- Our study pointed to the invaluable role that Maintained Nurseries play, particularly within areas of disadvantage. Maintained Nursery Schools are positioned to impact within their communities, addressing issues of poverty and acting as a 'preventative service' with the potential to mitigate the involvement and associated costs of other public services. There is an urgent requirement for young children's care and educational needs (particularly within these disadvantaged areas) to be re-evaluated strategically at central and local government level.
- Much of the data collected through this research showed what Silverman (2001, p.32) calls human capacities that "statistics cannot measure". These are captured extensively in our report. Our research demonstrates the value of everyday, warm, caring, human actions and encounters that are regarded as 'ordinary' by those Maintained Nursery practitioners and leaders within our report. Some of these 'ordinary' duties included: a knowledge of children and families built up over time enabling practitioners to provide tailored educational support and guidance; an open and listening culture for parents and families over a 'cup of tea'; a sign-posting and provision of support in engaging with wider public services beyond the nursery school; and a passionate belief in the capacities of all children to achieve educationally and throughout life as a consequence of quality early years provision.

The above were presented as responsibilities that practitioners were ardent about and committed to, but which were becoming increasingly difficult to deliver due to ongoing funding cuts. As a result of cuts many practitioners lamented that they had become pre-occupied with "*finding ways to survive*" rather than attending to the needs of their children.

- The wider impact of the Maintained Nursery School on families and communities did not diminish the impact of their fundamental role, that is, supporting the learning and development needs of all pre-school children. This is where the data demonstrated that they excelled, especially within the challenging contexts of Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusion (SENDi) and English as an Additional Language. Practitioners and leaders in Maintained Nursery Schools are experts in their field who push and challenge themselves to review and refresh their knowledge, viewing it as part of their remit and identity. Despite the rigorous demands of their roles, practitioners and leaders were committed to sharing their knowledge for the enrichment of other early years colleagues across the sector.
- There were obvious and increasingly impenetrable barriers to the success and ongoing work of the Maintained Nursery. These included the challenged public service context in which the nurseries operate, alongside uncertainties about future sustainable funding and lack of political attention to the specific remit of the Maintained Nursery School.
- Our study clearly demonstrated that the loss of the resource of the Maintained Nursery School from the fabric of many urban communities would be virtually impossible to replicate once gone.

Recommendations

1. *To address the urgency of the fiscal crisis in current and future funding of the Maintained Nursery School.*

It is crucial that the acute funding crisis is addressed as an urgent priority before more of the Maintained Nursery sector vanishes due to lack of funding. The range of services and levels of skill and expertise associated with these schools is such that reports (Bertram and Pascal, 2019; Paull and Popov, 2019) have indicated their fiscal value-added in supporting the learning of children of disadvantage, children experiencing SENDi issues and families with pre-school children in need or crisis. This must be acknowledged within any future financial settlement.

2. *To shift public conceptions at local, regional and national level concerning the importance and significance of ECEC in general and the Maintained Nursery School in particular.*

The funding crisis combined with the lack of certainty about the future of their provision is causing Maintained Nursery School professionals, their families and communities, anxiety, stress and angst. Central government must empower those within local government to work more productively with leaders in Maintained Nursery Schools, and also to converse with other ECEC providers, to more clearly understand the specialist, distinctive and particular contributory role of the Maintained Nursery School.

Providers and services must be enabled, through dialogue, to work within networks of support and co-operation rather than suspicion and competition. The role and remit of the Maintained Nursery School within ECEC must be made clear and transparent as a dynamic of local democracy for the potential benefit of all families and children, in particular within contexts of need.

3. *To recognise and champion the histories, accumulated knowledge and expertise contained within the Maintained Nursery School especially within the context of:*

Knowledge, expertise and experience in pedagogies and practices to promote individual learning and achievement for all pre-school children. This is necessary in order to ensure children experience holistic learning, effective social development, and a sense of learning as intrinsically playful. This is integral to children having the confidence and resilience to see themselves as achievers and democratic citizens entitled to participate and have a voice, regardless of their range of abilities and societal differences as they move on through the 5-18 school system.

Knowledge, expertise and experience of regarding the child within the context of the wider family. Maintained Nursery Schools should be further enabled to work with the wider family in matters that impact on the learning, education and well-being of the child. It is important that Maintained Nursery Schools continue their work enabling families to feel listened to, respected and supported. This is essential for those families considered 'hard to reach' or who are 'disadvantaged' in one way or another or who may be experiencing particular health or well-being challenges that make them vulnerable.

Experience of a wider community remit in which the child and the child's family is promoted as being located within a wider community fabric of belonging. This will ensure that the Maintained Nursery School continues the work that it currently undertakes to link children and families with:

- *Professionals and services that are empowered to support the needs of the child and family*
- *Other children and families in the area with whom they may be able to form supportive bonds that will sustain them beyond the opening hours of the Maintained Nursery School*
- *Voluntary and charitable organisations whose remit and purpose is to offer support, encouragement and expertise to the child and the family within a fabric of a supportive community ethos*
- *Opportunities and events that champion the capabilities and aptitudes of children and families and that do not always place them in deficit in order to presume to teach them more or differently*
- *Primary and secondary schools to demystify statutory schooling and to promote the needs of children and families regardless of their SENDi status.*

Knowledge, expertise and experience in areas of SENDi and those with EAL. The particular professional make-up of the Maintained Nursery School means that they house specialist knowledge and expertise in the multi-faceted policy and practice characteristics of SENDi. Their inclusive focus ensures that they effectively prepare *all* children for an appropriate educational future within a 5-18 provision. Maintained Nursery Schools should be provided with further opportunities to work and share their knowledge of constructive and innovative ways to function in these specialist areas with partner ECEC establishments.

4. To acknowledge the entrepreneurial and innovative experiences and capabilities of practitioners and leaders within the Maintained Nursery School.

Our research demonstrated that as a result of the period of fiscal crisis over the last few years, many leaders and practitioners have developed entrepreneurial skills in order to ensure the day-to-day running of their Maintained Nursery School. In alliance with local government and other specialist statutory children/ family/education services, Maintained Nursery School leaders should be given opportunity to advise on how to deploy skills and capabilities most effectively. This could be of considerable benefit in supporting the field of ECEC to move forward within networks of local democracy.

Introduction

TACTYC commissioned this research in order to explore how the Maintained Nursery School regards itself in the context of the wider Early Childhood Education and Care sector in order to deliver quality provision. The aim was to investigate the impact of the Maintained Nursery School on the lives of pre-school children and the families they serve, and to gain a greater understanding of barriers that may prevent them from realising their full potential currently and in the future. The research was conducted within a context of public sector challenge. Recent reports stress the 'unique and specialised nature' of the Maintained Nursery School (Bertram and Pascal, 2019, p. 2). The Maintained Nursery School is threatened by a fiscal deficit which will become particularly acute post 2019/20 when the future of supplementary funding to them hangs in the balance (Bertram and Pascal, 2019; Paull and Popov, 2019). There has been a sharp decline in the number of Maintained Nursery Schools over the last few years where they are most needed (Paull and Popov, 2019).

The reason for a focus on this particular form of Early Childhood Education and Care, as compared with any other Early Years provision, is due to the essential role that the Maintained Nursery School plays in providing quality education and care within areas of high need and deprivation (Bertram and Pascal, 2019). It concerns not just opportunities for learning and preparation for statutory schooling for the most vulnerable children (Paull and Popov, 2019), but also wider family support, which extends into the community, especially for those who are at most risk and who require the ongoing professional expertise, attention and guidance of the Maintained Nursery School.

Many Maintained Nursery Schools were established over 100 years ago in areas of deprivation to provide Early Years Education and Care (Paull and Popov, 2019). Their day-to-day provision was largely taken-for-granted until the 1980s when a neoliberal lens scrutinised links between ideas of effective early educational interventions and the efficient use of the resources of a welfare state with implications for fiscal stringency (Simpson et al., 2017). During the New Labour period of government (1997-2010) the remit of Early Childhood Education and Care expanded and spearheaded social and economic public/private initiatives to eradicate child poverty (ibid). A free-market approach to the provision of pre-school *childcare* and *education* expanded during this time. The purpose of Early Childhood Education and Care provision shifted, alongside a belief that an economic upswing could be generated through enabling more parents of young children to work in ways that would generate benefits to the child in their family and community context.

This created a proliferation of Private, Voluntary and Independent childcare settings, tasked with a childcare and education remit that some regarded as rather too focused on the needs of the parents/carers as economic units, rather than appropriate, sustainable quality care and education provision for the pre-school child (McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012). During this period the number of Maintained Nursery Schools was declining, and this decline has continued. There are now 392 registered Maintained Nursery Schools, a fall from over 600 in 1986 (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 8) despite demand for Early Childhood Education and Care places more generally, increasing (Rutter, 2016). Over the last twenty years, Early Childhood Education and Care provision has operated within a fast-paced and changing terrain. The National Childcare Strategy (DFE 1998), Every Child Matters (DfE, 2004) and the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008) have all seen increasing regulatory and accountability frameworks for all Early Childhood Education and Care providers, regardless of their Private, Voluntary and Independent or Maintained status. During this period, the role of the 'Early Years Professional' was created and Ofsted Inspections were extended to Early Childhood Education and Care providers. Yet, despite this recognition of the crucial role that Early Childhood Education and Care can play in preparing a child for later life (Sylva et al., 2010; DfE, 2013), many perceive that Early Childhood Education and Care remains the poor relation within the educational system. Lack of understanding of Early Childhood Education and Care pedagogy means that it has never achieved the recognition given to primary and secondary schooling, in terms of qualifications and salary. Osgood (2010) argues that the increase in regulation for Early Childhood Education and Care providers along the lines of 5-18 statutory schools serves to repress rather than empower Early Years practitioners to engage with the needs of local communities of families and children in the ways traditionally adopted by the Maintained Nursery School.

Today, the Maintained Nursery School continues to enable children to access age-appropriate learning (Thangarajah, 2018) within a context of a focus on their unique and holistic needs (Early Education, 2015) as part of a family unit and within a community (Sylva et al., 2004). They are legally constituted as a school with a head teacher (with an Early Years Education and Care specialism), a governing body, a delegated budget and at least one teacher with Qualified Teacher Status. One in seven, or 15%, of children in Maintained Nursery Schools are currently in receipt of the Early Years Pupil Premium compared to only 3% in Private, Voluntary and Independent settings (Paull and Popov, 2019), which demonstrates their special role and remit in serving the needs of children and families in areas of highest need.

This research took a case study and mixed methods approach, with a particular emphasis on the perspectives and accounts of those working within the Maintained Nursery School sector. Its aim

was to give a voice to practitioners and leaders working most closely with children and their families. With a focus upon the Midlands and the 'South' region of England (which included London and the South East and touched the South as far west as Oxford) it involved two stages of data collection:

Stage 1: (Jan to March 2019): Maintained Nursery School practitioners and leaders were invited to complete an online survey to answer questions related to roles, sector improvements, opportunities for professional development, their impact and the challenges they faced (responses N=55 for practitioner surveys; N=60 for leaders).

Stage 2: (April to June 2019): Researchers made contact with the Maintained Nursery Schools that had volunteered to play a further part in the study and conducted visits and interviews with leaders of Maintained Nursery Schools. Following the analysis of Stage 1 data, interviews focused on particular areas of significance from this. The report is divided in such a way as to locate the results of the research within a wider context with one chapter on broader Early Childhood Education and Care literature and one on a more detailed consideration of methodology, before attending to the results divided into 5 chapters:

1. Accountability, identity and impact
2. A nursery for all children
3. The Maintained Nursery School and the family
4. The Maintained Nursery School and the community
5. A service in crisis

There follows a discussion chapter exploring the main themes from the results chapters and a conclusion with key recommendations from the study.

Literature Review

Introduction

Any current reading of scholarship that relates to the Maintained Nursery School (MNS), inevitably places it both within a wider context of scholarship pertaining to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), especially concerning ideas of “quality provision” for pre-school children in England (Sylva et al. 2010), and the more specific arena of research focused on an ongoing rationale for a remit and purpose of the MNS. This review of literature, therefore, touches upon wider research and scholarship, especially since the 1997 advent of the Effective Provision for Pre-School Education (EPPE) project, which suggests that for the most disadvantaged children especially early exposure to pre-school education, whether within a Private, Voluntary or Independent (PVI) setting or a MNS, enables children to achieve better than their counterparts who do not receive this. This wider literature relates to questions concerning the professionalism (broadly constructed as relating to a workforce with necessary and appropriate knowledge, aptitudes and training) of those employed within the sector, seen as central to the delivery of quality in all types of ECEC provision (Children’s Workforce Development Council 2012; Faulkner & Coates, 2013; Lynch & McDonough, 2018; Mathers & Smees 2014; Osgood 2010). Gambaro, Stewart and Waldfogel (2013) suggest that considerations of quality provision in the ECEC sector, whether judged by parents of pre-school children in terms of providing care, warmth and stability for children, or by official reports measuring children’s educational ‘outcomes’, make significant claims for the connection between professionalism (and all this assumes in terms of leadership, training, knowledge of appropriate curricular and pedagogy) and quality.

More specifically, this review focusses on the specific purpose, context and cost of the MNS in providing professional, quality, free pre-school education as an arm of the state for those children most at risk of underachievement in the years leading up to, and including, statutory schooling (Nutbrown, 2012; Bertram and Pascall, 2019; Paull & Popov, 2019). Although viewed as a fundamental source of quality welfare provision for the child in the context of their family¹ in predominantly urban areas of high deprivation, numbers of MNSs have fallen from 600 to well under 400 in the last thirty years, with the most dramatic decline in their numbers occurring since 2011 (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 8). This is especially significant in a period during which more

¹ Families is used throughout this report to refer to any adult involved in the care of the child and does not only refer to immediate relatives. This can, for example, include kinship and foster carers. In the same way ‘parents’ is used to encompass all adults who take on the parenting role.

parents of young children have entered the workforce than ever before at the same time as child and familial poverty has been rising (Simpson et al., 2017). These changes have occurred amidst rising concerns over the links between deprivation (including that of low-income poverty of those both out of work and in low-income employment) and educational outcomes (Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2010). It seems that the continuation of the MNS as a public education service that mitigates against the worst aspects of child deprivation and familial poverty to promote quality education, is currently at severe risk. This is due to a political terrain in which there are uncertainties concerning the provision of secure, longitudinal local and central government funding now and into the future for the MNS (Thangarajah 2018; Bertram and Pascall, 2019; Paull & Popov, 2019).

This literature review is divided into three sections. The first provides a contextual summary of the changes to the ECEC landscape with a focus upon the MNS as well as its particular role, and what this assumes of ideas of professionalism to ensure quality. The second focuses upon the attributes of the MNS identified in the most recent Paull and Popov (2019) report commissioned for the DfE; namely the way in which the MNS is especially geared to coping with aspects and attributes of deprivation in urban conurbations. These include: the requirements of children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SENDi); the support of their children's families; and particular aspects of structural quality, namely their meeting of criteria as judged by the qualification levels of their Early Years (EY) workforce and by external inspection regimes. The third section focuses upon what might be at stake in the current fiscal funding context of apparent uncertainty and crisis.

Section One: The Maintained Nursery School in Context

The over-arching remit of ECEC

Historically, childcare and pre-school education were seen as a private matter to be dealt with in the family (primarily the duty of the stay-at-home mother) and up until 1998, ECEC had evolved without significant government intervention (Lewis & West, 2016). This was despite the existence, since the first half of the twentieth century, of the MNS, predominantly within urban areas of high deprivation (Paull & Popov, 2019). However, with the advent of neoliberal policies towards the end of the 1980s in England, successive governments have sought to make social investments to improve education/life/work chances for children growing up with the expectation of also reducing welfare dependency (Simpson et al., 2017). Despite the New Labour government (1997-2010) adopting a 'Third Way' to marry the function of the state with that of the free-market, which included a commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020 (ibid 2017),

government thinking has been that of a strategy of adopting “market solutions to welfare problems” (ibid, 2017, p. 87). To keep up with, and shape, a growing demand for high quality ECEC provision, the predominant market model has become an integral part of modern society (McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012). We have seen the adoption of the Childcare Act (2006) and subsequent publications informing ECEC policy including the Field Report (Field, 2010), the Allen Intervention (Allen, 2011) and the Tickell Review (Tickell, 2011), all of which have had a hand in shaping a landscape of ECEC provision and the balance of what might be provided through a market/charity (PVI) and state welfare/local government (MNS) rationale.

As part of the management and justification for new configurations of ECEC within a marketised economy, regulatory measurement and standardisation tools and policies have been introduced to generate a sense of a necessary professionalisation of ECEC policy across the PVI and MNS sector. This has included the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, DCSF, 2008). During the era of New Labour, the EYFS also adopted commitments towards multi-agency working within a context of integrated service provision for the support of pre-school children and their families. This built on a National Childcare Strategy adopted in 1997 and included a further Children’s Workforce Strategy in 2005. Both were intended to develop high quality ECEC provision by raising the status of a professional childcare workforce (Mathers et al., 2011). The graduate Early Years Professional (EYP) was introduced, which subsequently became the Early Years Teacher (EYT) qualification in 2013.

A recent report from Lynch and McDonough (2018) suggests that high-quality interactions between ECEC practitioners and pre-school children are crucial to ensure the support of a government agenda to move away from long-term welfare dependency and educational achievement at statutory school-age and beyond. Indeed, this was also clearly the ambition of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-14) in the making of their decisions concerning a further professionalisation of the EY workforce within all ECECs. Their report commissioned at the time stated:

High quality early education and childcare, delivered with love and care, can have a powerful impact on young children. The evidence is clear that a good start in these early years can have a positive effect on children’s development, preparing them for school and later life. (DfE 2013, p. 13)

Quality provision underpinned by a professionalised workforce is borne out by the EPPE project, which found that children who attend a preschool setting demonstrate higher levels of cognition and social behavioural outcomes upon entry to primary school compared to children who have not (Sylva et al., 2010). This concept is supported by a raft of additional research which, crucially,

also suggests that having exposure to high quality early education and care has a huge impact on children from disadvantaged areas (Hall et al., 2013; Maisey et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004b). It is particularly this group of children within the context of their families and communities that were the focus for the original remit of the MNS, albeit conceptualised in a different era, especially post-Second World War, when social welfarism and reform was at its peak (Early Education, 2014).

The Vision of the Maintained Nursery School

Originally established over a century ago by the state to support children in deprived areas, MNSs enabled children to access basic education (Thangarajah, 2018). Crucially, however, they have gone on to have far wider remit, as envisioned by pioneers such as the McMillans, who sought to improve children's health and educational outcomes in areas of high deprivation (with a focus upon play, outdoor education and the involvement of the family and their wider community). The original MNSs included in their training the benefits of EY educational practices and approaches with an overarching focus on the holistic development of the whole-child (Early Education, 2015).

Although EY educational providers in the same way as PVI settings, MNSs are also legally constituted in the same way as statutory primary schools. They have: a head teacher (with an EY educational specialism); at least one other teacher with qualified teacher status; a devolved budget; and a constituted board of governors (Paull and Popov, 2019). They are Ofsted assessed and evaluated according to criteria that pertain to statutory schools. These differ to those applied by Ofsted to PVIs. Indeed, a few MNSs that operate as both a nursery school and as part of a broader Children's Centres services (offering places for under 3s) find themselves subject to a regime of three different external inspection types (Early Education, 2015).

In their economic summary, Paull and Popov (2019, p.9) concluded that the MNS has a higher fraction of children from disadvantaged backgrounds than other ECEC providers; works with a greater proportion of children with SENDi; and tends to enable 'higher structural quality' with more staff educated to degree level (with a greater proportion of settings achieving an 'outstanding' Ofsted ranking, also with higher numbers of 'exceptional leaders'). Beatrice Merrick, Chief Executive of the professional organisation, Early Education, stated that:

Maintained Nursery Schools are the highest performing part of our education system. With the majority of nursery schools serving some of the most deprived communities, they achieve outstanding results. 98% of nursery schools are judged outstanding or good

by Ofsted. Indeed, Ofsted rates 63% nursery schools outstanding and 35% are good. 65% of nursery school places are located in the 30% most deprived parts of England.

(No Author, 2018, p.12)

Section Two: Positive and Particular Attributes of the MNS

Addressing the ECEC needs of the Disadvantaged Child

Historically, many MNSs have been based in areas of disadvantage. Paull and Popov (2019, p.9) found that close to half are still located in areas in the most deprived quintile, compared to 32% of 'other nursery types' and 15% of 'other provider types'. They also found that around one in seven (15%) children in MNSs are in receipt of the Early Years Pupil Premium compared to 12% in nursery classes with a significantly lower proportions in 'other provider types' (6% in voluntary providers, 3% in private providers and 1% in childminders). As an example, Blanden et al. (2017) found that MNSs are more likely than other ECEC settings to be attended by children eligible for free school meals. Despite the challenges of deprivation, EPPE research (Sylva et al., 2004) suggests that the MNSs generally score higher, using a range of quality indicators, than those in the PVI sector.

Within all ECEC settings, children who attend high quality provision (particularly those with a focus on communication through language development), have been shown to benefit in ways that extend into adult life, compared to children who do not attend an ECEC, or those who attend one judged to be of low-quality (Sylva et al., 2004). Achieving these benefits requires ECEC practitioners to be proactive in supporting families with their children's learning beyond the setting, in their home and community environments. Sylva et al. (2004) found ECEC provision was of a higher quality where care and education were integrated within the setting in ways that would extend beyond it, and that this was more consistently apparent within the MNS.

Early Education (2015, p. 11) highlighted that one of the key differences between the MNS and other ECECs is the extent to which the MNS is able to support disadvantaged children and families through bespoke programmes, often providing outreach into the home. This aspect of the MNS, which connects the child and the family within the community to promote a "joined up approach" for effective learning through an "open culture", is a notable attribute of many MNSs (Callanan et al., 2017, p. 52). Attention to the needs of the disadvantaged child was also supported by the Millennium Cohort Study (2003-2005, cited by Gambaro, Stewart and Waldfogel 2013, p. 18) which identified that "children from less advantaged backgrounds tend to receive better quality of provision, and that this result was driven by their greater likelihood of attending settings in the

maintained sector". The study indicated that teachers (with Qualified Teacher, EYP or EYT status) were most likely to promote high quality communication and were less likely to be employed within PVI settings where there is often a cost constraint to their employment. Having said this, many studies (Lewis & West, 2016; No Author, 2018; Paull and Popov, 2019) query the capacity of the MNS to continue to deploy graduate teachers into the future due to fiscal constraints, which would inevitably impact on the high quality provision necessary for disadvantaged children and their families.

The approach taken to protecting those children most at risk of harm who exist "on the fringes of social care without support" (No Author, 2016, p. 2) is currently through LA processes and other means of referral (such as health visitors) to be directed towards an MNS place if available. These children and their families rely on the early interventions that the MNS is geared up to provide which are often beyond the scope, remit or expertise of a PVI setting. There are concerns about loss or reduction of services for these at risk children if the MNS is under threat due to reduction or removal of supplementary funding (ibid).

Integrated Practice with the Special Educational Needs and Diversity Child at the Heart

Within the ECEC sector, PVI settings are not duty bound to take children with complex SENDi if they do not feel that they are equipped to cope well with the child (No Author, 2018, p. 8). Many MNSs take children with a range of additional learning needs, including those with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds, as long as they have the capacity so to do (Early Education, 2015). Evidence from the Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey (Brind et al., 2013) also shows that MNSs have higher proportions of children with disabilities, and particularly more severe disabilities, than primary schools with nursery and reception classes (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 30).

