

## Justifying charges

Our panel discuss how to explain extra charges to parents. By **Gabriella Jozwiak**

**Q.** A group of parents has formally complained to us about our consumables charge for funded places, which is £1 per hour. It's the first time this has happened and I'm not sure how to respond



**Charlotte White, manager and early years teacher, Repton Manor Nursery**

'I would start with checking your local authority's provider agreement.

Ensure you can charge for consumables, as some local authorities do not allow this.

'Then check your setting's new-starters policy. Make sure it is clear that there is a charge for consumables, what the consumables are, and if it is a compulsory or

voluntary charge. Also check this is clear on your website.

'Then invite the parents in for an informal meeting. Bring in your deputy manager so they can witness what is being said. Present them with a breakdown of what you are charging for. And explain to them that the Government needs to change the wording of "free education", because it is not free. You could suggest if parents do not want to pay a consumables

charge, they can provide the items themselves, such as nappies and wipes.

'We have had to introduce charges at our nursery too. We explained our reasons for this to parents from the start. We now charge a non-refundable registration fee for all families, apart from those who claim for free-for-tuos funding. We thought that would put off parents, but it has not. We are still really busy.

'We also make up the shortfall by doing fundraising. When we do a stay-and-play for a special occasion, we put out a donation box. One of our parents put £20 in there last week. If you're clear with parents where the money is going, and what you will spend it on, parents are more than likely to support you.

'You can also charge for extracurricular activities. For example, a Forest School or football or dance coaches.'

### Louise