SENDi children can be integrated into the MNS as many of these settings have histories of working with integrated services and with practitioners experienced in working in multi-professional teams with specialisms (Early Education, 2018). Indeed, MNSs have statutory requirements under the SEN Code of Practice to meet the needs of SENDi children (Early Education, 2015, p. 11). Even where wider integrated services have gone, MNSs continue to operate as a hub for local communities, working with parents and families to improve children's outcomes and, in particular, supporting those children with SENDi (Early Education, 2015). Nonetheless, some LAs are unable to meet their duty in establishing specialist plans for those children with profound SENs within a statutory time-scale, due to their own fiscal challenges. This

means that many MNSs often have to manage as best they can with SENDi children in order to provide for their pre-school needs, without the associated funding (No Author, 2018, p. 8).

A survey conducted by Early Education (2015) demonstrated the network of services provided to children and their families through an MNS portal. This recognised that issues of disadvantage and SENDi requirements often go hand-in-hand. Links to services included such things as: access to speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, family nurses, portage, health visitors, midwives, oral health and dentists, mental health services, antenatal and perinatal teams, safeguarding, social care, family support and early intervention teams; as well as housing and police services. In addition, the MNS was found to be the central sign-posting hub to local voluntary sector groups, community organisations including arts, libraries, universities and training providers. Betram and Pascall (2019, p.3), commenting on the wide-ranging provision of MNS across one urban conurbation, noted that:

Starkly and remarkably, and in the absence of other services, in some cases severe and life threatening life conditions are also mitigated through the Nursery's action, such as lack of food, provision of housing, removal from domestic violence, treatment for drug and substance abuse and protection from human trafficking.

Such observations are testament to the multi-faceted public service child, family and community role that the MNS has taken on increasingly over the last decade or so (Early Education, 2015, p. 12). As stand-alone services, it is highly challenging for the PVI sector to meet wide-ranging disadvantage and SEND demands in the same way (No Author, 2018, p. 3). This MNS head in London explained:

We are a useful resource to the Local Authority as we can provide expertise through a long serving and skilled staff base. We are a community organisation, which can be accessed by children and families other than just the children on roll. We provide outstanding support for children with SEND and guidance for their families.

(Early Education, p. 10)

However, Paull and Popov (2019, p.78) noted that the MNS is experiencing an increase in the "number of children transferring to the MNS from other ECEC providers who are unable to meet their needs" in a sustained way due to ongoing changes in EY funding streams as currently configured.

Quality Professionals, Quality Inspection Outcomes

High structural quality noted by Paull and Popov (2019, p. 10) suggests that staff qualifications are, on average, higher in the MNS than other provider types. Although lower when compared to

nursery classes housed within schools (27% compared to 36%) the number of MNS staff qualified to degree level is significantly higher than other PVI ECEC providers. Degrees are held by just 12% of staff in private providers, 10% in voluntary providers and 11% of childminders. The Early Years Workforce Strategy (DfE, 2017, p. 9) emphasises that a “high quality workforce has a significant impact on the quality of provision and outcomes for children.” This supports Nutbrown’s (2012, p. 14) earlier findings in her review that “the biggest influence on the quality of early education and care is its workforce” with graduates as leaders of practice having the greatest impact on high quality. Callanan et al. (2017) discuss a range of research that demonstrates that the level of qualifications of ECEC staff has a strong correlation with the quality of provision, as has been found by a number of other pieces of research (for example, Karemaker et al., 2011; Mathers et al., 2007; Mathers and Smees 2014; Roberts et al., 2010).

For the MNS and all other ECEC providers, the availability of training post-qualification, as well as training for those practitioners hoping to achieve a first graduate qualification, has been reduced within Local Authorities (LAs). Additionally, the financial constraints within settings have made it more difficult for staff to be released to attend external training. Callanan et al (2017, p. 63 and 70) identified a range of approaches that have been creatively adopted by a number of ECECs to overcome these challenges. These have included: staff conducting individual research projects on an area of interest to disseminate to their team; staff attending external training courses and providing feedback to the wider team; internal training delivered by senior practitioners; online training and twilight Continuing Professional Development sessions. Callanan (ibid, p. 91) concluded that value should be placed on an ‘open and reflective culture’ in any ECEC as a means to drive continuous improvement; creating a positive working environment and encouraging good practice to be shared to increase the quality of provision. Finding the time and funding for this type of professional development is severely challenged in an ECEC system (including both MNSs and PVI settings) in crisis.

Despite constraints, the MNS continues to find ways to ensure quality provision. This is evident in Paull and Popov’s (2019, p. 10) research which found that almost two-thirds (63%) of MNSs are rated as ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted compared to just 18% of other provider types. Of the 102 MNSs inspected in 2016/17, those that were judged outstanding were reported by Ofsted to have ‘exceptional leaders’, who were meticulous about structured approaches to teaching and learning.

There is a correlation between high quality graduates and Ofsted ratings, which can be found within many MNSs (Mather and Smees 2014). Sylva et al. (2004) found that ECEC settings with

graduate staff tended to score more highly across all quality indicators, affecting children's progress positively. Crucially, however, they judged it unnecessary that all staff be highly qualified to graduate level, providing a good proportion of qualified and experienced practitioners are able to have an impact on overall quality of provision, as is legally constituted within the model of the MNS (Sylva et al. 2004b). Callanan et al. (2017) also report that qualifications and experience provide additional focus to teaching and learning, as well as to curriculum planning and assessment within quality ECEC and that the role of leaders is crucial for continual professional development of all practitioners by virtue of their having comprehensive knowledge of staff strengths and weaknesses (Callanan et al., 2017, p. 53).

Another dimension of evidencing structural quality within the MNS is the way in which many support sector improvements through positive links with PVI settings. Callanan et al. (2017, p. 11) highlight the value of LAs "organising early years clusters, running conferences, delivering training and providing packages of support to settings" in addition to the advice and guidance provided on issues such as SEND and safeguarding. Mathers, Singler and Karemaker (2012) identify that all ECECs require guidance to improve the quality of their provision with the support from partnerships with their LAs and other providers such as MNSs.

In a survey conducted by Early Education (2014, pp. 6-7), MNS partnership working is discussed as being about: the way they work with ECECs locally and nationally, supporting staff in local PVIs through local forums and cluster groups, offering support and development opportunities for childminders, supporting visits from other settings, working with local primary and infant schools, supporting students and apprentices from local colleges, universities, including Teaching School alliances, engaging with research into effective practice in the EY, supporting LA EY teams and offering training for local parents. Through high structural quality, the MNS can provide a means for networking opportunities for childminding services and other ECECs, in addition to supporting local training providers and students in the field of ECEC. In another survey by Early Education (2015, pp. 13-14), it was found that 60% of MNSs (within the sample selected for the study) supported local PVI settings with quality improvements through the sharing of good practice, documentation, and observations of practice and leadership development.

Yet another report compiled by seven MNSs (No Author, 2018, p. 13) highlighted how they have consistently adopted wide ranging community roles, including: supporting wider family stability, encouraging the development of skills for life and work, and developing active home-school learning links. This outreach included the PVI sector with whom they liaise. The impact of this was documented in terms of the number of referrals for families to other services and the positive

contributions made to higher outcomes for children. Bertram and Pascall (2019, p.2) pay particular attention to the wide range of complex family needs that the MNSs within their Birmingham study managed to pay attention to, including “basic life requirements” of housing, food, debt and drug management.

Paull and Popov (2019, p. 12) conclude that the MNSs offer a greater range and quantity of additional and specialist services than other ECEC providers. Nonetheless, the Early Years Education Report (2018) suggests that this may be in jeopardy if the future funding of the MNS is not resolved with some urgency. The briefing on funding stated that that: “according to DfE’s figures, in 2016-17 18% of maintained nursery schools were in deficit - twice the proportion of the school sector as a whole - and [this] is expected to increase steeply in 2018-19” (Early Education 2018 , p. 2).

Section Three: Challenges faced by Maintained Nursery Schools – Uncertainty and Crisis

All ECECs, whether PVI settings or MNSs, receive funding via their LAs from central government to support those pre-school children in receipt of their free early education entitlement, calculated on the basis of familial deprivation. However, as part of their public service role, MNSs also benefit from additional funding through the Early Years National Funding Formula (EYNFF) paid directly to LAs (Early Years Education, 2018). In 2017, the EYNFF also provided a supplement of £60 million to protect MNSs up to 2020 (Paull and Popov, 2019). At the time of writing, there are no guarantees of funding beyond this date, which Early Years Education (2018) suggests leaves the MNS unable to plan adequately for the future. Although legally constituted as schools, MNSs are not funded as such, which means that they accrue particular fiscal challenges independent of those faced by other statutory providers (Early Education 2015).

Morton (2018) reported on the survey conducted by Early Education in 2015, citing three in ten MNSs as having significant concerns over their finances and long-term viability as ECEC providers beyond 2020. Early Education (2018) reported that schools were struggling to set budgets for 2019-2020 with 64% of MNSs expecting to be in deficit. They cited a combination of rising costs (to buildings and insurance), a crisis in funding of SENDi, lack of extra funding for children entitled to 30 hours of education and care and the confusing and the unpredictable nature of supplementary funding from LAs.

Staff costs are reported as the largest cost category for MNSs, accounting for 79% of weekly costs (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 10), a consequence of the greater proportion of graduate level practitioners within MNSs. However, the differences in the hourly cost between the MNS and

other providers is still extremely small (or even non-existent). Indeed, Paull and Popov suggest that there is evidence that the hourly cost of delivering childcare for three- and four-year olds in MNSs in 2018-19 may be lower than it was in 2015-16 (ibid, p. 12) due to the steps they have taken to rationalise their services.

As a result of funding cuts to their own budgets from central government, LAs have pulled back their levels of support for MNSs, especially since 2011. However, MNSs continue to value the support provided by LAs in accessing a range of services wherever possible. This support includes: conferences and network events and meetings, training, targeted support packages, moderation of effective assessment, support for SEN and safeguarding (Callanan et al., 2017, p. 58), although increasingly MNSs find that they have to pay for these services themselves (Early Education 2015). Some MNSs also find innovative ways of diversifying and some are offering wrap-around care beyond school hours and in holidays and for other age groups of children, thus boosting their revenues (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 77).

Reported interviews with LA staff showed that the greatest concern for MNSs is the uncertainty around funding and supplementary funding beyond 2020 in particular (Paull and Popov, p. 75). A quarter of MNSs in LAs have either a structural deficit (a deficit beyond recovery and where the school is unviable), or a significant deficit (a deficit requiring intensive intervention and focused report to recover). A further 46% are in a vulnerable position indicating that they are either quickly going through their reserves, losing significant pupil numbers or moving to the brink of deficit (Paull and Popov, p. 76).

Paull and Popov (2019, p. 76) stress that whatever changes may be required for the role of the MNS within the ECEC sector, they certainly require urgent guidance on what they might expect from central and local government moving forward to give them clarity and purpose.

Conclusion

This review of literature has sought to locate the particularity of the MNS case within the wider scope of the current terrain of ECEC within England in 2019. It recognizes the huge challenge of providing an integrated, affordable, equitable ECEC service balancing public sector provision within a market context that takes account of the needs of the pre-school child and the parent to work in paid employment outside the home. Within this context, a report from seven LAs (no author, 2018, p. 2) drew attention to the importance of the “hidden work” of the MNS that benefits the most vulnerable families and diminishes “progress gaps between the most vulnerable groups and all children”. This has been most recently supported by Bertram and

Pascall (2019, p. 2), who suggest that their report can testify to the “true and added-value of the MNS as a unique, cost-effective public service”.

Although a small element of the ECEC sector, there are currently 392 MNSs which account for 3% of funded places for three- and four-year-old children in England (Paull and Popov, 2019, p.23). They still strongly reflect their original purpose, to provide education and care for the most vulnerable of children, many of whose families predominantly live in urban areas and in contexts of deprivation. Almost two-thirds (64%) are located in the 30% most deprived areas of England (Early Education, 2018). They nurture and educate a higher proportion of children from deprived backgrounds than any other ECEC sector (Early Education, 2015; Paull and Popov, 2019). They also have higher proportions of children with SENDi (Callanan et al., 2017) and some LA staff have commented that MNSs are willing to take children which other ECEC providers said they were unable to cater for (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 26). MNSs are invariably regarded as centres of excellence and their role is often seen as wider than just delivering EY education; this includes being thought of as sector leaders and catalysts for spreading best practice in different areas across all PVI settings and areas of ECEC, including higher education establishments (ibid, p. 26).

In line with their vision as integrated with other child and family services, especially during the New Labour administration from 1997-2010, they continue to provide a range of additional services including specialist support for children with SENDi and family support (ibid, p. 53) and they hold pivotal public service roles within wider community contexts (Bertram and Pascal, 2019). MNSs are more likely than other ECEC provider to offer a range of activity types, to deliver more user hours in larger groups and to spend a slightly greater share of their delivery costs on additional and specialist services than any other area of ECEC (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 53). Evidence of their structural quality, in the form of practitioners with graduate teaching qualifications, means that they are respected for their ability to deliver specialist services and interventions (ibid, p. 13), where high quality is most associated with the qualifications of the practitioners delivering the services (ibid, p. 21).

The funding for MNSs is currently undergoing significant change and there is extreme concern that they will no longer be viable without the ongoing supplementary funding they currently receive (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 14). LAs have very positive views of their MNSs (ibid, 2019, p. 23) and the considerations and voices of those contained within this report are testament to this. As Early Education (2015, p. 26) reports:

Maintained nursery schools are a remarkable part of our [English] education system where the most disadvantaged children can access the highest quality education. Rather

than letting them wither on the vine through short-sighted attempts at cutting costs, we should be using them as a means of bringing up quality across the early years sector.

Methodology

The current study intended to build upon previous research identified in the literature section. It aimed not only to better understand the role and responsibilities of maintained nursery schools evolving sector improvements, but also, perhaps more importantly, to give voice to the experiences of practitioners in the sector (Hargreaves, 1996). It explored the nurseries' impact upon other EY settings within their region but also identified potential issues which impeded impact. 'Sector improvement' is used in the widest sense, to embrace ideas of professionalism and quality, including a range of practitioners' values and perspectives upon their own priorities for this.

This research provided opportunity to focus on the 'complexity' of the 'single community' (Bryman, 2016, p. 60), the MNS in this instance, and to conduct an intensive examination of the ways in which they have, through time, built a body of sedimented ECEC knowledge and practice, embedded within the needs of a given community. We have investigated the 'irreplaceability' of tacit knowledge, honed and situated pedagogies and practices, that can only come through a combination of a range of skilled practitioners located within communities that are there to meet the identified needs of their children, as complex as these might be. We have remained mindful that these settings and practitioners are operating within limiting fiscal parameters created by budgets that are increasingly tight.

In light of the literature that suggested that MNSs are effective in accommodating populations of high social need, the opportunity to capture this as a 'case' has provided knowledge that is impossible to gather through the examination of statistical knowledge alone. The case study approach has enabled us to engage in the observation and unstructured interviewing of a range of professionals, including nursery network hub leaders, head teachers, teachers, specialist teachers and qualified and unqualified practitioners in order, through their discourses and legitimacies, to present "the members' perspectives on the social reality" (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 490). Our data classifies these sets of respondents more simplistically, as 'leaders' and 'practitioners' as further specification of roles is surplus to the points being made. Although mindful of the pertinence of the child and parents' perspective, gathering their views was beyond the scope of this particular study and would make fascinating future research, particularly in light of the data collected.

The focus of the research has ensured that it benefits from the acquisition of legitimate goals in terms of quality and meaning, whilst explicating the benefits of transferability of data and impact (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003; De Lisle, 2011). Statistical data, gathered via survey, were used to

frame the particularity of urgency of making the case for the MNS sector in light of the immediate socio-political context of judgements about maximising value for money in the distribution of provision of EYEC between the MNSs and PVI settings. The data collected have both breadth, through the gathering of statistical data from 115 current practitioners, and depth through interviews with 21 MNS leaders, in two contrasting geographical locations. These regions have both been identified as areas of high socio-economic deprivation.

Aim of the study:

To critically analyse the experiences, values and issues identified by those employed within the maintained nursery sector.

The project initially focused upon five key areas:

1. The needs of maintained nursery schools in terms of sector improvement.
2. The contribution that maintained nursery schools themselves make to this.
3. How maintained nursery schools go about leading on this.
4. The benefits obtained through sector improvement activities.
5. The barriers encountered which prevent the success of sector improvement activities.

However, as the research progressed, the prominence of various areas shifted and new themes emerged and took dominance.

Methods of data collection

The case study research strategy involved the collection of statistical data through survey, which provided a useful backdrop to the MNSs' training, sector leadership and practitioner development. An overview of the results of this can be found in Appendices B and C. In addition to this, the collection of qualitative data was key, because there are areas that "statistics cannot measure" (Silverman, 2001, p. 32). These regions' providers were emailed through existing, publicly available, contact details. The choice of two contrasting LAs ensured that we represented the achievements and needs of MNSs in a range of areas. A mixed methods approach ensured that the research benefitted from the acquisition of more legitimate goals in terms of quality and meaning.

The data collection methods were designed around three key questions:

- *Perspectives:* What has been the experience of EY practitioners re sector improvements?
- *Needs:* What are the needs of settings?

- *Drivers and Barriers*: What are the drivers of sector development and what challenges are experienced?

The mixed methods approach included:

- Policy/ literature analysis
- A review of the regions' Ofsted data in order to identify key issues
- An online survey for settings' leaders and practitioners designed and administered through Bristol Online Surveys (a hard copy version was also made available).
- Telephone or face-to-face interviews with key staff in settings
- Field-notes gathered from half day visits to case study settings
- A focus group interview with sector leads.

The Sample and data collection methods

1. Maintained nursery leads ($n= 200$)

An online questionnaire survey was sent to 100 leads in maintained nurseries in each of the two geographical regions. In total sixty leaders responded to the survey. Leaders were invited, via the survey email, to host a researcher visit or take part in an interview. As a result of this, following the survey, the researchers carried out:

- I. 6 MNS visits
- II. 14 individual interviews
- III. One focus group interview with 7 leaders

2. Maintained nursery practitioners

A further online survey for practitioners was sent to the 200 maintained nurseries in the regions identified. This requested that the leads already contacted pass on the practitioner survey to their staff. Because of this method of administration, we do not hold accurate numbers of the practitioners that this reached, but 55 practitioners responded.

Obtaining consent

The BERA (2018) Ethical Guidelines were adhered to throughout. Each participant was invited to engage voluntarily with no coercion. A full explanatory letter and project information sheet was sent in advance of any participation and only when fully informed were participants asked to complete the survey or, in the case of interviews, sign a declaration of consent. As all researchers carrying out this project have worked extensively with settings, we were aware of the importance

of building respectful and caring research relationships. Leader and Practitioner information letters can be found in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Following the completion and analysis of the surveys, some very clear themes began to emerge which were explored further through interviews and visits. On completion of the data collection, the researchers independently immersed themselves (Norton, 2009) in survey data, field notes and interview transcripts. There was a correlation of the themes identified by the researchers, and these are found in the following section of the report. Themes include: accountability, identity and impact; a nursery for *all* children; the MNS and the family; the MNS and the community and the MNS in crisis.

Upon further ongoing scrutiny, discussion and agreement of the themes, the data were condensed into a data reduction grid in order for the various sources of the data to be triangulated across each theme. One researcher took responsibility for each section, with the other researchers acting as sources of validation that the theme had been presented appropriately and that sufficient data were presented to 'sustain the claim' (Cohen et al., 2001, p. 107). The data categories are presented in the sections that follow. Reference is made to both leaders and practitioners within the following results chapters, with direct quotes predominantly drawn from the interviews conducted with MNS leaders. However, where practitioners provided extended comments as part of the survey data, these have been incorporated into the text where appropriate.

Findings

Accountability, identity and impact

An under-appreciated public service with an honourable history

The MNS functions, to some extent, 'below the radar'. What MNSs have done for many years, and still do, is often taken-for-granted and largely under-appreciated. This can be recognised, to some extent, as a wider problem with the ECEC sector more generally. Ninety-six per cent of the practitioners who completed the survey felt that greater clarification was needed about the qualifications necessary to work in the ECEC workforce. As this practitioner explained:

Nursery practitioners are regarded as low-level staff with low qualifications. Plenty have degrees and have invested years into CPD but are still met with low paid and even degrading positions. Early years is so important to continued learning in a child's life. Beginning a love of learning and engagement is fundamental to a happy society and this is not recognised in the insufficient funding and status it receives.

More specifically, the role of the MNS and the ways in which it differs to that of the PVI setting can be unclear even to those with an educational and public service background. This leader commented:

Sadly, some Local Authority officers see us as a costly alternative to the PVI sector and do not understand or value the distinctive nature of our provision or work, a clearer remit or sector improvement would support this.

And the confusion is not restricted to LA officers mentioned above, but exists more widely, as one leader explained: "The sector still does not 'get' how we differ." All 60 leaders who completed the survey commented that it was important that the role and responsibilities that they held, as a MNS, be more clearly defined. They were aware that with a lack of understanding of the role of the MNS and the professionals within it, there was limited chance of them obtaining the support that they needed. As this leader summarises:

Caught between definition as schools and general EY provision. We are beaten with the demands and regulation of schools while being funded as general provision.

A history

Without exception in all interviews and surveys, MNS leaders were confident in talking about their own sense of their MNS in order to assert a clear identity for it. The settings were variously described and, despite a shared moral purpose around the welfare of children and families (which

shall be discussed shortly), they maintained particular identities with specific and unique priorities. A strong identity characteristic was associated with the place of the MNS through time: its role as a public service with a history that is worthy of note as delineating something of value within ideas of state welfarism. This leader explained “*Maintained nurseries have a long, long history and we give up all that accumulated knowledge at our peril*”, and another warned:

Maintained Nursery schools have had a long record of providing high quality education care and learning, for children and their families and vulnerable children. If they were lost it would be an amazing resource that would be lost for ever.

One MNS leader located its history as attending to a need at a particular moment in time, as well as the ongoing contribution it continues to make today:

It was set up 70 plus years ago during the Second World War when there was a need to cater for the needs of children when the roles of women changed suddenly. And it is still here, which is testament to the role it played then and since.

Even those who did not specifically define it within a similar historical trajectory frequently marked out its place in time. This was captured by way of reference to it taking over from another public service that had been lost, particularly within the last ten years, whether as a Family or Sure Start Centre, often described in terms of “*picking up the pieces*” where supporting families was concerned.

One leader explained that they had always “*picked up families*” but were doing so far more since the reduction in children’s centres within their local area from four to one. In some cases, where the nurseries had taken over a children’s centre building, the community still assumed that they would offer the same support. As this leader explained: “*They do come to us. Even after the children have left, you know, if they are in crisis, they do come back to us because we used to be a children’s centre as well...They still see us as that.*” This practitioner shared the impact that this has had upon her as both teacher and parent:

My role involves much more than teaching young children because of the services that were once provided to support families are slowly declining, which means practitioners have to pick up the pieces, becoming carers, providing family support and advice, acting as a midwife, by giving toilet training and training in the importance of being healthy, to name just a few. This has a huge impact on my time, and trying to fit my own family’s needs in can be difficult.

A School

There was a strong sense of the MNS as defined through its distinctive status as a school with a head and teachers with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and distinct patterns of working:

We open 0900-1500 and term-time only. That is the way we work and that is established and accepted in our community. We have an excellent bank of child-minders who collect children for parents and it all works really well...

"We are a school, you know, for all intents and purpose"; "It is about our core identity. We are a school". These statements, and others similarly expressed, were claimed with some assuredness by interviewees. However, beyond this assertion of *"the school"*, ideas of how this might be recognized in terms of a common EY curriculum, practices and associated pedagogies were less fixed. For example, some leaders defined their MNS in terms of common statutory schooling vocabularies and rhetoric, using terms of *"tracking"*, *'assessing'*, *'measuring impact'*, *'high-'* and *'low-attaining groups'*, *'STEM'* [science, technology, engineering, mathematics], *'interventions'* and *'narrowing the [attainment] gap'*. Whereas, others actively resisted this. One leader reflected on the slipperiness of defining the *'impact'* of schooling and reducing it to an easily quantifiable and instrumental measurement. She said:

I think we all find it hard to measure it. It's actually in the eyes of the parents, and in the eyes of the people who know the children. It is quite a subjective judgment, but actually, it's an incredibly detailed well-informed judgment, isn't it?

For a study that ostensibly explored the educational impacts of the MNS upon young children, it is important to note here that the outstanding improvements that children made, attainment-wise, were frequently mentioned almost in passing, as being *beside the key priorities of the school*. As a result our findings are heavily skewed towards the 'care' rather than the 'education' aspect of the MNS role. But this should not overshadow the significant impact that MNSs had on their children's educational achievement. The message came through clearly that children entering the schools were well below any recognised *"average"* and that leaving on track was important (as will be discussed in the 'A Nursery for All Children' section), but this was not *as* important as the life skills the children developed within the settings. As one leader explained: *"The most important thing is we have children who leave us and they're very confident, tolerant, curious and keen to learn...well developed ... in relation to tolerance and their dispositions and attitudes."* Life skills were perceived as more important than academic attainment because these *underpinned* dispositions for lifelong learning.

Another leader spoke of her school as one that was defined by the networked connections with other schools where: *“we are very interested in researching about how children learn, then how we all learn; and researching the children and everything about it. That becomes a dynamic part of a debate.”* This portrays the school as less a site of fixity but more as one of exploration and curiosity. This was echoed variously by other interviewees, capturing their ideas of their school as a site where impact was conceived as the propensity of the children to be prepared to: *“ask questions”*; [to push themselves] *“into the grey zone”*; to *“demonstrate their increasing independence”*; or *“their ability to show and express their feelings”* rather than their ability to fulfil assessment criteria.

Other interviewees expressed their sensibility of the MNS as a building that housed inter-generational responsibilities and commitments. They felt that this interconnection between generations, many of whom had links with the MNS over many years, added significantly to the child’s sense of learning *“holistically”*. To support this, MNS leaders and practitioners referenced their ongoing commitment to: enriching outdoor environments, their Forest School practices, the inclusion of an artist-in-residence to inspire creativity, and the development of communication, social relations and community.

One leader expressed her view of the school in terms of: *“[seeing] ourselves at the heart of the community, educating the families, as well as the children”*, whilst another captured this as about supporting *“their [the children’s] personal and social development”* or even recognising that it would seem that *“Mummy needs a bit of help [with her emotional well-being] as well”*. As is explored in the *‘The MNS and the Family’* section, MNSs accepted that a child should not be considered separately from their family, and that the welfare of the family influences the welfare of the child. In order for a child to achieve academically they need to be in an emotionally secure place.

Asserting a Sense of Core Identity

I'm amazed that people are still trying to feel convinced about what's the importance of a nursery school, because nurseries have demonstrated their effectiveness over so many years to so many people.

Leader

Frequently the ideas of the current purposes and beliefs of the MNS were defined by interviewees in terms of how they differed to those within the PVI sector. Sometimes these views were captured in binary shorthand: *“we are not a PVI”*. At other times, beliefs concerning purposes were expressed as assumptions about the differing roles of the MNS and the PVI

setting; for example, one leader shared that she didn't believe that MNSs and PVI settings were always providing a service *"for the same reasons"*. Sometimes this was also expressed as a distinction that was not made clear to the general public. This particular leader went on to suggest that there were different expectations of the MNS and the PVI setting by the Office for Government Standards in Education (Ofsted) in terms of making a judgement about quality educational provision. She said: *"you can go past the gate of a MNS that says 'outstanding' and go past the gate of a PVI that says 'Outstanding', and it is two completely different types of 'outstanding'"*. There was a frustration asserted by a number of head teachers in particular about the lack of recognition of the expertise housed within MNSs' walls that, despite the experience and many qualifications held by the MNS staff, they were still not consulted by those making local level decisions. This leader mused on how her contextual expertise of the area was not called upon in times of crisis, saying: *"They don't think to ask our opinion, necessarily, when actually we do really know why the wheels are falling off."*

The Qualified Teacher with Status

It's the quality and the expertise that we've got here and being led by a specialist head teacher. So because of that, we can raise the standards. *Leader*

Many of those asked about the distinctiveness of the MNS suggested that this was not only about being a school but also about those with QTS. Others spelt this out in terms of levels of knowledge, experience and specialism, particularly with regard to working with children and families with a complex array of needs. This leader explained: *"[our] children need interventions. And because we've got a teacher, she can then do the interventions. She's got the skills and the qualifications to do that"*. The remit and constitution of the MNS was often justified thus: *"We have to have a headteacher, and qualified teachers and staff to achieve what we do"*. Some leaders clarified their expectations of their qualified teachers: *"...they take part in ongoing training; they are stable and we don't have a high turn-over of staff. They are innovative and have lots of ideas about what we should be doing. They all engage in research"*. This leader explained that the staff *"have got to be a bit like the children, really. They've got to be people that want to be lifelong explorers as well as the children and open to that"*.

The practitioners echoed this in their survey responses. They recognised their settings as centres of excellence and accepted their responsibility for providing ongoing development to other settings through leading ECEC hubs and training. They set extremely high standards for themselves, as this practitioner explained:

I feel more confident in my ability to improve my practice knowing that I'm involved in an 'outstanding' setting and therefore sharing my experience with others knowing it's the best practice there is to be had.

There were many references to expectations of consistency in the quality of teaching staff and the length of time that many had been employed within settings, often seen as a strength in community environments where the constancy, dependability, trust and familiarity were posited as necessary attributes of the MNS. Some leaders referenced the tradition within the MNS sector of employing QTS teachers who made a commitment over a long period, in part linked to the better pay and conditions that they received in MNSs as compared with many PVI settings. This leader explained: *"we've always paid local authority terms and conditions and people get holidays and sickness pay, maternity pay"*.

Training peers was a key aspect of the expertise that the MNS claimed. Ninety-five per cent of the practitioners asked reported that they had been involved in development activities during the last 12 months. Practitioners recognised themselves as specialists and were confident in their specialist knowledge. This practitioner explained what she felt was necessary if MNSs were to be appropriately valued for their role:

A greater understanding of the role nursery schools play within the local area, supporting often vulnerable children and families; within the authority sharing excellent practice and moving thinking along; within the county, we specialise in early years education and are able to develop a deeper understanding through that specialism.

Some leaders were at pains to recognise the value of the Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) as a qualification that generated practitioners who knew about, *"essential aspects of child development... [but also met] teaching standards"*. However, this leader expressed the views of many interviewed about the importance they placed upon QTS:

The key point for consideration within the context of MNS is the lack of QTS attached to EYTS. This issue was highlighted by the recent Education Select Committee report... QTS carries with it a recognised status and rightly or wrongly any qualification which claims to be equivalent to this but which doesn't carry the 'QTS' badge will naturally not be seen as the same. I don't think those who know what a [EYTS] course covers look down on the qualification but schools are required to employ qualified teachers and in maintained schools, a qualified teacher is someone who holds QTS.

One leader expressed her concern and frustration that only employing those with QTS for three- and four-year olds was creating huge issues of inequity within her nursery which now also offered private places all year around to under threes:

At the moment the situation is that, I have an unequally remunerated workforce that is unfair and divisive. I have workforce that is paid as though we were a school (for the over 3s) and an Under 3 workforce who are not remunerated in anywhere near the same way...In essence, I have two workforces – one workforce is ‘valued’ fiscally and in terms of conditions and the other is not. They work side-by-side day in and day out and frankly, it is utterly divisive. It has to change. It is quite literally ‘unmanageable’.

Challenging ‘Fixity’: The MNS in transition?

Some interviewees illustrated a considerable lack of fixity and, indeed, much flexibility and entrepreneurship, by way of responding to readings of the challenging national and local, political and fiscal climate, that seemed to demand ‘change’ for the role of the MNS. This leader explained:

...we are totally used to change; we've been through the whole children's centre moves, and coming and going. We've ... had so much change it's untrue. So actually, the people who are here, are people who've managed to thrive on that and have been able to pull positive things out of that.

Although all sharing the identity of nursery ‘school’, there proved to be a huge variety of ways in which some MNSs had become configured. This leader explained: “*We are 3 nurseries that come together as a consortium and we all work together for the purposes of developing a training and development programme for children and families*”. Other nurseries were described as being part of “*federations*” in which head teachers oversaw the work of several nurseries in an area, whilst some were part of “*Teaching School Alliances*”. Still others described themselves as belonging to “*a hub*” within their LA that connected the MNSs with PVI settings in the local area.

Many head teachers interviewed were meeting with colleagues from other schools and alliances to consider ways they could form regional branches as “*Early Excellence*” centres to develop new ways of working and new business models. This would enable them to generate revenue through offering training and support to schools, academies, PVI settings, child-minders and families. Despite differences in their structure, what was consistent across all of the MNSs was a collaborative approach to the way that they worked with families, other settings and other professionals, in order to achieve the very best outcomes for the children of their locale.

Some interviewees recognised the need for an EY focused teaching school within their region, suggesting opportunities for the MNS to be entrepreneurial in this context to fulfil ECEC educational needs. One leader reflected that by doing this:

Our impact will no longer be focused on, and geared towards, the needs of our local communities and the impact that we know we can make there...instead our impact might shift and we might possibly have a wider impact.

Nonetheless, some interviewees balked at having to think of themselves as “a business” in order to raise finances, which they felt to be a distraction from their moral purpose. Thinking about the families, one leader explained: “we can’t insist on charging money they don’t have”, although they did recognise the need to charge other settings for their expertise as an element of their economic survival. This practitioner commented that “With such uncertainty to our future viability and funding, every staff member, particularly the head and SLT, are constantly spending time and energy to ensure we find ways to survive”.

Many interviewees recognised the skills and aptitudes of a wide range of practitioners within PVI settings at the same time as feeling frustrated that they had areas of expertise that they could share with them if funding were not an issue. Some felt that sharing between MNSs and PVI settings was less far-reaching than it might otherwise be due to “limited budgets” (although later in this chapter we will also see that MNS leaders were also proud of the range of partnership work they did manage to undertake). One leader noted that recently “the number of PVIs who are signing up for training schemes has gone down”. But the reduction in finances was also significantly affecting MNSs, as this practitioner explained:

I have worked in Early Years for 37 years, mainly within nursery schools [MNSs], and have seen many changes. One area, which concerns me, is the decrease in contracted hours but increase in expectation. While I have always worked beyond my contracted hours, this has now become an expectation. Within my setting staff frequently work one and a half to two hours over their contracted hours most days.

There were numerous comments, discussed more fully in the final data section, where MNS staff felt stretched “to breaking point”.

Values shaped and honed through time

Much of the discussion in relation to the educational values of the MNS, shaped and honed over time, connected it with public service values and an affective set of ideals, beliefs and moral purposes. Terms to describe the role of the MNS often included “help” and “making a difference”.

One leader in particular described her own setting as a “*thriving hub of expertise and of passion*”. Many interviewees made reference to a set of ideals they identified with the MNS as a public good with distinctive purposes, beyond a market value, one that gained greater value over time. This leader said, “*I see the MNS as an investment that will pay back in the whole of [our] children's future because you build momentum, and there is no wasted today*”. One practitioner stressed how “*beginning a love of learning and engagement is fundamental to a happy society*”. MNSs viewed themselves as not only impacting upon a child’s present but providing them opportunity of a better future. This leader explains:

I think, the ways in which we impact children are very, very strong. And actually that impact is something that unlocks the future for them. And also gives them a valuable memorable childhood, here and now. So the day is important, and the future is important.

Another leader identified the way in which values can only be accrued through time to generate a trust within a community that has a reach beyond the individual child:

[Being here] ...over many generations means that the MNS is a place of safety and reputation. When families are experiencing things they come back here, even when their children have left because they think, ‘I know I’ll be listened to. I know somebody will help me here’.

Other leaders referenced investments of their time that demonstrated their own sense of moral responsibility for those connected with the child. This leader explained:

I will be downstairs greeting every single child and every single parent every day...and if somebody isn't coming in, I will go out into the car park. And I think that's something that, again, it has to be consistent. That welcome, is the most important thing, and then the follow through...

Many interviewees identified the MNS within its historical trajectory, as integrally connected with those for whom the state has traditionally been most required to make provision. This included reference to those living in ‘*deprivation*’ and those with SEND. There were many references to the spaces and places of the MNS as located within areas of low socio-economic value which presumed particular beliefs about the purpose of the MNS. For example, this leader commented:

So for me, it's really important that children from areas like this, high areas of deprivation, get the best chance they can, both in terms of their academic career, and their career when they leave school. Giving those most disadvantaged children the best early life experiences that we possibly can, is why we're here. That's why we do what we do.

These concepts are expanded upon in the following sections.

Support for other settings

Something mentioned throughout both survey and interview responses was the role that MNSs took on in terms of leading and supporting other settings. All but one of the 60 leaders who responded to the survey mentioned their own MNS putting on training for other settings, and 70% of the practitioners mentioned working with other settings in this way. Comments made by leaders in relation to this included:

We have been asked to lead on provision of outdoor learning as part of the borough. We believe that it is impacting positively as we have return visits from practitioners to follow up sessions they have attended and we are always busy hosting learning walks and so on.

As a Teaching School and working in partnership with our Local Authority we are running a project to support schools and their feeder PVI settings in building community relationships to support families at transition from settings to school and providing training for parents and staff through transitional objects and wellbeing.

We have run 'Visitor Days' - training days for EY staff from provisions. Staff spend half a day in the nursery observing and being involved in the practice we deliver and have a short training session to consolidate what they have seen. The training has been oversubscribed and feedback suggests that what they have experienced has impacted on developing their practice...

With the other 3 maintained nursery schools we have developed a training package of courses that we have been delivering to settings...and some settings are returning as the training is new and exciting and is meeting their needs.

We have led training regarding SEND, Maths and Enabling Environments to the private and voluntary sector and the feedback has been very positive, which in turn will help staff and children throughout the EY sector.

It was not only leaders that mentioned this responsibility; practitioners also reported sharing their knowledge with other settings, providing training and sharing their “expertise” and “best practice”.

The desire of MNS practitioners to help others better support children and families was evident as a clear moral obligation across the interviews. This leader explained: “there’s a twofold quality to maintained nurseries, which is that there is a constantly evolving pedagogy an area of expertise but also that support for the family and other settings.” Leaders understood that supporting not only parents but other settings (including PVI settings) was part of their responsibility in terms of

being a MNS and they believed it short-sighted of the government to fail to recognise that the role that they played, and could extend further, in sharing their wealth of experience, was value for money. These two leaders explained:

...the powers that be, the politicians and the councillors need to wake up and smell the roses... You know, I realise what models work. No one ever does any work on what works. They never do that, you know? And that's sad, really, isn't it? Because they should, with the money that they had, they could have had 10 of these [an expanded MNS offering additional services], one in each district; why didn't they do it?

The government should be celebrating and embracing MNS as beacon schools and centres/hubs of early years excellence. The quality in MNS is better than in any other sector or phase. MNS are led by head teachers with expert skills and a moral imperative which is rarely found in a private setting or chain of nurseries. MNS are truly community schools who prioritise their places for disadvantaged children and families. Why do Government officials insist on making sweeping statements that 'all nurseries do the same job and therefore should get the same money' - it is just not true! Or 'you do an amazing job but you are expensive aren't you?' Also not true if, for that little bit of extra funding, you also get a family support team that reaches 600 families and a Teaching School!

Expertise in SENDi

A particular area of expertise that arose through the qualitative data related to the field of SENDi, where MNS leaders discussed providing for the needs of many children that had been turned away from other often private settings. As one leader noted:

...we have all the children nobody else will have. Or who can't pay. Or they are too troublesome. So everyone thought 'great, two-year-old grant, get the two-year-olds in'. But they can't cope with them. So our impact is that we are actually educating children that nobody else will.

The MNSs presented their work with SENDi children, although a drain on resources, as a positive facet of their provision “because it adds diversity, but it also teaches the children tolerance and difference”. One respondent explained it this way: “we actually want to be inclusive. And that actually, by being inclusive, all the children benefit. It's an inclusive society. So our nurture should reflect that.” Again, values surpassed assessment results.

More than simply taking the SENDi children in, the staff showed great commitment, knowledge and skill in the area, adeptly assessing and meeting children’s learning, development and social

needs by preparing Individual Health Care Plans (IHCPs) ready for a child's onward move to primary school. This is a theme taken-up again in the next chapter. Their commitment to all children's development often left the MNS in challenging circumstances fiscally, as this leader explained:

And often we take them at massive expense to ourselves. Because, if a child is only here for a year, well, no one gets diagnosed in a year. And nobody gets an IHCP plan in a year. So we will support them [the children] one-to-one, or however they need to be supported from our own pocket. And, and then we'll get that an IHCP plan in place, just so they have it ready to start school. So we're in a catch 22. But you just wouldn't not, and I know all the nursery schools feel the same, you couldn't not take a child because it's not in the child's best interest to be knocking around at home, particularly one with significant special needs.

Passion and commitment

Countless comments were made about the passion and commitment shown by staff within the MNS to the children and families that they worked with. Below are just a few examples:

We've actually bought into this. Yeah, this is that this is what we know is right. For children and families here. ...I truly believe this isn't a job, this is a passion, this is something that you truly believe in.

Look at them [the children]. They're amazing. It's the best job in the world and I wouldn't want to do anything else, and I'd do more if it meant I could stay here.

We give them the foundations, don't we? We are the building blocks for what's ahead. And we must get that right in the first instance.

Because they [the practitioners] know, today could be that child's only day for doing that thing. And you've got to give them that. That chance every day, every day.

I have got staff who are paid part-time but work full-time. Because they know... they want to do it, and they know that the money just isn't there. It'd be really nice to be in a position where we just pay people for the job they're doing!

As well as many staff working on low wages, resulting in some taking on second jobs in order to pay their own bills, practitioners also took a variety of approaches to ensuring continuity and a possible future for their MNS. These included: fund-raising, outside work-time, through charitable organisations they had set-up to support additional provision, charging for an expertise they were able to market to private EY providers, or, as this leader confided, taking steps to improve

leadership skills in order to be able to make the best of trying circumstances within the MNS sector. She explained: *“I might be doing my Executive Leadership, but I only have to do it to make sure it does sustain the MNS because I don’t want to lose nursery schools.”* Many leaders shared their dread of what might happen to some of their children and their families if there were no longer MNSs there to support them. This leader posed the question rhetorically: *“Where will the vulnerable children and families go if the MNS is unable to continue to provide this support?”*

A Nursery for All Children

You have to believe in each and every one of those children...how could you not? How could you do that to that little person who has only been alive 36 months? How could you? How could you not want to do the absolute very best, you can do, with what you've got? Realistically. But how could not want to? And you know, it's a lovely job. It is a lovely job, isn't it?

Leader

And I think that the group of children who are economically deprived, we know from research that those children are coming in with lower starting points than the rest. And we can effectively narrow that gap. Early on, the earlier we start the better. And we can, so that the two-year-old (and, you know, two to five is such a valuable period of time) that we can actually have children who get to expected levels of development by the time they start reception class. And you feel that that makes such an enormous difference to how they're going to experience Primary School and their opportunities in the future.

Leader

What was consistent throughout the data, whether from leaders, as above, or practitioners, was a “*commitment and dedication*” to “*providing an inspirational, life-changing start to the children and families in our communities*”. One leader commented that they had “*young children at the heart, at the centre of absolutely everything we do. So it's a place that has at its heart the children.*” In order to support children effectively MNS practitioners recognised the importance of the wider family. This leader explained how her team “*work proactively to understand who the child is in front of us and therefore we need to understand their families, themselves, their journeys of learning and development, where we see that there are opportunities there and starting points.*” Specific work with families is discussed more fully in the next chapter entitled ‘*The MNS and The Family*’.

Priorities

What were the aims of practitioners and leaders for the children in their charge? The leaders made clear that these aims went beyond providing assessment results from the learning opportunities that they adeptly provided in order to demonstrate educational progress (although this was considered of great importance – see *Narrowing The Gap* below). One respondent described her aim as connected to matters of well-being which were about developing, “*strong characteristics of mental health and resilience.*” And there were many different versions of this; *buoyant dispositions, self-belief, competence, ambition, a sense of belonging, children who question, viewing themselves as valuable and important* were all identified as aims for the

children. Poignantly one leader added that she wanted her children to “*feel and ... live lives which at that moment are free from all of the things that can negatively impact on them outside, in their previous experience.*” Another leader stressed that they needed to “*get into their [the children’s] hearts have good relationships, good conversations.*” And one practitioner, shared that they went “*above and beyond*” to achieve this.

This leader summarised the impact that she hoped her setting would make on the young children attending her MNS:

If ... we actually see a child in front of us who has real strong characteristics of mental health and resilience. Who has strong characteristics of learning, and has an understanding of how to rally the circumstances around them and the support that they need to actually learn, develop, and be cared for and do well. That's what I feel, that's impact, that's what I look for in every child.

Another leader explained that:

The most important thing is we have children who leave us and they're very confident, tolerant, curious and keen to learn...well developed ... in relation to tolerance and their dispositions and attitudes.

And another that:

The biggest part for us is around independence and resilience. Because with the council estate we're on, there isn't much resilience with the adults, let alone the children. And aspiration is quite low for a lot of children. So they come in very dependent, very needy, so unable to dress themselves, unable to feed themselves, unable to go to the toilet by themselves. Unable to communicate. And without any of that you can't learn.

Rather than conforming to extrinsic assessment priorities, these settings were focused upon the holistic needs of their children as they prepared them for society. Enabling them to feel safe and ready to learn was the first step in a lifelong learning journey.

The significance of Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs*² was mentioned many times in interviews. This socio-cultural construct was positioned as a foundation that needed to be in place before the child could learn. One leader explained the importance of the MNS practitioner providing for the child by first attending to the family:

² Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs is a psychological theory dating from the 1940s that suggests that basic physiological and safety needs of humans must be attended to before humans can be motivated to pay attention to learning in new ways.

It's very much Maslow, they [the child] feels safe and looked after [as a consequence of our work with the wider family]. And, you know, they don't have all those extrinsic kind of worries. So they can just be a child and just play. And they don't have to worry 'am I going to have some tea?' or, you know, 'what's my mum going to be like tonight?' as much as they previously had.

Narrowing the gap

The leader and practitioner focus upon ensuring the well-being of the child did not totally usurp the aim to enable children to learn new things and to raise their academic attainment. Rather, attending to well-being was understood as the groundwork that was needed in order for effective learning to take place. Many leaders spoke of the aim to “*narrow the gap*” and to improve the “*life chances*” for the children in their care. Numerous references were made to the accelerated development that children achieved whilst in the charge of an MNS; just some of these are referenced by leaders below:

We have children who come to us with a very low level of attainment. And generally, children leave us with an average one.

Our children come in with very, very low starting points, but they don't go out with low starting point;, the majority of them go out at age related expectations.

...there is that gap when they come, they come in significantly behind where they should be for their age, or they are behind by different proportions, and then a vast majority of our children go out where they should be. And so it converts from being 13% on track on entry to being 70% on track on exit. And our SEND children make good progress. At least good progress, if not better.

Our children make better than good progress. And our lowest starting children make outstanding progress.

They do come in predominantly below age related expectation. 42% have EYPP funding, so pupil premium funding... which is on the increase. So obviously, when they come in, they are coming from quite challenging backgrounds, from all backgrounds. But when they leave us, they make significant progress. ...90% are at age related expectation or above when they leave...including children with disabilities, 90% of them are where they should be; excluding children with disabilities 96% are where they should be or above.

It would have been easy to insert tables of statistics here, but what came through the data very clearly was that MNS practitioners and leaders did not see the children leaving the nursery at a

certain level of achievement as an end point, but, rather, as the starting point for better life chances. They discussed how it *“continues, you've got better, starting points, you've got [a] better learning disposition”* and how vital it was *“that children from areas like this, high areas of deprivation, get the best chance they can.”*

Special Educational Needs and Disability

As has already been acknowledged in the previous chapter, the commitment of leaders and practitioners was not limited to the children in their own MNS setting; both groups recognised their responsibility to support other ECEC settings. This leader explained that *“Nursery schools [MNSs] have a moral purpose towards giving the best start holistically to very young children, and we feel a responsibility to help the whole early years sector succeed”*. In some cases, this meant offering extensive SENDi support to schools within the local community. Two MNS settings that were visited as part of the data gathering were fortunate enough to have infrastructures in place to provide a range of support, a legacy from a time when the building used to house a children’s centre³. This meant that the practitioners and leaders felt *“able to do that journey with them [the child and their family] ...support them through [additional support] because actually, it's all under one roof.”* Significantly this leader added that *“They feel safe and secure here.”*

The needs of children varied from those with EAL (for example, one leader shared: *“last year, 50% of our children had English as second language”*) to those experiencing severe developmental needs and disabilities. A significant number of the MNSs that we researched prided themselves on welcoming *all* children regardless of their range of SENDi needs. As this leader explained:

...we're very inclusive; they [the children] are used to seeing children with severe disabilities, and they play alongside them and with them. We've got a very mixed community as well. We have something like 18 languages here at the moment. And everybody is welcome. And the children respect that, I think.

Many leaders commented on accepting children that PVI settings had had to turn away due to a lack of expertise and adequate provision. As a public service, they expressed the belief that it was the duty of the MNS to meet children’s entitlements to have their health, welfare and education provision met. They discussed a child’s *“right to get support”* and how they had taken on children who *“have been to three different settings before they come to us, as we take the children that are excluded from other settings.”* One leader made clear that *“children should not be being hived*

³ Children’s Centres are associated with a New Labour initiative often linked to ‘Sure Start’. They housed child care, education, health and family support in one place often within urban areas of deprivation to provide a one-stop hub of public sector support.

off into special schools and hidden away from society. They should be in mainstream schools with everybody else,s” adding “I’m absolutely passionate about it.”

A number of practitioners and leaders discussed how they had, in some cases inadvertently, become positioned over time as a specialist ECEC setting. These leaders explained:

...we often get children who've been turned away from setting after setting. And then, at some point, somebody says, you know, who'll support you? Our nursery school.

We've become, somehow, a little specialist unit, but not, not in any official capacity. With parents, with health visitors. With referral agencies for children with high level autism.

If for example a child has additional needs, if there is a child protection plan, or if the parents need support, the Independent Reviewing Officers will actually suggest the children come here rather than going to the local nursery, because they know they will get that support... We have, at the moment about 120 children within the nursery school, which is a three to four age group. And of those 40 children have additional needs 17 have EHCPs [Education Health Care Plans], which is quite significant. In our time for twos provision, which is 40 places, probably about 60% of the children have additional needs.

One practitioner lamented that her setting had provision for ten children with complex SEN, but despite this some children could not be offered a place. Another leader explained that turning a child away was sometimes the only option, saying: *“I do not ever want to turn a child away, but if I do not have the funds to support the child it is unsafe for me to try.”* Another leader also shared her worry that by taking on too many children with SENDi with limited staffing (due to funding restrictions) the children wouldn't get the help and support that they needed. Funding issues are discussed further in the final results chapter, *‘A Service in Crisis’*.

Expertise

A breadth and depth of practice knowledge was apparent throughout the data. One leader discussed undertaking research within her two MNSs that explored the use of video recordings with parents as a tool to support IHCP reviews. A practitioner explained how their particular specialism in autism enabled *“Children [to] come out of their own worlds and begin to seek social and emotional interaction with practitioners.”* One leader deliberated upon the importance of not overly intervening in the day-to-day learning activities of the IHCP children so that they still had opportunities to build relationships with their peers through finding ways to communicate. She explicated: *“we deliberately work it on a carousel. So that when they do transition to a school,*

they're not dependent on one particular adult. They just get scooped up. And all the staff know their needs."

One practitioner expounded the view that the level of expertise of the staff was directly related to the enhanced training that they had received, their current focus being "*physical and sensory development*". The importance of ongoing and continuing professional development was evident in the survey data as an integral dynamic of improving practice. The importance of a learning culture for all practitioners was touched upon in the first findings chapter, '*Accountability, Identity and Impact*'. Enthusiasm for learning was also evident in the comments made by this leader concerning the way practitioners had developed their knowledge of how to interact with a blind child:

...we had a little boy who was blind, so we all learned body signing. So instead of Makaton which is visual, like for 'more' he would bang his shoulder, and 'finished' he would bang on the table. And that's kind of as far as we've got. And then things like his key person would have a certain perfume on her scarf that she wouldn't change, so that he could recognise her when he came in. We learned so much from him.

Supporting partner schools - despite funding limitations

As has already been touched upon, a significant amount of the work that practitioners described, particularly in developing IHCPs for children, was actually carried out at a financial loss to the MNS setting. They nonetheless regarded it as necessary for the children if they were to make progress with their learning, development and social needs. One practitioner shared how her MNS prided itself on "*Early identification and then support for children and families who otherwise may not have been identified until primary school.*" In addition, these leaders explained:

We have 12 children going for the IHCP. So there with the year ahead we are working with our Childhood Development Centre, to help them [the children] now so they can actually get to school with an EHC plan, and are ready to go.

We get paid retrospectively for children with complex SEND. We have to apply for funding and then a decision gets taken about whether this warrants any extra money for us to cope with the child's needs. If agreed, the funding is not backdated. It means that we are always every hopeful of some money but that we have to cope with very little on a day-to-day basis.

A delay in receiving funding was not the only problem described by leaders as they endeavoured to ensure that children were able to access their educational entitlement. There were also other hurdles with the development of the IHCPs. Administrative changes meant that in developing the plans the workload increased for the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) responsible for drawing up IHCPs. This leader explained:

My idea was to do it [the IHCP] ready for September. When they do move into nursery, they'll move to a 1: 13 ratio and then they'll have it ready. Instead I have to apply for different stream of funding that's only open at the moment to nursery schools, which is called the 'top up'. But that only lasts a year, so I'll apply for that, I'll get that because their level of need is that high. The little girl we've just seen, for example, she's only just learned to walk. She's epileptic. She has to be watched, she's one to one all the time. We've had to call the ambulance for her three times already this year. So it is quite a high level. Now that one [funding application] got bounced back. Because, I have to wait until the nursery year, to see whether she'll need it. I don't need a crystal ball to see whether or not she'll need it!

Despite the work created by apparently uncompromising systems, leaders still ensured that the task of developing EHCPs was undertaken, because, as one leader explained, the support was the child's "legal right" and a responsibility of MNS professionals not to be avoided. Additionally, support for SENDi that had, historically, been forthcoming from the LA, was reducing at a rapid rate. This leader explained that: "Our support from the SEN teaching team is reduced. I think when I first started it was nine days per year we would get. And this year it's been three hours." Those we encountered within the research felt that the MNS was providing children with all of the support that they could, despite the barriers that were encountered. As this leader asserted:

...what's the best for this child and family here? What's the best we can do with the resources? With the people we've got? What's the very, very best we can do? You know, it won't be 100%. But what's the very, very best we can do. And I think we've all done that. We've all done that.

The Maintained Nursery School and the Family

It wasn't just giving that child a nursery place, it never can be ...it's that that five minutes in the morning, that smile on the door, that when that mom's in a ratty mood, or the dad, and I say 'oooh, he's been ever so good today, he's done this this and this.' Sometimes I make it up, because I can see the change. Because everyone loves their kid, really. Really. To hear something positive...And we can, it's easy to say something positive, isn't it?

Leader

And we've had parents turn up with carrier bags full of stuff, just fled their husband. And they ask: Can you help me?

Leader

Probably all the maintained nursery heads will say the same. I'm the SENCO, I'm the family support worker, I'm the one in car on the Sunday night delivering a cot.

Leader

A noteworthy dimension of many interviews conducted with leaders was the attention they drew to the nurture and support provided by MNSs to the families of the children. This was regarded as an integral dimension of quality ECEC provision. Interviewees detailed everything from small words of encouragement offered to parents over a cup of tea when delivering and collecting children, to the finding of money for a crisis situation, or providing safe accommodation for a mother and her children for the night. Once more, reference to Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* was a key justification of many leaders for an approach premised on the belief that children cannot learn if their basic needs of food, shelter and care are neglected. One leader shared: *"Some of our kids, one of the first things I say is 'where did you sleep last night?' Most of our fundraising goes on feeding our kids".*

Many leaders suggested that they and their practitioners work on the principle that *"it's hard to take children and families apart...it is about working as a partnership."* They recognise that the child and the family come as 'a whole' and to best support the care and education of the child, support and encouragement needs to extend to the wider family, too; some of whom were really struggling. One leader explained that she believed a child's stable environment needed to begin in the home; so if a parent was struggling to provide this, then the MNS would do their utmost to support the family to achieve this. A practitioner explained that:

We pride ourselves on our positive parent partnerships at our setting. This has led to parents feeling they can share their worries and concerns, leading to a variety of early interventions and sign posting to a wide range of advice and support. All leading to alleviation of worry and stress which would otherwise have a detrimental effect on our children.

Many leaders and practitioners in this study felt that the role of the MNS in supporting “often vulnerable children and families” is insufficiently recognised and commended. But a wealth of data collected through this research suggests that the support that they provide to families is extensive, and a dimension of their everyday quality provision. As this leader explained:

Throughout the time that they're with us. We see some families go through some really terrible times. And you know, to watch that family, and not to say we had a massive impact on that. But we were there along the way. And it might have just been a smile in the morning or a hug in the afternoon. A 'Come on, let's go and get a cup of tea'. Let's go. What can I do? I'll put you in touch with the service, we can maybe do that, it's huge.

One practitioner added her perspective on the key role that the MNS plays for many families: “Parents share their worries and concerns with us and we sign-post them to a wide range of advice and support. Having a place to come to is a life-line for our parents”.

Dwindling support in LA family services

The demise of the Children Centre model has been catastrophic for families and outcomes. MNS should be properly funded to allow them to fulfil this role. Leader

Why does the MNS find itself taking on a family support role? From our data, it seems that this is often linked to the demise of children’s centres over the last ten years. Three of the MNSs visited during this research had taken over the physical infrastructure and building of a prior children’s centre. Two of the larger MNSs continued to run a number of the family support services previously offered by the centres. But even when MNSs were in a small building adjoining a school, this did not seem to limit the support that they were prepared to offer parents, or the sense of responsibility that they felt towards families in their community. This leader explained how she understood the reduction in opportunities and support for families in her local area:

Because everything else disappeared in this area. There aren't any moms and toddlers' groups. Because nobody wants to run them, particularly because of all the things that come with it. I think. There aren't any weaning support. Health visitors don't hold groups for parents so that they can go and learn about weaning, or baby massage or baby ballet. ... Nobody wants to give those groups a room, because no one's got space, we used to, now we can't.

In response to the needs of families a number of MNSs have taken it upon themselves to ‘upskill’ their staff in order to offer families some of the support that they would have received from a children’s centre. One leader explained: “the needs of the families are so huge”. The same leader

went on to describe how the closure of children's centres caused the MNS to go through a steep learning curve, she explained: *"I think that we learned an enormous amount through that process. And with this insight we could do things better, for the families on the ground."* A number of practitioners mentioned giving parents support with the financial side of ECEC provision, so that they would know *"whether they are eligible for further help/whether they could access other payment options (such as tax free childcare)"* so that they *"do not miss the deadline to reconfirm their eligibility."* This may seem an inappropriate burden for practitioners to take on, but one leader explained that it *"keeps them [the parents] in work and provides a security for their children"*.

The leader below summed up what she perceived to be the changes in the responsibilities of the MNS, since wider LA support reduced:

We are essentially doing the family support, now. We are leading on early help plans, we are supporting parents... The stuff that I would have passed over to a family support worker, because it's just out of our realms ... we are now having to learn about housing, anything. I've just printed off a load of documents for court for a parent who's trying to get sole legal custody...So, yeah, you are doing stuff, going 'oh, I don't know about that, but I'll Google it and try and find out.'

Identifying family needs

A key role of the MNS has become identifying the needs of families as a dimension of the child's education and care. Below, the comments made by a leader encapsulate the way that many MNS leaders and practitioners construct the needs of the family and the family as inter-connected:

So they come in, and because we've got the skill and the expertise, they can say, right, well, actually, you know, within a week or two of having them, they need help with their speech and language, we know that they need help with their personal and social development... It could be that they need help with their emotions. And then it could be that, oh, goodness me that Mommy needs a bit of help as well.

In many cases the practitioners reported that the parents primarily needed someone to listen to them. One leader commented that many were *"very socially isolated"*. Therefore, being available to listen and providing a *"safe and enabling environment"*, was something that was mentioned many times, as these examples demonstrate:

Parents need to know that if they come here to ask for support, actually, they will be listened to. And it doesn't matter if it's a busy day or not a busy day, you never don't respond, you never don't hear.

And the parents that just might need to talk to someone, we are always there for them. It's an open-door policy.

Staff including myself are always available to talk to parents.

I was talking to a Mommy last week; there was something going on between her and her ex-partner. And we took time out to have her in the office and have a chat to her and see if there were things that we could do to help support her.

...they just want someone that will listen to them; that will take them seriously, rather than just being fobbed off.

One leader explained that being available to parents wasn't a case of just "being nice" but was part of constructing a "wider family" where "we have happy children and happy families" acknowledging the interdependence of the two.

Treading softly

Methods of developing relationships with parents was a topic mentioned many times. In some cases this was through getting to know the child, creating a bond that enabled parents to "start to open up and talk to you about things that they wouldn't necessarily [have] done." In other cases, settings had to act more proactively to break down barriers and form relationships with the child's family. This leader explained the approach she took:

I won't say we have an open door ... I will go out there, do you see what I mean? And if somebody isn't coming in, I will go out into the car park.... So for example, at the moment we've got an enormous world map on the wall in reception. And, but we're not, we're not saying that has to be a conversation about anything in particular, it's just there. But it's a really good opener for me, because so many people are interested in the world map. But also, it enables me to say to somebody. Well is important to you? Do you have family there? Where have you been on holiday? Let's find it. And it opens up so many other conversations and it's just trying to get all of the openers, for engagement. Because as soon as there's that communication and engagement, actually it doesn't matter that you've got - half of our children have languages that the staff don't speak. But we can still engage really well together because we've got a common purpose. So I think it is just actively seeking to be engaged with people and that's something that people respond to. If they feel that they're valued and that you're not a place that is judging them. But you're a place that is there to support their children and to join them in supporting their children. You get respect from most folks that way.

Many leaders commented on the need for them to show consistency and reliability to the parents that they worked with. In some cases, trust was built-up over a long period of time and was reliant, to some extent, on how long practitioners and leaders had been at the setting. Some practitioners would remain in one MNS long enough to see generations of families through the nursery. This leader explained:

Some of these families are bringing their third or fourth child and they're still being able to see the same teachers within the space. And they may have been gone for three or four years, they may be bringing a grandchild back, but for them to come in and see that we're still here. And we're still doing that that gives them the security and the trust in us to be able to bond.

Leaders discussed the importance of developing authentic connections with parents built upon their own trust and dependability. One practitioner elucidated: *"We have open, supportive, kindly and informative dialogue with parents who trust us"*, and how the growth of this trust had come about within the community was explained by this leader: *"And after we sort of helped out a couple of the parents, the parents became a little bit more confident, to kind of confide in us...And then the word gets around, then...'nursery'll help, why don't you ask nursery'."*

The point was also made by another interviewee that once established a positive relationship could not ever be taken for granted, but needed to be fastidiously conserved. This leader observed:

I think it's about your reliability. Yeah, I think you have to be utterly reliable to exactly what you're going to do, and you always do it consistently. And you operate together within the team, so that you don't get one response from one person and a different response from somebody else. ... You can manage it in different ways, if it's not the best time to, you know you haven't got the staffing to be able to sit with somebody, you manage that in another way, but parents have to be able to rely, because if you, if you get it wrong, once, actually, you've blown it. You know what I mean? You have to be utterly consistent.

Another leader remarked that being consistent with parents didn't mean that they always had to be agreed with, but that time to talk and to explain and to show fairness was crucial.

Relationships had to be built on transparency and authenticity. She added:

I mean, don't get me wrong. We get shouted at we get sworn at. We are just real with them. I say to them, come on, you're obviously very angry. But I don't think we need to be like this. Come on, let's calm down and sort it out.

Structured engagement

As well as initiating and sustaining incidental relationships with parents, all of the MNSs in the study took a structured approach to engaging with families. One practitioner explained that her MNS had “*ongoing, appropriate support for children and their families*”. She went on to make clear that, although they felt that the MNS was there to support the parents, it also had specific expectations of them too. The needs of the child always remained a priority:

I think for the families, we are a predictable, helpful, supportive and non-judgmental community. We actively demonstrate and model the kind of non-negotiable of holding the needs of children in mind. Yes, that is the thing that we will not negotiate on.

Various approaches were taken to involving parents. In some cases that meant expecting them to come in to work with the children for a small amount of time:

There's an awful lot of parent engagement, because for us, they take the place based on the fact that it's 15 hours of free funding for their two-year olds. But one hour back comes back each week for us to work together. And that's how we wanted to work with those vulnerable families.

But in other cases, this actually meant keeping parents at arm's length at particular times. This decision depended upon judgements made about the very precise needs of the children within a particular community. The leader (below) outlined the approach taken within her particular MNS, from first establishing space between the parent and the child, to fully integrating them to take a role within the child's educational development:

And so when they start, we don't do any kind of 'parents coming in'. We say, you know, we've done all of this, because it works for our children. Now, you've just got to let them be. And so we kind of, not push the parents away, but at the very start, we kind of say, you know, let your child settle without you. And it works really well, for our children. It's not how I'd do it... in other areas. But then then after that, we start inviting them in for workshops. So our first workshop is how to make playdough and the benefits of playdough. But what this actually is, is, before you leave, we're going to put a story on the Tapestry⁴ that you write, so they bring along their devices. And we help them put their first. I mean, for some of them, it's not their first you know, they're quite adept. But for those who haven't quite got to grips with Tapestry, we sit alongside them and do it. And so, that gets quite good engagement after that point.

⁴ 'Tapestry' is an online journal that enables practitioners and families to share and record, monitor and celebrate children's learning and achievements whilst in their ECEC setting

In some cases, the time the MNS requested from the parent was not to directly support the child's education, but rather to develop the skills of the parent (this is a topic returned to at the end of this chapter). For example, the leader who requested "one hour back" from parents in receipt of 15 hours of nursery provision, explained that this time was used as a valuable training asset with the parents. This was premised upon the idea that the benefit to the parent would transfer as a benefit to the education and welfare of the child.

Prevention rather than cure

One thing that leaders felt that the MNS was well-placed to do was to notice when there seemed to be problems within the family that would impinge on the child. As one leader commented, she could often see when "the wheels are getting wobbly." She mused how, as a consequence of working hard to build strong relationships with the parents, her MNS was in a position to offer support for the family before things deteriorated such that they might impact severely on the child. Similarly, another leader explained:

...we're a prevention, rather than a cure. I mean, we have these very hard cases, child protection cases and the kids got taken off them, and they need to. But just before that, is that bit where you're coming up to the cliff, and you haven't quite jumped off? Yeah, because of the relationships, you can stop that jumping off the cliff. And I think it's, it's not something you can quantify, because you can't say, how many of these people would have been on a child protection plan if we hadn't been here. So I don't even want to say but it's very true that it's what you're actually going to lose... is very difficult to quantify, for maintained nursery schools.

The quote above demonstrates the ways in which leaders of an MNS often make judgements about how to act that are very difficult to quantify or record in terms of positive impact upon the child and the family concerned. The same leader went on to suggest that this substantial aspect of their role is one that often goes unrecognised. She elucidated "... I can't say that if we hadn't intervened there, she'd [the mother of a child] have been battered to death, killed. It's the truth ... it didn't happen. We can't prove... we stopped it."

Another leader recounted a situation in which the MNS was instrumental in providing an emergency placement for a child, spurred largely by the wellbeing of the family as a whole. The leader suggested that without the MNS providing a place at short notice for the child, the mum may have lost her job; and that this could have been the "one thing that would just cascade the [family's] tower of cards". With their awareness of the broader picture, which included two siblings with specific needs and the child in need of a place having experienced a string of

exclusions, the MNS placement provided the parent with the means to be able to cope with her other children and continue to function as a family unit. The leader added with some satisfaction that the child, excluded from several other settings, was *“here at the moment ... And he’s doing fine.”*

Vulnerable parents with varying needs

Because many MNSs are situated in urban and peri-urban areas of deprivation the needs of the families encountered are sometimes extreme. Often there are children with substantial behaviour issues who have been rejected by other PVI settings. As this leader explains: *“And then they turn up at this door. And I know that the family has been treated really badly. You just know. Because they are waiting for the next problem.”* But sometimes there are more extreme, and challenging child protection cases. Reference to the prevalence of these varied depending on the interviewee. One leader mused how much easier it would be for her MNS to have some family support available that was more formalised by the LA and properly funded, as she commented: *“I’d love to be able to sort of say to parents ‘shall we just do a little bit... have somebody come out?’”* One leader explained how her MNS offered 30 hours of education and care to children on the safeguarding register who remained at home. The MNS bore the cost of this as their way of supporting the child at risk within the family. References to finding ways to support a child from a high-risk family were not unusual in the interviews conducted. As another leader explained: *“we’ve got that little lad we were looking at in tiny nursery ... Terrible, terrible, sad child protection. But actually, for him to be here every day is a present to him and his family.”*

Poverty was an unforeseen issue that unmistakably emerged throughout the data.

Homelessness, in particular, was mentioned a number of times. There were recounts of nursery leaders sitting with parents at the local housing office or paying out themselves for safe accommodation for a family for the night. As this leader explained:

If somebody is homeless, due to domestic violence, sometimes due to other issues. Sometimes we’ve had to go sit with them, at the housing office. Which, I mean, it’s a stretch to be honest, on resources. But you can’t not, in all good conscience. There was one particular family, initially it was me, and then obviously, we’ve taken it from a safeguarding budget, we’ve actually paid for them to stay somewhere, for the night. Because social housing couldn’t offer them anything, all the refuges were full, all the charities were full. Housing is quite a biggie for us. Our priority is that we want the children to have somewhere safe to go, and to live. And actually, you know, in a hostel,

with drug addicts, probably isn't the safest place for them to go... We have parents turn up on our doors with their bags packed...

Safe housing and the difficulty of providing sufficient food for some families was mentioned, with one leader noting that food banks were “*massively on the rise*” and that her MNS had assisted families through the complicated process of accessing them. As one practitioner explained, they were “*supporting families to engage with services to protect and support the child in difficult circumstances.*”

Another area of concern highlighted by some leaders was parent mental health, which was described as a “*huge*” issue within one LA. This leader defined her role as such: “*sometimes it's supporting parents to do with their children. But sometimes, it's the parents who we will need to refer to ...mental health services, to signpost them in the right direction. We'll print off bus routes for them.*” Another leader put the “*massive*” problems that they were encountering with mental health down to the disappearance of a range of support services, including those directly linked to mental health, but also to health visiting and receiving postnatal support. She went on to explain:

...We've got an awful lot more moms with more significant mental health issues. It's not just postnatal depression, it's quite severe postnatal depression that no one's picked up...We are getting the children showing the symptoms, but you sometimes think, the actual history of that is because of the attachment disorder, early neglect and things like that...

Parent development

Throughout the surveys and interviews numerous references were made to providing training opportunities for parents. Although training was frequently used to broaden the parents' understanding of child development and to enable them to better support their child's learning, there was also a concern to enable the parent to acquire the skills to earn more money in order to support the long-term needs of the child more effectively. One survey referred to MNSs as the “*jewel in the social mobility crown*” in aiming to try to be a part of ‘narrowing the gap’ for both parents and children. With social mobility in mind, leaders made the following comments:

We have a large number of local staff, many of whom have come as teenage parents and undertaken training and ultimately degrees with us.

Well, a lot of our staff, 90% of them, were moms here. And some of them were struggling moms. And look at them now, they are working, they are buying their own houses.

...one of the moms was the crèche worker that supported the person that ran that in there. And she then moved through, she got all the qualifications. And she moved through and worked in the nursery...she was very good and she knew the community really well. The children loved her and she loved the kids.

Another leader made reference to the way that she works closely with the parents of the children within her MNS to not only provide them with qualifications that will enable them to work, but also make them situated to provide for their own children's education and welfare:

A lot of our parents, you know, left school without qualifications, haven't done anything. We get them in, if they show willing, or even if they don't, I kind of twist their arm up the back [laughing] to volunteer with us. And then when they volunteer, if they show an aptitude or, again a willingness... we've got a really good training company that works with us. And they start them on level two training. So they train with us, then we often put them on a casual contract, meaning that, you know, if we are struggling for staff or if we've got a child that needs some additional support, we've got somebody we can call in. So they do that. And then if we get any job opportunities come up, we advertise them internally. And so the majority of the staff we have now, have come through that route.

So not only are many MNSs focused on the educational outcomes and welfare of the children in their charge, but they are actively supporting and providing for the wider welfare of the family. As one leader summarised: *"The most important thing is that we are here for the families as well as the children. And I think as educators, we see ourselves at the heart of the community, educating the families, as well as the children."*

The Maintained Nursery School and the Wider Community

Some of the staff have been here for like, nearly 30 years... I mean, parents come through now. And the staff taught the parents when they were here. So it's quite lovely.

Practitioner

This kind of community, either they're either with you or they're not. And, you know, we believe that our children are better helped if they are with us. So we're very hands on and that's where the communication works. You know, my office I share with four other people, it's completely central to the nursery, and the parents can access me at any time, or the deputy. And they know that.

Leader

Children at the heart

There were many versions of similar research interactions with leaders where they explained their role as key to wider community relations, beyond the needs of individual children and families but, nonetheless, “*holding the children in mind*” and “*doing the right thing by children*”. Our data suggested that many saw the MNS as historically integral to the community it served, as one leader explained: “*if you're here for a long time, like this school has been, you know, so you've done that generation after generation, actually you start to get a community that gets it. In terms of children.*” Another leader suggested that the wider community start to ‘*get it*’ (the culture of the setting) through generations of families experiencing the values of the MNS.

One leader gave a concrete example of the way in which her MNS sustains a community sense over time:

We are in an area of high deprivation... The children have a learning journey, which is a place where any of the staff can contribute but parents contribute, too. So items which are very often ... photographic images that demonstrate significant points of learning for that child. And it's an ongoing journal for the time that this child is here, and it belongs to the child. ... We had one got lost. And it was brought in by somebody in the community. Saying 'I think this is really important to a child'. Now to find that in an inner-city area is astonishing. And they'd opened it, seen that it was the nursery school, because we've put that in the front, and they went to the trouble of bringing it back in. That, to me, that just says so much about the impact on the wider community.

Establishing values

What does 'holding the children in mind' mean as part of a wider community fabric? One leader explained that it was about "social cohesion", that what they did as a MNS was actually a part of the community's "social construction". And the way that happened was through nurturing a set of values that were put into practice "every day". This leader explained more precisely what the values of her setting were, and why they were so important:

You know there's a lot of conflict, it's an inner-city area so obviously, there's levels of crime and ... there's conflict between people, but it's very rare that that spills over once people have come through the threshold to the nursery school. Because they know that actually the values of the place are that each person is recognised and valued and that respectful behaviour is that which is required for our youngest children; that's what we're trying to set as the norm.

The idea presented above suggests the MNS as a necessary place of calm, a safe haven at the heart of a sometimes tumultuous community. This resonates with a leader's comment (mentioned earlier in this report but worth repeating here) that demonstrates a strength of feeling about the role of the MNS as part of the fabric of a community:

So, you know, that becomes very exciting the kind foundation that that gives us as a place of safety and the reputation. When families are experiencing things they come back here, even when their children have left because they think 'I know I'll be listened to'. I know somebody will help me here.

Fostering wider relationships

The view of the MNS outlined above, as a safe haven based upon firm values, relates directly to its role for children and families but this is just one of the obligations that the MNS sustains within their community. Other commitments that leaders referred to during interviews included: supporting EY student practitioners sharing "that joy of children" as they gained their qualifications, working with a range of other schools and working within multi-disciplinary groups of professionals. Comments made suggest that MNS practitioners believe that the values that they embody are tangible and will influence the other professionals that they are encounter. This leader explained:

And with the children with complex needs, and any of the meetings... you've got a whole range of disciplines as well as the family. You're actually... saying something about the values that you hold in the school and people are seeing the impact ... on the children. So I think all of those things actually really do rub off.

Another leader discussed the work that her MNS undertook with charitable and other caring organisations in order to give that *“kind of moral purpose to our families.”* And the same leader discussed an intergenerational project that they undertook with a local residential home once a week. She felt that as a consequence:

...their practice [that of the residential care workers] is improved, because we've worked with them. So now they do sensory shaving foam and sensory playdough with the residents, and that's great for arthritic fingers, play dough. And, of course, having the children there gives them that purpose ... So that's lovely and that's a big impact on their practice.

This suggests that not only is the practice and expertise of the MNS impacting upon fellow EY practitioners, but also upon care workers and professionals in other areas. A practitioner commented further upon the relationship the retirement centre, suggesting that it had *“brought joy and pleasure to the lives of the residents and to the children.”* But this ‘joy’ was not all, for she also observed an impact upon children’s communication skills, explaining that in this unfamiliar situation *“The children are very effective at finding ways to communicate”*. It would seem that community initiatives of this kind are beneficial on multiple levels.

One further aspect of community relations worth a mention here, and taken up again in the final chapter, is the way in which some MNSs have developed relationships with local businesses in order to innovate with a view to longer-term fiscal stability through *“garner[ing] useful contacts”* as part of having to *“spend time and energy to ensure [they] find ways to survive.”*

A lasting relationship

What was apparent from so many interviews was that relationships with the community, once forged, endured, often for *“generations of families”*. One leader spoke about children that had been through the nursery coming to visit for *“years and years after”* and being made to always feel welcome. The same leader explained that to her, this was real ‘impact’ (although hard to quantify):

As soon as you have a training day somebody will bring their five older siblings. We are that friendly, you know, to say ‘come in’. So you will actually get to talk to somebody who's in a secondary school, and he remembers being at the nursery. And because of the longevity of people working, you know this is a sector where people tend to, because it relies on our, our passion and you know if it is the best job in the world. It really is. It's one of the hardest, I think, but it's a wonderful, wonderful job...we have staff who remember what the passions of the children were and actually they come back and say, I remember,

working with pipes and doing this, that and the other, and then they'll tell us what they're doing now, and you can see those strands of learning that are still evident in the interest and the learning of children who are much, much older. But it's all subjective stuff, isn't it? It's really difficult to quantify, but for me it's evident every day.

The Maintained Nursery School in Crisis

What is the threat that those leading the MNS identify?

Without exception, all leaders and practitioners who took part in interviews and focus groups identified their extreme concerns about the lack of certainty related to current and future funding of the MNS after 2019-20, when the current fiscal government support stream ceases. *“On the basic nursery funding rates it [the MNS] will not be sustainable. So, we are dependent upon the outcome of the autumn spending review. I think I'd say that very, very clearly”*, explained one leader.

In particular, interviewees expressed their worry and frustration about the lack of clarity concerning a vision for the remit and purpose of the MNS, within a public service model of state educational provision. This was expressed by one leader this way: *“there has to be a clear message about our distinctive role... [the government] have got to clarify what they want the role of the MNS to be. They need to really decide what the value of the MNS is”*.

A Role Now and in the Future?

On multiple occasions interviewees addressed the importance of research as highlighting the power and potential of the MNS. As one leader explained: *“There's so much out there on the correlation between high quality, early experience and later life chances”*. This was expressed by another as more broadly appreciated within the wider schooling system, especially in relation to the value of consistent good quality education and care for the youngest members of society born into challenging community and family circumstances. One MNS leader shared:

Secondary schools have said that what we are doing is really important. They want us to have the money and put the interventions in here because they see that it will help them in the long run. They recognise that they will have to put fewer things in place for the children and families as the children move through if we do it at this stage.

Another leader expressed her worry about the future in terms of the loss of the distinctive contribution of the MNS service that supports quality care and education:

The thing that really concerns me is that once MNSs have gone, that level of expertise and social service will also. It seems that there's a sort of double quality to the MNS, which is [about] constantly evolving, high level pedagogy and providing areas of expertise, like special needs, and so on. But also support for the family. Both of those things you don't find so much in PVI's or in other care facilities. There's very specific expertise that's going to go to waste...

Many interviewees discussed their role as leaders within the MNS sector as being about a public service of support and prevention for those who might otherwise have nowhere else to turn within a shrinking welfare state. In talking of this, a number suggested this role was hard to quantify in terms of a straight-forward cost-benefit analysis, as has already been mentioned in terms of preventing individuals from “*jumping off the cliff*” into total family dysfunction.

Leaders drew attention to the way quality provision is inspected within the ECEC sector by applying different Ofsted frameworks to the MNS and the PVI sector. This means that the MNS is judged as a school (similarly to statutory state 5-18 schools). One leader explained:

The difference is that we're on a par with a primary school in terms of how we are inspected. And, and that is different [to a PVI], although they [Ofsted] say it's the same. It's not, it's different to a day care setting. So that, you know, if the public are aware of that, then they're more likely to be interested in sending their children to us... and actually that would support with the funding as well...

Another head expressed her frustration about the assumptions of the role of the MNS and the way in which this played against the sector in terms of funding to ensure ongoing quality:

I feel, as I'm sure everybody feels, that because of our non-statutory nature, we [as an MNS] are dismissed. We have the same running costs and overheads as a school. We pay on teachers' pay scale and meet teachers paying conditions. We have highly qualified, highly experienced teachers, teaching assistants and professionals, office managers, you know, admin stuff. And we have all those overheads like any other school in the primary sector or secondary sector, but yet we're funded in line with a childminder.

A Sense of Crisis Deepens

Interviewees felt that it was entirely legitimate that they should be rigorously held to account for the service delivery of the MNS. They discussed the fact that close scrutiny concerning quality, efficiency and value for money was nothing new and something they accepted, saying “*we have been doing this year on year on year*”. However, there was extreme frustration concerning the level of constant scrutiny involved in justifying their funding with “*endless boxes to tick and hoops to jump through*”, combined with new demands of budgeting that were of an amplitude not previously experienced. This leader shared:

We need the money. You know, we are thinking it, at the moment, in everything we do. How can we make this more efficient? If somebody is going on maternity leave, how can we stretch ourselves so that we don't have to cover this, so that we see this as an

opportunity? How can we do things differently so that we see things as an opportunity to get better, whilst also saving?

Another leader, referring to the constant concern of saving money, wondered whether the MNS sector had, paradoxically, become almost too good at “*making do*” and carrying on in challenging circumstances for too long. They said: “*I think, we are victims of our own way of working... that we've just always got on with it and done it*”. Others illustrated ways they tried to keep going, harkening back to times when the remit of the role of the MNS was part of a wider support for vulnerable families working with those with a wide-range of recognised community responsibilities. This leader mused that “*at one point we had a social worker, we had four outreach workers, and four family support workers*”; yet, despite losing this, and the status of being attached to a Children’s Centre, they somehow carried on and maintained a public service that was “*pretty consistent*” for the community they served. One leader shared that despite the ongoing concern over future funding that they’d kept going, “*by hook or by crook because you do*”.

Without exception all leaders interviewed discussed the lack of sustainability of what they regarded as the precarious and tenuous current system of funding the MNS and the toll that this placed on those trying to plan for a future of acute uncertainty. This leader explained: “*It's hard, because you're always making decisions and actually not knowing whether it's a terrible decision that's going to put you in a massive deficit position*”. Others referred to their unease that by “*rattling cages*” and making “*a noise with the LA*” they were forcing the LA “*to rob Peter to pay Paul*” given that LAs themselves were so overstretched in meeting their responsibilities to both the young and the old in need. Some pointed out their concerns about rising costs, as their funding became increasingly precarious; this included the cost of insuring and maintaining buildings and paying for service level agreements with those whose services they now had to buy in. And unfortunately, this was not an option as, as this leader explained, “*we need these people with their skills in areas of deprivation*”.

Another leader pointed out that the support for SEND from the LA teaching team had reduced drastically over a similar time-frame with “*nine days support*” reducing to “*just three hours*” (as has already been mentioned) and that to receive any more would be at significant cost. One leader highlighted the vagaries of having to pay out for children they identified with acute special needs in advance, especially those with IHCPs, without any guarantee of getting the money back from the LA in the future. She said “*it has been really bad. I think, on average, I probably write nine -ten IHCPs a year. And I've had six turned down [this year] and I will have to apply through a*

different funding stream...” As has already been mentioned, leaders jump through these hoops because they believe that it is the child’s “*legal right to have that EHCP*” and will do what they believe to be morally correct, even at ongoing expense to themselves.

‘Making Do’

Some interviewees talked pragmatically about having to make decisions that they found disconcerting and stressful. These concerned how they might continue with some sort of pre-school education service in the near, and possibly longer-term, future to keep within a manageable fiscal structure that they and their governors could live with, and which the LA would support. One leader told us that her LA had suggested that she just had to offer a “*bronze service’...we just need to keep the doors open and come up with some theoretical plan*”. However, she added that “*it won’t be me doing that*” because she was not prepared to downgrade staff and restructure. She explained that hers were “*highly trained and very, very effective early years practitioners*” and so she was not prepared to offer a second-rate service. A different leader posed this rhetorical question to us:

So, when is the MNS not a school? My next cut would be to cut the only other qualified teacher when she leaves. Do I replace that teacher with an unqualified teacher? And the danger is once you dilute that, then that is dangerous.

Discussions about ‘making cuts’ littered all discussions with leaders. There was the continual making and reviewing of plans to enable settings to continue functioning. This is a typical example of the logic used to continue to protect the child’s welfare where change is needed:

My priority is the children's learning and the impact that has and that's why I've restructured. I've got rid of dinner ladies because that was a saving that we could make and not have an impact on the children and their overall experience. But it still doesn't save enough...

Some leaders talked about the difficult decision of ring-fencing their 3-year old provision above and beyond all other MNS services in the midst of cuts. Many referenced the “*impossibility*” of planning a secure future for their children when they just don’t know what this holds:

We are currently trying to set our budget for the next 3 years. It's a challenging issue at our governors meetings. All our local councillors and our MP [member of parliament] tell us that we do a wonderful job for the community but they also say that we are expensive. It's just so frustrating trying to marry this up with our core day-to-day concern of providing education for children. But we do – somehow...

A Service not a Business

Relationships, connections and ways of working with those in local and national government were recurring themes for many of those interviewed. Conversations related to both the changing nature of the ECEC sector, and to government systems for managing budgets and delineating the role of ECEC education providers (whether as MNSs or PVI settings) in and of themselves and in relation to other services. Many interviewees referred to the importance to them of being recognised as “*providing a service*”. Several head teachers suggested that through working hard with LAs they had built good relationships and found LAs appreciative of the high quality of service they provided, particularly after achieving ‘Outstanding’ status during inspections. This, they explained, had given the LA a “*new found respect for the work we do*”. And that respect was mutual, especially when MNSs felt that their work was being appreciated and valued. This leader explained:

The Education School Improvement Lead in our local area recognises the importance of our remit and the necessity of championing the quality of the work undertaken by the MNS and the impact that we have in distinctive ways.

And that ‘impact’ extended to working with PVIs, which MNSs willingly support in order to do what is “*best for the community*”.

Another head expressed how the sector crisis had brought the LA to her, to draw on her expertise and support. She explained how she was currently working for the LA for a day a week in order to bring money back. The consultancy work was just another way of “*finding ways to survive*” and continue a service for the children in her MNS.

Many comments made through the survey, by both practitioners and leaders regarding the continual tightening of funding, are found in the appendices, but this leader summed up the gravity of the situation as she saw it in the following way:

MNSs had efficiencies to make and some amazing partnerships and innovative and creative working relationships have developed from the current financial constraints, but there is literally no more slack left and we are at breaking point. Not understanding how MNSs provide social insurance, not understanding the schism between the maintained sector and the PVI sector, not defining our real goals and opening up to the most promising avenues to realise these goals and not understanding the impact of the continued loss of Nursery schools from a strategic national, local and then funnelling down to community level, will be detrimental environmentally, structurally, politically,

culturally, pedagogically and definitely from an economic perspective. The debate around MNSs should not be treated lightly.

Discussion

MNS Identity

Both the literature and the data from the findings chapters demonstrate that the position and role of the MNS within the wider ECEC terrain is both complex and challenging. The MNS straddles education and care the individual child and the family within the community and is a threatened element of a welfare state with a public service responsibility within a broader market economy (McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012). In many respects the MNS can be typified as the 'forgotten' or 'overlooked' ECEC provider within the broader sector that encompasses PVI's also. And yet the MNS is also heavily scrutinised both by Ofsted (as though it were a statutory school) and by those within LA roles forced to justify expenditure and look to make fiscal savings. If the position and role of the MNS appears complex to those professionals who are familiar with ECEC provision, how much more baffling must its remit seem to those trying to navigate the field of ECEC as parents? As one leader explained, the MNS is legally constituted as a school, but without any of the funding or the respect of those within primary education. Although the role and position of the MNS is somewhat murky, what is overwhelmingly clear is just how adeptly MNS leaders and practitioners negotiate and deliver conflicting and demanding expectations to support young children's learning and care needs within the context of the family and community.

All of the MNSs involved in this research identified themselves as providing a particular service for "those children most at risk of underachievement" in line with the literature (Nutbrown, 2012; Early Education, 2012; Bertram and Pascal, 2019). And although the care of these children and their families was a clearly recognised priority, as shall be discussed shortly, this was not at the cost of a focus on the quality of learning and educational achievements, where "the performance of MNS is generally regarded as excellent" (Paull and Popov, 2019, p.26). As has been discussed, the learning outcomes of the children within the MNSs that made up this research sample were frequently referenced, but they were almost taken for granted by our participants. This was not perceived as their greatest achievement. What had been learnt by the children was considered *alongside* other aspects of nurture and care for the child as a unique individual within their family context and within a wider community. It was not possible to disentangle education and authentic care.

The accelerated progress that the leaders *did* mention in the results section aligns with the Millennium Cohort Study (2003-2005, cited by Gambaro, Stewart and Waldfogel 2013) which identified that the quality of provision for disadvantaged children was higher in the MNS. It is also reflected in the fact that 63% of MNSs are judged to be 'outstanding' compared to just 18% of PVI settings (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 10).

So what does our research suggest as the secret of the success in delivering quality learning? Virtually all respondents made reference to the qualifications of their staff. As suggested by Callanan et al. (2017) and Mathers et al. (2011), approaches to and the consistent development of a learning culture of ongoing professional development impacted upon the outcomes of the children. Professional reflection by leaders and practitioners was exemplified throughout our data and often linked back to child's educational experiences as a core measure of quality education provision and the success of the MNS. This data aligns with the findings of Gambaro, Stewart and Waldfogel (2013) and Callanan et al. (2017) in identifying markers of quality. Our data made much reference, likewise, to the importance of ECEC professional qualifications and the support given to those from diverse backgrounds to achieve them. This mirrors the significance attributed to EY qualifications in existing literatures that lead to demonstrable excellence and impact (for example, Karemaker et al., 2011; Mathers et al., 2007; Mathers and Smees, 2014; Nutbrown, 2012; Roberts et al., 2010).

Another key point raised in the literature was the importance of an EY specialist expert in the lead role of the MNS (Paull and Popov, 2019). This was not so evident in our data, as the leaders that we interviewed rarely cited their own professional expertise overtly. Their discussion was far more humble and pragmatic, sharing the issues encountered and actions taken within their settings. Nonetheless, in referencing the demands placed on other leaders and practitioners with whom they worked, they demonstrated their acute awareness of the central role played by those with specialist knowledges that they were willing and able to share, both within their own MNS setting and also across the ECEC sector. This is reflected in the Early Years Education finding (2015, p. 11) that 80% of MNSs they surveyed provided support and/or expertise on children with SEND to LAs, primary or special schools and local PVI settings. Levels of expertise is taken up further in the section below on Working with All Children.

Outward facing

Although never taking their eye away from the care and learning needs of the child, it was clear from our data that the roles taken on by leaders and practitioner within the MNS were much more multi-dimensional than fulfilling these basic needs. This is discussed in further depth in the

next section, but our data exemplified the “multi-faceted public service child, family and community role that the MNS has taken on increasingly over the last decade” (Early Education, 2015, p. 12). Often the adeptness of leaders at managing numerous strands of responsibility, within a landscape of acute need and constant flux, was striking. That leaders could offer, and felt able to offer, useful advice based on their own experience and expertise to ECEC sector leads in restructuring their services (mentioned by several interviewees), should be given serious consideration in any future re-structuring of ECEC provision.

In their taking up and adapting many of the services that were previously provided by children’s centres (as noted by Paull and Popov 2019, p.26), many of the MNSs in our sample demonstrated innovation and ingenuity in leading sector developments (as was also noted in Early Education in 2014). All of the leaders in our research and 95% of the practitioners reported playing an active role in professional development activities. Additionally, a number of the leaders reported their involvement in LA improvement activities, local forums and cluster groups. Leaders told us how staff regularly shared their knowledge with other ECECs, including PVIs, through training sessions and visits, particularly in the area of SENDi, (discussed in more detail shortly). As Early Education (2015) noted, MNS leaders and practitioners take their role of sharing expertise in EY pedagogy and practice extremely seriously. In light of the extensive data that we collected regarding this, it is unsurprising that Paull and Popov (2019, p. 12) reached their conclusion that the “MNS offer[s] a greater range and quantity of additional and specialist services than other EY providers”.

Levels of commitment

What appears to be missing from the literature when considering the impact or “added value” (Bertram and Pascal, 2019, p.2) provided by the MNS to the ECEC sector is a way of quantifying the visceral passion and commitment that leaders both displayed and discussed in referencing the work of many MNS practitioners on a day-to-day basis. This was key to a sense of collective identity, as those who believed in and valued the unique and specialist role of the MNS as a service with a history, associated with an idea of welfare beyond market provision. And yet this significant and highly affective identity seems to be overlooked in much published discussion about MNS provision. A sense of passion and commitment was evident throughout the data in relation to a determination to build quality relationships with families above and beyond a focus on the care and learning of the children, taking action to address crises of families in ways that trespassed on practitioner/leader time (and sometimes expense) beyond a job-description and preparedness to regularly work extended and unremunerated hours. This was expressed by many as a sacrifice worth making in order to keep open an MNS at risk of closure. The closest that the literature gets to portraying this commitment is Pascal and Bertram’s (2019, p.3) “practitioner

goodwill and professional generosity” (that produced huge public service financial savings to the tax-payer) that they identified as noteworthy in their own study. This is a theme taken-up again towards the end of this chapter.

Working with All Children

An unmistakable quality of MNSs is their willingness to accept all children, regardless of the extent of the child’s specialist needs. The determination of leaders and practitioners to provide a ‘safe-haven’ shone through all of the data. Paull and Popov (2019, p. 9) noted three key aspects of MNSs that set them apart from other ECEC providers: their propensity to work with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, their willingness to take on children with a wide range of SENDi requirements and the advanced skills of professionals in providing “higher structural quality” with “exceptional leaders”. It is worth exploring each of these characteristics with relation to our data.

The data collected suggested that not only were leaders and practitioners committed to working with children from disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged backgrounds, but that they were committed to enabling them to ‘narrow the gap’ in aspects of their learning and social and emotional development. The data evidences the commitment of leaders to change children’s life chances, with a determination to focus on the ideal of a better future for them. These findings from our data are echoed extensively by other researchers (Hall et al., 2013; Maisey et al., 2013; Mathers and Smees, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004b).

Our data also highlighted the commitment of those in this study, as both leaders and practitioners of MNSs, to overcome the challenges of disadvantage (that often presented as delayed development) in order to enable their children with every opportunity to succeed at primary school. The focus on the distinctive needs of children as unique meant that the pedagogic approaches did not involve only ‘teaching to the test’ but rather attending to particular needs in order to maximise the children’s chances of achieving later in life (Field, 2010).

Many of the practices that were referenced in the data highlighted professionals as experts in the links between deprivation and poor educational outcomes (Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2010). practitioners who fully understood the holistic needs of the children with whom they worked. The data suggested a deep understanding that the basic needs of hunger, tiredness and worry were all real barriers to their children succeeding. Leaders and practitioners alike focused as much attention on fostering resilience, self-esteem, communication capabilities and compassion within the children in their charge as they did on developing phonological skills, for example, in order to prepare children effectively “for school and later life” (DfE 2013, p. 13).

The MNSs involved in this research appeared to not only 'step up' to the challenge of SENDi but to regard its effective provision as a core element of the MNS. Numerous comments were made about how MNS practitioners were experts in aspects of SENDi, to the extent that LAs and PVI providers sought them out when struggling to find a suitable setting for some children with specific or severe needs. Our data aligns with the research of Paull and Popov (2019) who found increasing numbers of children were accommodated within MNSs due to lack of space or suitable provision for them on the part of other ECEC providers.

Although PVIs have the option to accept or decline children dependent on whether they feel able to provide for individual needs, MNSs are required to accept all children as long as they have space to accommodate them. However, MNSs mentioned within our study did not have space, or funding, but accepted children with SENDi regardless. Brind et al. (2013) found that MNSs have significantly higher numbers of children with severe disabilities (49%) compared to primary schools with nursery and reception classes attached to them (25%). Attention and commitment to providing SENDi specialisms and support seemed to be encompassed within a values framework of the MNS, expressed through our data as a child's right to an inclusive ECEC experience and the receipt of an IHCP (should this be required) to enable their ongoing inclusion within any future statutory school setting. It would seem that the specialist skill-set acquired by leaders and practitioners within MNSs through their ongoing day-to-day SENDi practice, combined with their commitment to their own professional training, is an area worthy of further exploration in order that this human resource is fully recognised and not squandered.

Working with Families

Threaded throughout our data is constant reference to the role of the MNS as committed to the education and care of the child *within the context of their family*. This wider family focus is recognised within a number of recent reports (for example, No Author, 2018; Bertram and Pascal, 2019; Paull and Popov, 2019). Supporting the learning and care needs of the child was often presented to us as most effectively achieved through working with families according to Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*, where practitioners recognised that the children needed to be safe and secure in order for them to be able to learn. In some cases, this meant negotiating landscapes of extreme poverty.

Working in close tandem with the family was championed by Sylva et al. (2004) in their extensive study of quality provision in ECEC. This study asserted that the highest quality ECEC provision within the MNS also extended beyond it to the home and that quality education could only be achieved through supporting and up-skilling parents to sustain nurturing and attentive

pedagogies. In 2015 Early Education noted a key difference between the MNS and other ECEC as exemplified in tailored, unique and specific programmes designed for children that stretched into the family home. Callanan et al. (2017, p. 52) also discussed the distinct quality of the MNS where a “joined up approach” was taken to learning through an “open culture” between the home and school based upon a two-way dialogue.

Our research suggests that attention to children within the wider family context is, in part, due to a values approach that is part of the history of the MNS (Early Education, 2014; Paull and Popov, 2019). However, it would seem that it is also a product of the demise of wider family public service provision, particularly since 2010 (Lewis and West, 2016), that has focused on the marketization of childcare and education provision. It became clear, through our discussions with MNS leaders, that in many cases they felt that they were all that the families had left to call upon for support and guidance. In many cases they had taken on the role of a children’s centre, operating as a ‘hub’ in the way that is described by Early Education (2015). The need for this multi-faceted role is due to the fact that almost half of MNSs are found in the most deprived areas (Paull and Popov, 2019, p. 9).

Perhaps it is the longevity of their experience that makes MNS practitioners uniquely adept at providing support that is non-judgemental and pragmatic to struggling families. Not once during any discussion was the concept of ‘blame’ broached. There was no judgement, no suggestion that parenting responsibilities had been neglected. Families’ needs were listened to, valued and responded to wherever feasibly possible, as long as any help provided was in the best interest of the child even, at times, where this meant the practitioners were supporting children and families at their own private expense.

Working with the Community

Our interview data particularly suggested that another consequence of the demise of children’s centres was the increased likelihood of MNSs taking on a role in co-ordinating integrated teams to deliver ECEC services across a community. Again, this is something that has been recognised in the literature. Early Education (2015, p. 12) refers to MNSs working “with an extensive range of providers”, also noting that this had happened “increasingly over the last decade or so”. Early Education (2018) discusses, likewise, the experience that many MNS practitioners have of working within multi-professional teams in ways suggested by our data. One leader commented that as highly-qualified practitioners MNS teachers had become uniquely placed to understand and carry out a range of approaches recommended by specialists that had wider community applicability beyond an immediate child or family focus.

The role that MNSs play in a wider sense of community cohesion is something that was apparent throughout our data with leaders mentioning the significance for them of being recognised across generations as a public service with a community focus. Certainly, those we interviewed linked this to long associations with the areas within which the MNSs were located. Their relationship with the local community had been honed and shaped through time within a context of values about public service. A range of literature mentions the extensive services that MNSs have traditionally provided and continue to provide, making them a hub within the community (Early Education, 2015; No Author, 2018; Paull and Popov, 2019) but what is less clearly articulated is that practitioners and leaders within our data seemed to suggest that this was beyond fulfilling a public service duty for them. Their commitment to a community outlook was about their own sense-making of what it meant to be an ECEC professional, beyond a quantification of something instrumental and rational.

The Future of MNS?

Despite displaying endless positivity and ingenuity in working within the confines of ever-shrinking budgets, most of the leaders we spoke with had reached a point where they reflected, with much emotion, that they may no longer be able to continue to provide a service to children, families and communities unless the funding landscape changed dramatically and quickly. Goodwill alone could and had stretched, but it had reached its limit. It should also be noted that many leaders and practitioners were paying a high price in terms of their own health and wellbeing, due to the lack in funding and the uncertain of future of the MNS. This has been well documented recently; Morton's (2018) research reported that three in ten MNSs had concerns about their finances moving forward. And Bertram and Pascall (2019, p.17) highlighted Lucy Powell's statement to the House of Commons (31st January 2019) that MNSs imminently face losing 31% of their government funding, which would make them unviable in the immediate and longer term.

Although fiscal hardships seem to be the experience of many schools and LAs, our data suggested that leaders perceived MNSs as being especially hard hit. This aligns with the findings of Paull and Popov (2019) which found that, despite all that they have done to rationalise their services and remain economically viable, there were twice the number of MNSs in deficit than the rest of the school sector as a whole. Even with the number of additional hours worked and the provision of free resources and expertise, many of those that we spoke with felt that it might be time for MNSs to accept closure.

Bertram and Pascall (2019) have translated the cost of the MNS provision of this 'hidden' goodwill into £11.5 million in the city of Birmingham alone. Simpson et al. (2017) have written about the significance of the loss of the MNS as a further contributor to structural poverty, again mirroring the concerns of child and family poverty that emerged in our own data.

A clear message that came through our data was that MNSs were not prepared to compromise the standards of quality provision with which they had long been associated. Although Lewis and West (2016) and Paull and Popov (2019) question whether MNSs will be able to continue to employ graduate staff in the face of continuing cuts, our respondents made clear that they were not prepared to offer a 'bronze' service by de-valuing the currency of the EY professional. This is despite recognition with the literature of the low pay of many of those working within the sector (Lewis and West, 2016). Our data showed that MNS leaders valued having a range of ECEC professionals working in their settings and that they were always keen to enable those without previous formal qualifications to acquire them through work experience and training.

Callanan et al. (2017) noted the extent to which MNSs valued the support which many were provided through working with their LAs. Equally, however, the leaders that we spoke with reported just how much LA officials valued the services and the quality of provision that MNSs provided to those in situations of disadvantage within their locales. Many LAs relied on the expertise of MNS leaders to provide services, including advice on appropriate pedagogies, to other ECECs, including PVI and statutory schools.

Much of the interview data expressed the frustration felt by many leaders at the time taken up in focusing upon financial, regulatory and political matters concerning current and future MNS funding. Many leaders and practitioners felt that too much of their time was now spent on finding ways for the service they offered to just 'survive' day to day. Many displayed ingenuity and business acumen in finding ways to supplement their funding (as also noted by Paull and Popov, 2019) but many also resented that this took them away from their core concern and interest in providing quality childcare and education to their children, families and communities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of the MNS on the lives of pre-school children and the families they serve, and to achieve a greater understanding of the barriers that exist which may prevent them from realising their full potential. Our survey and interview data confirm the findings of Paull and Popov (2019) that the MNS is a resource currently at high risk.

Some clear concerns have arisen through this research, which need to be both noted and taken seriously. Firstly, the anxiety that our participants felt that, amid other pressing current political concerns, the ECEC agenda has slipped off the radar of the current government. This slippage has had especially dire consequences for the MNS acknowledged in recent reports as 'hidden' (No Author, 2018; Bertram and Pascale, 2019). Despite overwhelming research evidence demonstrating the vital role that high-quality ECEC plays in long term life chances, the sector remains grossly underfunded as a whole with a precarious low-wage culture persisting (Lewis and West, 2016). Nonetheless, it is the particular and unique role of the public service MNS that seems most overlooked and under-acknowledged.

Secondly, the invaluable role that the MNS plays within areas of disadvantage needs to be re-evaluated strategically and with urgency at central and local government level. Both Bertram and Pascale (2019) and Paull and Popov's (2019) research have provided financial assessments that highlight the value added by the MNS and the loss to the economy should they flounder. Nonetheless, these reports alongside those produced prior to 2019 also highlight more than an economic loss, what Silverman calls (2001, p.32) capacities that "statistics cannot measure" which we have captured extensively in this report. Our opportunity to engage in the gathering of both survey data that provided practitioners with space to respond and interviews that gave leaders a powerful and resonant voice, has demonstrated the everyday value of human encounters that are regarded as 'ordinary' within the fabric of the MNS. These taken-for-granted impacts include: a knowledge of children and families built up over time to provide tailored support and guidance; an open and listening culture for parents and families over a 'cup of tea'; a sign-posting and provision of support in engaging with wider services beyond the MNS for the benefit of families within the community and a belief in the capacities of all children to achieve educationally and throughout life as a consequence of quality ECEC provision. Certainly, the MNS is positioned to impact on the communities within which they are situated as a 'preventative service' that may mitigate the involvement and associated costs of other services further down the line.

Thirdly, the wider impact of the MNS on families and within communities should not cloud the impact of their fundamental role in supporting the learning and development of pre-school children. This is where they excel. Their success in assessing and providing for the needs of the most deprived children and enabling those children an opportunity to thrive should not be overshadowed by the broader remit they have maintained, and extended, to mitigate the effects of disadvantage and poverty. MNSs deploy practitioners and leaders who are experts and specialist early years pedagogues, who push and challenge themselves to review and refresh their knowledge as part of their sense of their remit and identity.

The overarching barrier to the ongoing and future success of the MNS lies in the financially-challenged public service terrain within which it resides and the associated uncertainties over its future funding and remit. As so many of our research respondents made clear, the loss of the resource of the MNS from the fabric of many urban communities would be reprehensible and short-sighted.

Our recommendations are given below:

Recommendations

- 1. To address the urgency of the fiscal crisis in current and future funding of the Maintained Nursery School.**
- 2. To enhance the public conceptions at local, regional and national level concerning the importance and significance of Early Childhood Education and Care in general and the Maintained Nursery School in particular.**
- 3. To recognise and champion the histories, accumulated knowledge and expertise contained within the Maintained Nursery School.**
- 4. To enable Maintained Nursery Schools further opportunity (through recognition of their expertise and further funding) to continue to support and contribute to a wider community remit in which the child and the child's family are promoted as being located within a wider community fabric of belonging.**
- 5. To recognise and effectively utilise the knowledge, expertise and experience found within Maintained Nursery Schools in the areas of Special Educational Needs and Disability and the inclusion of those with English as an Additional Language.**
- 6. To acknowledge and make best use of the levels of entrepreneurial and innovative experience and capabilities of the practitioners and leaders within the Maintained Nursery School.**

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Appendix A: Information Letters

Leaders:

Evidencing the effects of maintained nursery schools' roles in Early Years sector improvements.

Dear Colleague,

We are writing to tell you about a research project that is taking place this year, carried out by the University of Worcester and the University of Sussex for TACTYC. The team carrying out this project are commissioned to assess maintained nursery schools' roles in Early Years sector improvements. They want to find out about the drivers and barriers impacting upon training and development in Early Years maintained nursery settings. The aim of the research is to give a voice to as many practitioners as possible about their experiences. All data collected will be anonymised and treated as strictly confidential. Schools and individuals will only be referred to by pseudonyms and not identified in any reports unless requested otherwise. This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Worcester Research Ethics Committee. Only the evaluation team members will have access to the data. Electronic files will be password protected and stored on a secure server.

Due to the researchers' geographical locations, we have chosen to focus upon the regions of the South East and the West Midlands. As a leader in the region we would like to invite you to be a part of the evaluation through filling out a survey. This will only take 10-20 minutes of your time, dependent upon the detail that you choose to include. We will send out the link for this in the coming weeks. Any responses that we receive will be anonymised. Because of this we will not ask you to complete a consent letter as this would reveal your identity; instead, your completion of the survey will be taken as your consent. All that we will know from completed surveys is the region that you are replying from and whether or not you are in a leadership role. Others in your setting will not know whether you have responded. Your involvement is totally voluntary, but we hope that you will take the opportunity to have your say about your own experiences of support for your professional development.

We kindly request that you also pass on the attached letter to your employees in the setting, as we are also interested in practitioners' views of training and development.

In addition to completing the survey, we also invite you to take part in either:

- A semi-structured interview or
- A setting visit

If you would be happy to be involved in either of these, could you please let us know by responding to this email? The interviews can be at a time and in a format to suit you (for example, Skype, face-to-face or telephone) and will be an opportunity for you to further share your views about developments in the Early Years sector. These interviews will be recorded and transcribed. We will email you a copy of the transcription and ask permission for your views to be used as part of the data. If, at any point, you would like to withdraw your interview or setting visit notes from the research data then that is perfectly feasible, up to the point of publication preparation, 1st June 2019. You simply need to advise any one of us of your request. We are afraid that we will not be able to withdraw questionnaire data due to the anonymized nature of the responses.

The setting visits will be an opportunity for you to share with us examples of your good practice. We will visit for a half day and spend the time chatting with you, observing practice and exploring

documentary evidence (for example, planning or training materials). As with the interviews, if there is any aspect that you would like removed from the notes, or if, after signing up, you decide that a visit is not, after all, convenient, you have every right and opportunity to withdraw from the research.

As the project progresses you can find updates on the developments at <http://tactycmaintainednurseryschools.wordpress.com>. Following the surveys, interviews and visits we will review all data as a whole in order to produce the final project report for TACTYC. This will also be made available via our web link. The data compiled through this research project will also be developed into conference presentations and research articles for wider dissemination.

This research project is intended as a collaborative review of practice and poses minimal risks to participants; but if you do have a concern about any aspect of this study you should speak to the evaluation team who will do their best to answer your questions (their contact details are below). If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally about any aspect or about the way you have been dealt with during the study, you can do this by contacting the Secretary of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Worcester, using the following details: Karen Dobson, Secretary of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Worcester, email Ethics@worc.ac.uk.

All research carried out will cohere closely to GDPR requirements, <https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/> and the University of Worcester's Privacy Policy, <https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/visitor-privacy-notice.html>.

Thank you for taking the time to read through the details of this exciting project and we hope that we will have the opportunity to work with as many of you as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Carla Solvason

01905 855482, c.solvason@worc.ac.uk

Samantha Sutton-Tsang

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Rebecca Webb

01273 876 712, R.C.Webb@sussex.ac.uk

Practitioners:

Dear Colleague,

We are writing to tell you about a research project that is taking place this year, carried out by the University of Worcester and the University of Sussex for TACTYC. The team carrying out this project have been commissioned to explore nursery schools' roles in Early Years sector improvements. They want to find out about the drivers and barriers impacting upon training and development in Early Years maintained nursery settings. Our aim is to give a voice to as many practitioners as possible about their experiences. All data collected will be anonymised and treated as strictly confidential. Schools and individuals will only be referred to by pseudonyms and not identified in any reports unless requested otherwise. This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Worcester Research Ethics Committee. Only the evaluation team members will have access to the data. Electronic files will be password protected and stored on a secure server.

Due to the researchers' geographical location, we have chosen to focus upon the regions of East Sussex and the West Midlands. As practitioners in the region, we would like to invite you to be a part of the evaluation through filling in the survey. We will send a link to the survey in the coming weeks. It should take no longer than 10-20 minutes to complete, dependent upon the level of detail that you choose to include. Any responses received will be fully anonymised. All that we will know is the region that you are replying from and whether or not you are in a leadership role. Because of this we will not be able to withdraw your responses following completion. Your involvement is voluntary and setting leaders will not know who has/ has not responded to this request. But we do hope that you will take the opportunity to have your say about your own experiences of professional development.

As the project progresses you can find updates on the developments at (<http://tactycmaintainednurseryschools.wordpress.com>). Following the surveys, interviews and visits we will review all data as a whole in order to produce the final project report. This will also be made available at our web link. The data compiled through this research project will also be developed into conference presentations and research articles for wider dissemination.

This research project is intended as a collaborative review of practice and poses minimal risks to you as a participant, but if you have a concern about any aspect of this study you should speak to the evaluation team who will do their best to answer your questions (their contact details are below). If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally about any aspect or about the way you have been dealt with during the study, you can do this by contacting the Secretary of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Worcester, using the following details: Karen Dobson, Secretary of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Worcester, email Ethics@worc.ac.uk.

Thank you for taking the time to read through the details of this exciting project and we hope that we will get to work with as many of you as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Carla Solvason: 01905 855482, c.solvason@worc.ac.uk

Samantha Sutton-Tsang: 01905 855398, s.sutton-tsang@worc.ac.uk

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Appendix B: Leader Data

Combined for the Midlands and South Regions

These are the results from an electronic survey that went out to 200 MNSs during February and March, 2019. This data is based upon 60 responses from leaders across both regions of the Midlands and the South of England (including, West Sussex, Brighton-Hove, East Sussex, Kent, inner and outer London, Hampshire, Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire). The overall leader response rate was 30%.

The survey used a mixture of multiple choice and open ended questions. The multiple choice questions were intended to show, at a glance, the involvement of MNS in development activities (the 'what') and the open ended questions to go into more depth concerning the impact and reasons behind the activities (the 'why'). The open-ended questions posed were designed to enable practitioners to engage with issues, recount their experiences, and express their values. The aim here has been to do justice to the breadth of responses without being overly repetitive.

The survey questions focused on the following eight areas:

- Provision improvements within their own MNS with which they had been involved
- Provision improvements within their own MNS with which they have not been involved but feel they would be able to contribute to
- Provision improvements (including their own CPD and leadership of CPD) beyond their own MNS
- The impact of their involvement in provision improvements on their own practice, that of their colleagues, children's learning and development within their own MNS and within their community; and the impact on wider partnerships
- The aspects of their practice they would wish to enhance
- The requirements of their MNS to enable it to be successful now and in the future
- The barriers they encounter that prevent the realisation of success now and in the future
- Any other comments.

This data is concerned with critically analysing 'quality EY improvements including the experiences, values and issues of those employed within the maintained nursery sector'. We have adapted and condensed these areas of interest to reflect the concerns of our respondents. Consequently, the first three bullet points broadly address current experiences, values and issues and the final bullet focuses on the immediate and longer term future of the MNS and those employed within it. Therefore we address the original intended outcomes of:

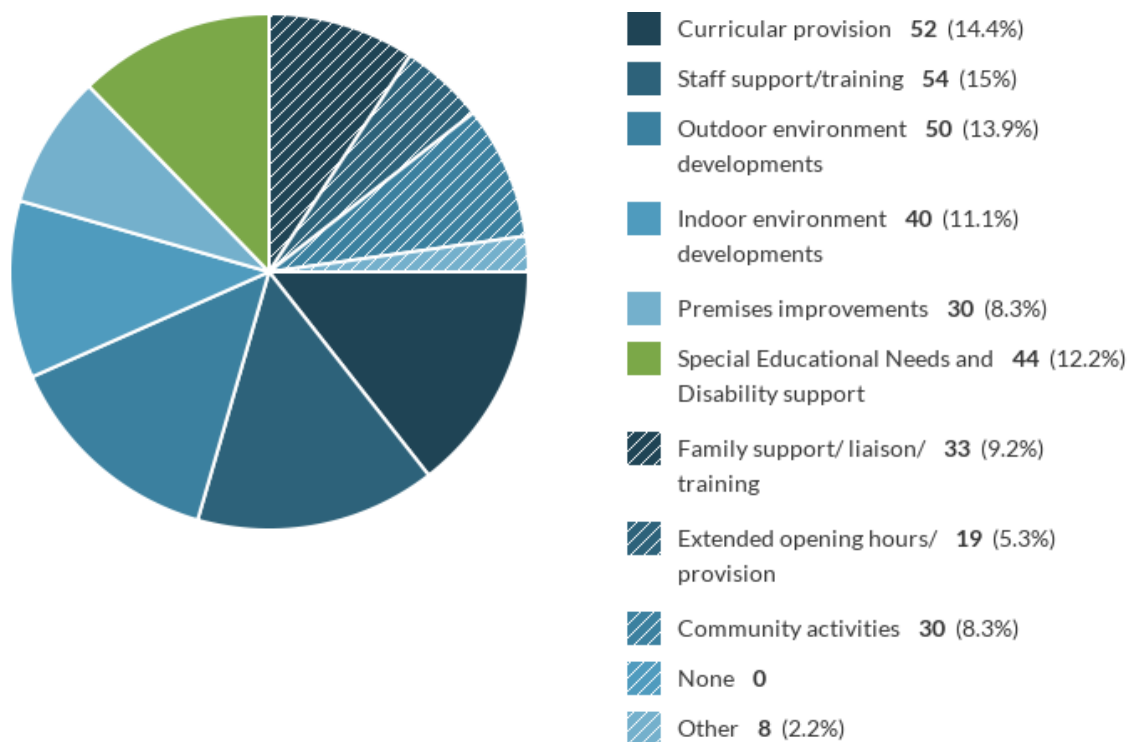
- The ways in which maintained nursery schools lead and contribute to sector improvements.
- The benefits obtained through maintained nursery schools leading on sector improvements
- The barriers encountered by maintained nursery schools which detract from sector improvements.
- The needs of maintained nursery schools to continue to impact upon sector improvements, focusing explicitly on: needs; drivers; and threats

The first data represented here indicates the extent to which settings have been involved in development activities over the last 12 months and the role that they have played in those

activities; i.e. whether they have implemented changes within their own setting and whether they have influenced change outside of their setting. The data in the ensuing sections looks at the barriers faced by MNS in sustaining this work and how passionately leaders of MNS feel about their role within the EY sector.

Developing provision in own setting

What changes have you introduced in the past 12 months to improve provision at your own nursery?



What is immediately obvious is that all settings have been involved in significant setting development over the last twelve months, many in multiple areas. The foci upon staff training, curricular developments, staff training and SENDi were consistent across most settings and these responses were reflected in the qualitative responses and interviews.

Over half of the leaders also identified the area of family support as a focus and again, this transpired to be of central importance upon further discussion.

Some leaders commented that it was difficult to disentangle any one particular area of development as they were all interrelated. Additionally, these leaders pointed out that such developments, were nothing new, they were simply part of the nurseries way of functioning. These two leaders said:

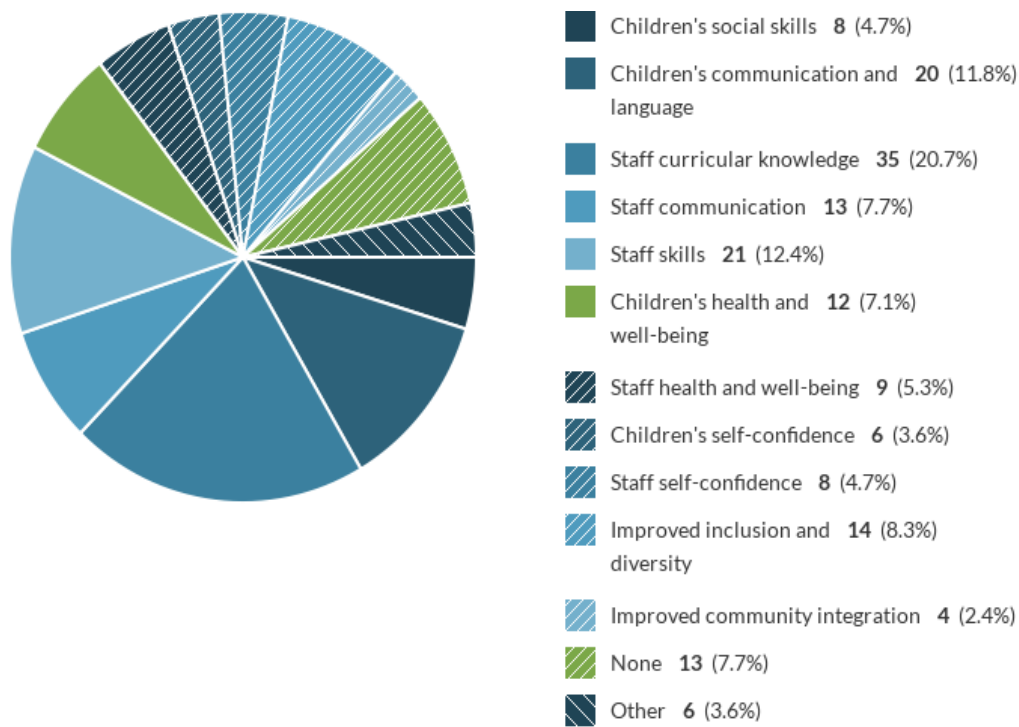
- *All interact together. All are further developments of existing practice rather than new initiatives.*
- *These are all constantly ongoing in our setting. We haven't just introduced them in the last 12 months.*

In addition, 77% of leaders said that there were further changes that they would *like* to put in place but could not. *In 85% of these cases the reasons were explicitly linked to funding*; in the remaining few cases, although not directly stated, the relation to funding was indirect, such as inadequate premises.

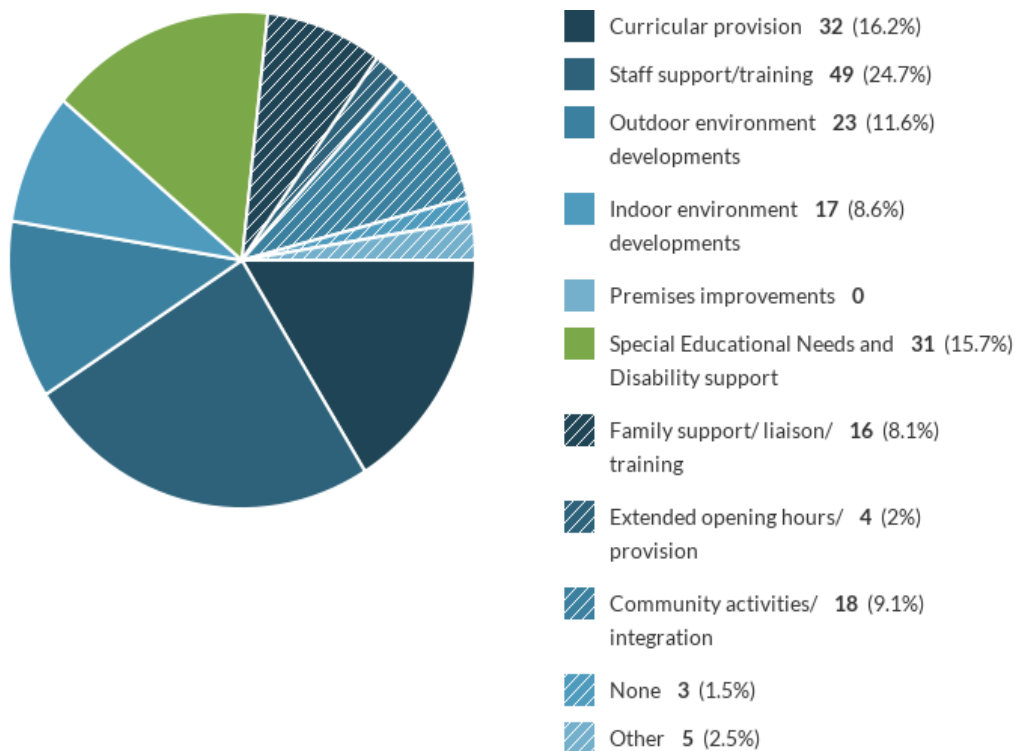
Wider impact

It is indicative of the ongoing impact of MNS that they not only focus upon their own setting but also offer development opportunities to other settings. The two pie graphs below indicate that during the last twelve months 92% of MNS had attended development activities put on by other MNS and an impressive 98 % of our sample had hosted their own training that was open to other settings.

Have you been involved in any development activities led by other maintained nursery schools? If so, what was the focus?



What areas of improvements to the sector have you led beyond your own nursery within the past 12 months?



In addition to the areas mentioned in the charts above, an area of development that was frequently mentioned during interviews and touched upon in individual responses to the survey, was the role that leaders of MNS frequently took in supporting other nursery schools that were struggling. This happened through hosting training and visit days, through secondment, or through feeding into sector developments at LA level. One leader commented that they offered training to colleagues at a cost in order “to try to generate income to be sustainable.”

There were 54 detailed responses about the type of training and guidance that MNS were able to offer to their colleagues, just a few are included for illustration below:

- *Supporting staff from local settings in providing stimulating learning environment. We have been asked to lead on provision of outdoor learning as part of the borough. We believe that it is impacting positively as we have return visits from practitioners to follow up sessions they have attended and we are always busy hosting learning walks etc.*
- *As a Teaching School and working in partnership with our Local Authority we are running a project to support schools and their feeder PVI settings in building community relationships to support families at transition from settings to school and providing training for parents and staff through transitional objects and wellbeing.*

- *We have run 'Visitor Days' - training days for EY staff from provisions. Staff spend half a day in the nursery observing and being involved in the practice we deliver and have a short training session to consolidate what they have seen. The training has been oversubscribed and feedback suggests that what they have experienced has impacted on developing their practice, in particular the child led learning, independent learning and opportunities for open ended play.*
- *With the other 3 maintained nursery schools we have developed a training package of courses that we have been delivering to settings. A unique element of these sessions is the ability to see practice in action and the feedback from practitioners has been very positive. Settings have taken ideas back to their settings and have tried them out and some settings are returning as the training is new and exciting and is meeting their needs.*
- *We have led training regarding SEND, Maths and Enabling Environments to the private and voluntary sector and the feedback has been very positive, which in turn will help staff and children throughout the EY sector.*
- *We have an Autistic resource and our SEND support has been valued far and wide in a wide range of settings.*

This area will be discussed further in our focus upon qualitative data.

What are the needs of maintained nursery schools generally in terms of continuing improvements within the sector?

The impact that maintained nurseries consistently have upon sector developments, if we are to take this data above as indicative of the wider MNS population, is clearly significant. Therefore the focus of the next questions was around whether this impact could be maintained and if so, what would be needed. We provided suggested areas and also prompted the leaders to identify any others that they thought necessary.

Increased funding or (at least) clarity on future funding

59 of the 60 leaders that responded felt that the funds received by MNS would need to be increased if they were to be able to continue making an impact. Furthermore, their qualitative responses suggested that a number of leaders would not actually be able to keep their settings open should any more cuts be imposed. This was also consistently reflected through their interview responses. Equally, 59 of the 60 leaders wanted clarity on their future funding. Even if it would be less, they preferred to know so that they could deal with it. These leaders said:

- *If the Government has insufficient money for Maintained Nursery schools we want to know asap so plans can be made to support the nursery to continue successfully without school status - we don't want the 'piece-meal' promises that keep us in a continued limbo state.*
- *We need to know where we stand, in terms of the government agenda and in financial terms, to allow us to plan (or plan closure!).*

- *As a maintained nursery school we are under constant financial pressure. We are under pressure to reduce the quality of our provision via employing less experienced/qualified staff. Our ability to provide wrap around care, community programmes, extracurricular activities etc are all at risk due to funding. Long term planning is a challenge as we have no assurance of safety beyond one more academic year.*
- *The lack of future funding is a concern and does provide your staff with concerns about their future and all the outstanding work they are doing.*
- *If there is no guarantee of continued funding, even at the current level, we will have no option but to close, as we would not be financially sustainable.*
- *Even at the current rate of funding, with increases in staffing and many other costs and year on year reductions in Local Authority funding, we are finding it increasingly difficult to make the books balance. We cannot cut staffing any further and this is having an impact on the quality that we are able to provide for our children and their families.*
- *The long term future of MNS is of huge significance. If the top up funding for qualified staff goes then there will be no MNS.*
- *Without the funding being maintained or increased we will no longer be viable.*
- *Funding plays a significant part in whether Maintained Nursery Schools survive after 2020, without it we will close.*

Clearer definition of the responsibilities of maintained nursery schools

All 60 leaders who completed the questionnaire felt that it was important that the role and responsibilities that they held as a maintained nursery be more clearly defined. Such uncertainty reflects the beginnings of this investigation. It proved to be extremely difficult to find any clear information with regards to the role of, parameters of and even numbers of MNS.

The ambiguity surrounding the role of MNS was reflected in some of the qualitative comments made below:

- *The sector still does not 'get' how we differ....*
- *Maintained nursery schools are schools, and should be funded as schools, not as PVI settings. There needs to be a clearer vision of the maintained nursery school sector by the government.*
- *Further clarity on the expectations of 'sector leadership' would be helpful in focusing future improvement work. Sadly, some Local Authority officers see us as a costly alternative to the PVI sector and don't understand or value to distinctive nature of our provision or work, a clearer remit or sector improvement would also support this.*
- *Having worked in MNS and the PVI sector of early Years there is no comparison in terms of quality and the outcomes for children. The difficulty lies when other providers do not understand the role of a MNS.*

- *Caught between definition as schools and general EY provision. We are beaten with the demands and regulation of schools while being funded as general provision.*

Professionalised workforce certainty

An extremely significant element of interviews proved to be MNS sense of identity as well qualified specialists in the area of EY. They wanted to be sure that this emphasis would continue as they believed it was central to the quality of the service they provided for children and families. This also came through in the questionnaires where 98% of all leaders who responded felt that maintaining a professionalised workforce was key to sustaining the quality of their practice.

Qualitative comments made by the leaders included:

- *We will not be able to continue unless a funding solution is found and if the amount per year does not increase we will not be able to maintain the impact we have on improving the education and life chances of children living in an inner city with high deprivation. We have very high SEND, EYPP eligibility and poverty, EAL, BME and we need highly experienced and qualified staff who will endure, work and learn together to effectively make a difference, this is beyond the scope of the private sector and we get rejected from grant funding as we are a maintained school and this is our core work and purpose.*
- *Professional workforce (and funding required to maintain this) is essential to continue high standards and outcomes for children. Nurseries need this professional workforce to provide support for other providers as well as the very best start for the children and families attending their own settings.*
- *The current Budget uncertainty is destabilising for children, families and Early Years Workers. This agenda has overshadowed and minimised the concept of quality in the Early Years which has definitely dropped off the public agenda. We are definitely in a crisis in the Early Years which is a complex sector which needs to be understood at governmental level and a decision made about the level of qualification necessary for leading Early Years Education.*

Regulatory certainty

Many leaders made reference to the unstable policy platform that their setting currently inhabited. All but one of the 60 leaders said that greater regulatory certainty was necessary for them to be able to function effectively. In addition, these leaders made these comments:

- *Maintained nursery schools offer high quality education for the most vulnerable children in society. To do this, highly skilled professionals need to work together to keep updated with recent and relevant research striving for continuous improvement and growth. This requires investment in training and resourcing. To attract and retain high quality staff there needs to be certainty in the sector so there is stability in the workforce.*
- *Longer term certainty over the future is a must as we will be able to plan for the future. If we have clearer definition of the things we can offer, then there will be recognition of the*

work we do that makes a difference and this will be recognized by those that have control over the funding.

The moral obligation that many staff in MNS feel

As a result of continual cuts MNS were coping on a bare minimum of funding. Some settings even mentioned 'fundraising' as one of their areas of development. One leader said:

- *Having the certainty of long-term funding will mean that much of the time that is now being put into exploring how to ensure long term sustainability by both myself & the Governing body could be put to the appropriate use of maintaining & expanding the high quality education we offer, rather than having to find ways of making money.*

How funds could be stretched was a key topic of interviews but was also mentioned a number of times in the surveys. What came through repeatedly was that EY practitioners in MNS were working above and beyond their paid roles as they felt a sense of duty towards the vulnerable children and families that they worked with. This will be discussed more fully in the qualitative section, but below is an indication of just some of the views presented by leaders through the survey:

- *The staff who are level 3 and below work beyond their hours every day and carry such responsibilities that their pay does not reflect their role. However, because of their professionalism and dedication to the role, they continue to provide quality care and education to the children endowed to them. This is not recognised by professionals outside of the sector.*
- *Increasing opening hours would support the needs of working parents, but as staff are already working those hours unpaid to order to fulfil their duties, it would be difficult to open to the children*
- *Staff and Leaders in MNS are genuinely in the job for the good of the children, often to the detriment of their working hours and budgets.*
- *Where will the vulnerable children and families go if maintained nurseries are unable to continue to provide this support??*
- *Those practitioners tasked with giving the most vulnerable children a solid foundation to improve social mobility are paid the lowest wages with many taking on a second job or claiming benefits to top up their wages to a living wage.*

Under-utilised expertise

Because of their passion for supporting vulnerable children and families many MNS leaders felt frustrated that their lack of recognition as experts in the EY sector, as well as cuts in funding meant that they were unable to offer other nursery schools and PVI's the support that they would like. These leaders added these comments to their surveys:

- *Nursery schools have a moral purpose towards giving the best start holistically to very young children, and we feel a responsibility to help the whole early year's sector to succeed. We cannot afford to provide this holistic approach, which educates and supports parents and other providers at the same time as providing excellent education in our nursery, without appropriate levels of funding.*

- *The government should be celebrating and embracing MNS as beacon schools and centres/hubs of early year's excellence. The quality in MNS is better than in any other sector or phase. MNS are led by HTs with expert skills and a moral imperative which is rarely found in a private setting or chain of nurseries. MNS are truly community schools who prioritise their places for disadvantaged children and families. Why do Government officials insist on making sweeping statements that 'all nurseries do the same job and therefore should get the same money', - it is just not true! Or 'you do an amazing job but you are expensive aren't you?' Also not true if, for that little bit of extra funding, you also get a family support team that reaches 600 families and a Teaching School!*

A service in crisis

The survey responses, in addition to the interviews, made very clear that MNS had reached crisis point. After managing to cope with continual cuts through careful strategic leadership and a great amount of goodwill, many felt that they were now on the brink of closure. They had reached crisis point. A number of leaders, below, commented on this fact, and the great sense of loss they felt at this reality:

- *MNS had efficiencies to make and some amazing partnerships and innovative and creative working relationships have developed from the current financial constraints, but there is literally, no more slack left and we are at breaking point. Not understanding how MNS provide social insurance, not understanding the schism between the maintained sector and the PVI sector, not defining our real goals and opening up to the most promising avenues to realise these goals and not understanding the impact of the continued loss of Nursery schools from a strategic national, Local and then funnelling down to community level will be detrimental environmentally, structurally, politically, culturally, pedagogically and definitely from an economic perspective. The debate around MNS should not be treated tritely.*
- *The skill, passion, understanding and creativity are currently there but the capacity due to tight finance and uncertainty is limiting what is possible. This potential will not persist if funding is not resolved and the drain will be extremely difficult to ever regain.*
- *Maintained Nursery schools have had a long record of providing high quality education care and learning, for children and their families and vulnerable children. If they were lost it would be an amazing resource that would be lost for ever.*
- *Maintained Nursery Schools are unique and if they do have to go, we will never be able to get them back.*
- *As has been said many times -we really are the jewel in the social mobility crown and although we have lots of local support for our maintained nursery school community, we are in desperate need of guaranteed central government sustainability funding to secure our future*
- *Nobody knows what the future of Early Years funding will look like in Maintained Nursery Schools. We are schools and as such incur the costs of a school, however we also do the work of a children's centre but are funded at the rate of a childminder. This lack of certainty has absolutely had an impact because, quite simply, why would you plan for a sector of schools that you don't know will survive another 18 months?*

- *Nursery schools are working at capacity and supporting vulnerable families and children who are being turned away from other providers. In order for us to continue to provide a safe and enabling environment with well trained and experienced staff, Nursery funding needs to remain at the current higher rate. With a reduced rate, this would mean less staff and an inability to support the children who need it most. I do not ever want to turn a child away, but if I do not have the funds to support the child, it would be unsafe for me to try. With children's centres and access to other support services being reduced, Maintained nursery schools really are the front line support for many children and families. I worry for the short- and long-term outcomes of children and families, if maintained nurseries cannot continue to provide this much needed support.*

Appendix C: Practitioner Data

Combined for the Midlands and South Regions

These are the results from an electronic survey that went out to 200 MNSs during February and March, 2019. This data is based upon 55 responses from practitioners across both regions of the Midlands and the South of England (including, West Sussex, Brighton-Hove, East Sussex, Kent, inner and outer London, Hampshire, Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire).

An email was sent to leaders which included a link for them to pass on to their practitioners, therefore the actual number of practitioners who received this link is unknown, but we do know that 27.5% of settings responded. The survey used a mixture of multiple choice and open-ended questions.

'Practitioner' is not defined within the survey. This is deliberate. It was the intention that no-one in a practice role of any description within a Maintained Nursery School (MNS) should feel excluded from responding to the survey. This means that practitioner responses could include those from a wide-range of backgrounds, spanning a government approved qualification spectrum from Level 2 (those meeting basic entry requirements of English and Maths GCSE) to Level 7 (those with full Qualified Teacher Status) and post-graduate degrees.

The survey used a mixture of multiple choice and open ended questions. The multiple choice questions were intended to show, at a glance, the involvement of MNS practitioners in development activities (the 'what') and the open ended questions to go into more depth concerning the impact and reasons behind the activities (the 'why'). The open-ended questions posed were designed to enable practitioners to engage with issues, recount their experiences, and express their values. The aim here has been to do justice to the breadth of responses without being overly repetitive.

The survey questions focused on the following eight areas:

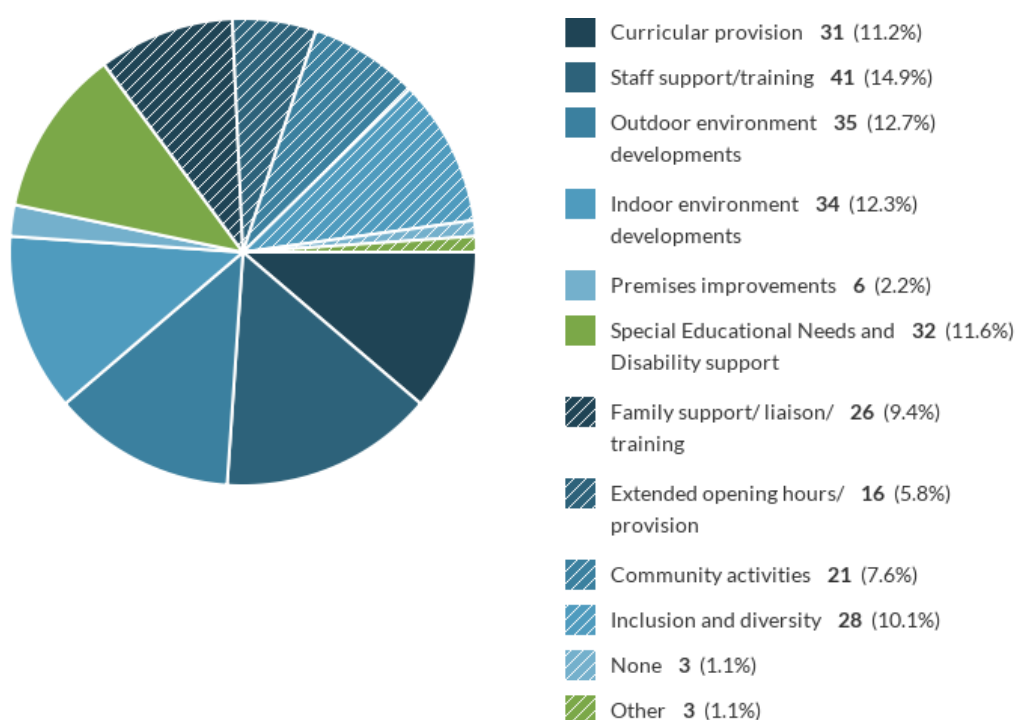
- Provision improvements within their own MNS with which they had been involved
- Provision improvements within their own MNS with which they have not been involved but feel they would be able to contribute to
- Provision improvements (including their own CPD and leadership of CPD) beyond their own MNS
- The impact of their involvement in provision improvements on their own practice, that of their colleagues, children's learning and development within their own MNS and within their community; and the impact on wider partnerships
- The aspects of their practice they would wish to enhance
- The requirements of their MNS to enable it to be successful now and in the future
- The barriers they encounter that prevent the realisation of success now and in the future
- Any other comments.

This data is concerned with critically analysing 'quality EY improvements including the experiences, values and issues of those employed within the maintained nursery sector'. We have adapted and condensed these areas of interest to reflect the concerns of our respondents. Consequently, the first three bullet points broadly address current experiences, values and issues and the final bullet focuses on the immediate and longer term future of the MNS and those employed within it. Therefore we address the original intended outcomes of:

- The ways in which maintained nursery schools lead and contribute to sector improvements.
- The benefits obtained through maintained nursery schools leading on sector improvements
- The barriers encountered by maintained nursery schools which detract from sector improvements.
- The needs of maintained nursery schools to continue to impact upon sector improvements, focusing explicitly on: needs; drivers; and threats

Provision improvements within their own MNS with which they had been involved

What changes have you introduced in the past 12 months to improve provision at your own nursery?



What is immediately clear is that 95% of practitioners in this sample had been involved in development activities of some description. In addition to the areas indicated above through multiple choice questions, 45 practitioners (82%) were eager to share the many ways that the training had impacted upon the settings in more detail. Below are the four main areas contributing to sector improvements that were recognised by practitioners within their own MNSs:

1. Support and training
2. Enhancing curricular provision and the learning environment
3. Special Education Needs and Diversity identification and provision
4. Engaging with children, families and the wider community.

Qualitative data from practitioners relating to each of the areas are provided below.

1. Support and training

The comments below indicate the ongoing developments instigated and carried out by practitioners in MNS. What comes through both sources of data very clearly is the reflective stance that many practitioners take in MNSs to developing their own practice. What becomes more obvious in the following section is how that support and initiative extends beyond the walls of their own setting.

- *I have gone on courses in my own time to develop my knowledge in Early Years provision*
- *I attended a university course in my own time so that I could advise and train others in that area, which was a statutory national award that I had to have*
- *We share our expertise and ideas with students, parents and other professionals that visit our setting*
- *I've assisted in training and supporting a new employee (in the office) to perform the day-to-day clerical duties required to support the Nursery. I've also trained this employee to input data (on a termly basis) into our assessment analysis tool*
- *I have had a major role in developing a 'School Readiness' booklet to help parents /carers to prepare their young children to be independent and ready to take on the exciting journey of starting school*
- *[Training for] staff and children's wellbeing and opening up barriers of communication*
- *Through staff support and training on the role of the adult it has improved staff's interactions and practice. It has helped their own professional development, too. Highlighting provision indoors and out has improved how areas are set up and how best children's learning and development is promoted.*
- *Improvements in children's self-esteem and self-regulation in order to learn and be ready to learn*
- *Increase in parent's understanding and involvement in their children's development particularly in regards to the importance of lifelong learning skills, speech and language and self-regulation*
- *CPD helps practitioners focus thinking on specific areas to monitor progress*
- *Evidence of improved practice in delivering Family Support linked with providing for the child in nursery*
- *The training I have received has really helped with high numbers of children with SEN and English as an additional language training opportunities have helped to alleviate some difficulties on how to handle different situations*
- *My planning has improved and I share this with colleagues*
- *For the training I have delivered feedback suggests that practitioners have many more ideas for activities for the children – e.g. the impact of Physical Literacy training course*
- *CPD has enabled me to really think about impact on children and families and think about how I might evidence this*
- *Helped me clarify my vision so I am better able to communicate this with other practitioners*
- *Training to keep 'up-to-date' means changes to practices which get written into policies which are consistent*
- *staff support and training on the role of the adult has improved staff's interactions and practice with each other, parents and the children generally*

2. Enhancing curricular provision and the learning environment

- *Within our environment/curriculum provision we have taken a lead role in the development of a 'Loose Parts' ['found objects' from the environment rather than manufactured play and learning equipment] project in our outdoor area.*
- *We provide an environment that delivers a curriculum based on children's current needs and interests.*
- *I am involved in developing an environment that is full of learning opportunities and caters for all children of all abilities.*
- *We create a positive, creative, reflective environment to work in and to build positive relationships for the children so they are happy to play and learn.*
- *We hold reflective whole team meetings, and ad hoc discussions on curriculum implementation focused on the children's needs as part of our everyday practice to focus on the children's needs and their progress*
- *We provide a stimulating, rich language environment for all children at an early age as research shows that this is key to children making progress*
- *Changes to the environment using the principles of in the moment planning have really increased child engagement, communication and language skills*
- *Highlighting provision indoors and out door has improved how areas are set up and how best children's learning and development is promoted.*
- *Presently developing the voice of the child supporting our own practice to provide the best start for children, especially those with 'additional needs'*
- *Environment continually improved and enhanced to strengthen and develop the children's learning*
- *Improved pedagogy and children's progression*
- *Improved well-being of staff and children through the strengthening and developing of children's learning*
- *A more enabling environment for children to use and play within*
- *Improved outcomes for children in most curriculum areas*
- *Children being able to make use of additional space and different types of activities to support their development*
- *Using a 'tales toolkit' has helped to develop the children's story telling skills*
- *Curricular developments through our new initiatives have increased literacy teaching for staff and skills of the children*
- *Changes to the environment using the principles of 'in-the-moment' planning have really increased child engagement, communication and language skills and promoted all areas of COEL ['Characteristics of Effective Learning']*
- *Children's progress is consistent for all ages and the range of activities and skills developed by the children has increased*
- *Development of 30 hours provision has since increased attainment*
- *CPD 'Talk for writing' training has helped evolve children deeper understanding of stories and language skills.*

3. Special Education Needs and Diversity identification and provision

- *We provide a stimulating, rich in language environment. This is essential at an early age for early development, to provide better outcomes. Highlighting children with learning difficulties means many children get the support they need before starting school, for example an EHCP in place, specialist provision explored and visual aids in place...*
- *Supporting families to engage with services to protect and support the child in difficult circumstances.*
- *We are lucky to have an SSC [Special Support Centre focused on enhancing language and communication for those children with delay]*
- *We have a project for the provision of 10 places for children with complex special needs and disabilities, some children have remained as Reception aged children. This provision has included ensuring the curriculum and the children's additional needs are catered for*
- *We have a programme of early identification of SEN [Special Education Needs] and then ongoing, appropriate support for children and their families.*
- *Early identification and then support for children and families who otherwise may not have been identified until primary school.*
- *We have improved our links with EAL [English As An Additional Language] families which has impacted on much more effective communication and involvement*
- *Our nursery school community works and plays and meets with families with children with complex SEN*
- *The children with special needs have had enhanced activities due to the staff's additional knowledge derived from training regarding the children with complex special needs. A particular focus being how central a child's physical and sensory development is to their well-being and ability to learn and develop*
- *PATH has had a positive impact on relationships we have with families and the shared understanding of children's learning it produces*
- *Great progress for our SEN children*
- *Children who come out of their own worlds (Autism) and begin to seek social and emotional interaction with practitioners*

4. Engaging actively with children, families and the wider community

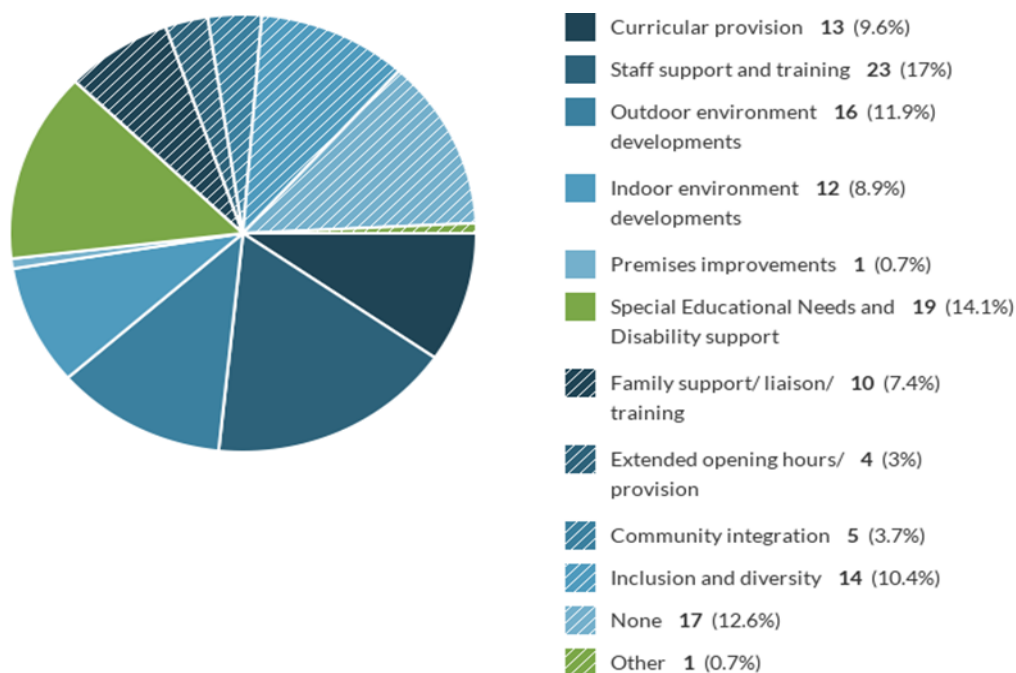
- *Working with a retirement centre next door to the setting with children and staff has brought joy and pleasure to the lives of the residents and to the children. The children are very effective at finding ways to communicate*
- *Teaming up with a local theatre company and sixth form of academy school next door to put on a puppet show for all the children, staff and parents/carers that attend our provision. This way of working generates a sense of our education in common*
- *Have developed extended provision to meet families' and carers' needs which has been a great success and support to working families*
- *We are supporting vulnerable families in a range of situations and we adapt to their needs so that their children can continue to learn*
- *A better understanding of child development and how to support it in children who are not developing as expected and how to work in partnership with the families*

- *In my role, I liaise with and support families on a daily basis. I regularly assist parents with their 30 hours applications/re-confirmations. I ensure that our parents are well informed about how the process works, and wherever possible they do not miss the deadline to reconfirm their eligibility. This keeps them in work and provides a security for their children*
- *I prompt families to check whether they are eligible for further help/whether they could access other payment options (such as tax free childcare)*
- *We hold a children's creativity exhibition in the local church and library which is a huge community asset*
- *Parents share their worries and concerns with us and we sign-post them to a wide range of advice and support. Having a place to come to is a life-line for our parents*
- *We have improved the quality of the home lives of our children and their parents through the support we give them with learning through play. Parents and carers tell us about the difference this makes*
- *We are helping the community with signposting and an informed understanding of what is available to them [with their young children] and how this can help [the whole family]*
- *We are running community accessible groups with a focus on early language and home learning. This is reassuring to young and vulnerable parents*
- *We pride ourselves on our positive parent partnerships at our setting. This has led to parents feeling they can share their worries and concerns, leading to a variety of early interventions and sign posting to a wide range of advice and support. All leading to alleviation of worry and stress which would otherwise have a detrimental effect on our children.*
- *We are involved in developing community hubs.*
- *Extended care outside nursery hours means that parents and carers know their children settle well and enjoy the experiences that this service provides*
- *We are working alongside partner agencies, in particular health, social care and schools. This means supporting families to engage with services to protect and support the child. This partnership working has improved children's outcomes*
- *Parents being more able to cope with behavioural issues and develop boundaries*
- *Great family links – families who come to us for support and advice – we throw them a life-line*
- *Supporting vulnerable families means we now see them able to access the right support from other professionals with whom we put them in touch*
- *Parents feel they can share their worries – many of them are so isolated. This alleviates their worry and distress which otherwise gets focused on their children*
- *We have happy children and happy families. They see us as their 'wider family'*
- *We have open, supportive, kindly and informative dialogue with parents who trust us*
- *Family-support sessions have been especially impactful – helping to support parents with challenging behaviour of their children outside nursery; supporting the development of children's listening skills at home; developing literacy and maths through play*
- *Providing support and guidance with children's toileting issues.*

The benefits of leading and contributing to sector improvements

The culture of MNS is that they not only focus upon their own setting but also offer development opportunities to other. The pie chart below indicates that during the last twelve months 70% of MNS practitioners had attended development activities put on by other MNS or had hosted their own training that was open to other settings. Many had attended a number of training activities, which is why the amounts add up to far more than the 55 respondents. Collaborative working is embedded within the MNS approach.

Have you been involved in any development activities led by other maintained nursery schools? Or, have you led on any yourself? If so, what was the focus?



Some comments made about the ways that these practitioners have worked with colleagues in other settings included:

- *We are promoting links with other maintained nursery schools in our county to develop and share best practice*
- *We prepared and conduct training days for PVI settings Impact on practitioners' practice which has benefited children's progress and deeper learning*
- *I am line-managing the Early Years hub in the local area to develop a practitioner's role as hub co-ordinator.*
- *I am now able to provide outstanding provision in the Early Years and great advice to a wide variety of people about all aspects of the Early Years*
- *Nursery schools are used as examples of good practice in our local area and we have visits from early Years schools and settings.*
- *Working alongside partner agencies: In particular health, social care and schools which children will move on to. This is demanding work with children with complex needs.*
- *We share our expertise and ideas with students, parents and other professionals that visit our setting.*

- *That so many within our local community have been included and feel able to feel engaged*
- *We have increased our profile in the community and garnered useful contacts with local businesses.*
- *Helping another Nursery School helped me to confirm whether my own processes were as refined and efficient as they could be.*
- *I took part in training on Action Research, and am undertaking some research within our two nursery settings, exploring the impact of sharing video clips of their children with parents at IEP reviews.*
- *I feel more confident in my ability to improve my practice knowing that I'm involved in an 'outstanding' setting and therefore sharing my experience with others knowing it's the best practice there is to be had.*
- *I am able to support other staff such as Nursery Nurses and Teaching Assistants*
- *I feel that I have been able to provide the right education for all the children within my class. Through working with other professionals and coming together to provide excellent practice and clear expectations for all children.*

What are the needs of maintained nursery schools generally in terms of continuing improvements within the sector?

The impact that maintained nurseries consistently have upon sector developments, if we are to take this data above as indicative of the wider MNS population, is clearly significant. Therefore the focus of our next questions was around whether this impact could be maintained and if so, what would be needed. We provided suggested areas and also prompted the practitioners to identify any others that they thought necessary.

Increased funding or (at least) clarity on future funding

All practitioners that responded felt that an increase in funding would be needed for MNS to continue their current standard of work, and 73% of the sample felt that this was 'very important'; 87% felt that more certainty was needed regarding their future funding.

When asked to make any further comment about what was needed for nurseries to sustain, 11 of the 16 comments made related to a lack of funding. These related to fewer staff meaning less opportunity for training and progression and the demotivating nature of continual cuts. In addition, invited to comment on *any* other aspects that they felt important to share at the end of the survey, again, 22 of the 30 practitioners' comments related to funding. Some of these comments are shown below:

- *Increased funding would allow staff to spend more quality time with key children rather than being rushed off their feet.*
- *...the lack of certainty in the future of funding for the Early Years is another huge issue. I hate not being able to plan my future and this may lead me to another career path.*

- *As a nursery school we have a tremendous positive effect upon the children and families we work with. This is in part due to the expertise among the staff, financial security will ensure that these knowledgeable staff are able to remain at the school.*
- *As a maintained Nursery School, we are already giving the sector significant support in improving early years practice but this is not sustainable without more funding into the maintained nursery school sector.*
- *Nursery schools are invaluable in disadvantaged areas where experienced practitioners work passionately to deliver their roles and responsibilities. So they deserve to be recognised for working hard and to be fairly rewarded for longer hours.*
- *Quality provision comes at a cost and nurseries need more sustainable funding to ensure that best practice remains high.*
- *Limited funding and uncertainty of future funding can and will make it difficult to keep skilled staff and train any new staff to the standard required to provide outstanding provision.*
- *Insufficient funding impacts on staffing levels which impacts on all areas e.g. Training, teaching time and time to spend with vulnerable families. To notice a change in our families requires time to talk to children, families and colleagues.*
- *The lack of money means we are short-staffed and cannot spend as much time with individual children as we want.*
- *The sector is grossly underfunded meaning there is not enough resource for settings.*
- *Continuous changes causes confusion in the setting, insufficient funding and future funding is daunting for the most vulnerable families in our community*

Additionally, various versions of the following comments were heard a number of times, relaying how nurseries are now forced into finding various routes of funding in order, to maintain their level of service:

- *Funding is becoming more of an issue. Budget cuts are constantly on the agenda and trying to find ways to save money are the main topic in meetings rather than educational issues.*
- *With such uncertainty to our future viability and funding, every staff member, particularly the head and SLT are constantly spending time and energy to ensure we find ways to survive*
- *Due to funding cuts to early years and the maintained sector, we are forced to put significantly more time, and energies into fundraising and grant applications. If it weren't for the time and energy we put into fundraising, we wouldn't even be able to afford to buy essential resources, toys, etc... for the Nursery. We are at a stage where we've cost-cut to the furthest degree possible, and are reaching a critical point of there being nothing else that we can do to save money/reduce our deficit.*
- *We have increased our profile in the community and garnered useful contacts with local businesses. The activities have also enabled us to fund raise.*

- *Our provision relies a lot on bringing in income from other sources, training and grants for project work, not guaranteed every year- have to find new ways to bring in income.*

Professionalised workforce certainty

Ninety six per cent of practitioners believed it was important to have clarity about the qualifications necessary to work in the EY workforce. They commented upon the ignorance that persisted where EY qualifications were concerned. In addition, respondents highlighted the lack of understanding that existed around the role of a maintained nursery and how it differed to other provisions. The following practitioners highlighted these points:

- *Nursery practitioners are regarded as low level staff with low qualifications. Plenty have degrees and have invested years into CPD but are still met with low paid and even degrading positions. Early years is so important to continued learning in a child's life, beginning a love of learning and engagement is fundamental to a happy society and this is not recognised in the insufficient funding and status it receives.*
- *For the work that happens within nursery schools with not only the child but the family as a whole to be more recognised. The dedication and professionalism that surrounds this role. For the importance of early years to be promoted and the importance of early experiences and how nursery schools go above and beyond to make a difference for the children and families.*
- *To be recognised and valued for the work, commitment and dedication that is put in day by day to make a difference to the children and families we deal with. To be recognised as a profession as we do make a difference!*
- *Yes, we may cost more than PVI's but that is because the quality, knowledge and experience of the staff teams are invaluable to providing an inspirational, life changing start to the children and families in our communities.*
- *Nursery schools are a special and precious place to work. They are wonderful places to work, and provide a major contribution to the wider community with their expertise and work with families. Staff, however, are stretched almost to breaking point and need and deserve more recognition, in both financial terms and in the amazing work they do.*
- *A greater understanding of the role nursery schools play within the local area, supporting often vulnerable children and families; within the authority sharing excellent practice and moving thinking along; within the country, we specialise in early year's education and are able to develop a deeper understanding through that specialism.*

More consistent policy expectations

In response to the question asking what was needed for MNSs to continue to function, a number of practitioners made reference to the unstable policy platform that their setting currently inhabited. They felt it impossible to plan more than a few months ahead because they had no idea how their educational landscape would look. They discussed how this not only had a destabilising effect on them, but the vulnerable families that they worked with.

- *As a nursery school, there is no certainty to the funding we will receive, therefore difficult to make long term investments.*
- *Knowing your setting has a future*

- *Continuous changes causes confusion in the setting, insufficient funding and future funding is daunting for the most vulnerable families in our community*

The moral obligation that many staff in MNS feel

How funds could be stretched was a key topic of interviews with leaders but it was also mentioned a number of times in the practitioner survey responses. What came through repeatedly was that EY practitioners in MNSs were working above and beyond their paid roles as they felt a sense of duty towards the vulnerable children and families that they worked with. This will be discussed more fully in the interview section, but below is an indication of just some of the views presented by practitioners through the survey:

- *There is zero work life balance.*
- *This has impacted on my personal life and my family life especially at weekends when I can work up to nine hours over 2 days.*
- *My role involves much more than teaching young children because of the services that were once provided to support families are slowly declining, which means practitioners have to pick up the pieces, becoming carers, providing family support and advice, acting as a midwife by giving toilet training and training in the importance of being healthy, to name just a few. This has a huge impact on my time, and trying to fit my own family's needs in can be difficult.*
- *I have worked in Early Years for 37 years, mainly within nursery schools, and have seen many changes. One area which concerns me is the decrease in contracted hours but increase in expectation. While I have always worked beyond my contracted hours, this has now become an expectation. Within my setting staff frequently work one and a half to two hours over their contracted hours most days*
- *School day rarely gives time for record keeping i.e. tapestry obs, and floor book time. Have to do these at home and discuss with teacher after children have gone home much later than contracted hours of work.*
- *Staff are underpaid for the level of responsibility and demands that they have - most work additional hours unpaid.*
- *With such uncertainty to our future viability and funding, every staff member, particularly the head and SLT are constantly spending time and energy to ensure we find ways to survive*
- *Staff work long hours putting the children in their class first. Many staff take on a second job to help with running a home and providing for their own family. Funds can be so low in a school that many staff purchase resources out of their own pocket.*

A service in crisis

The survey responses, in addition to the interviews, made very clear that MNS had reached crisis point. After managing to cope with continual cuts through careful strategic leadership and a great amount of goodwill, many practitioners and leaders felt that they were now on the brink of closure. They had reached crisis point. A number of practitioners, below, commented on this fact, and the great sense of loss they felt at this reality:

- *Within Nursery Schools the quality of provision and commitment to delivery by highly qualified staff teams is being undermined and disregarded with the ongoing lack of commitment to long term funding. We continually hear of the need for early intervention and the importance of quality early years provision for our country's youngest students yet the very settings that offer this at the highest level remain in the firing line and at risk of extinction!!!*
- *Our SEND (diagnosis of autism) children all deserve one-to-one support to achieve their full potential. We have a duty of care to help them achieve this. Those who need special schools, have the right to access them without having to wait for places to become available. Some of our children have been forced to attend mainstream schools in the interim and have been either excluded, or had their hours of attendance reduced to only two days a week. Some parents choose to keep their children at home instead of having them being bullied in mainstream schools because of their needs. It should not be acceptable in any part of society.*
- *Early years are so important. It's like building a house, if you don't get the foundations right the rest will topple down. If we don't get children's early education right, then their future learning can be damaged. We need funds to train staff and keep good staff, money to buy specialist early year's resources, to maintain building etc...*
- *Early year's education are the foundations for life. If we get it right here, we get it right for the future lives of so many. Injecting more financial support and additional training for all staff is a priority.*
- *Maintained Nurseries are incredibly special and unique places. There are so many disadvantaged and SEND children who will not get the right support at the right time if maintained Nursery schools do not exist!*
- *To consider getting rid of those establishments that build the strongest foundation to future learning is a short sighted and catastrophic waste!*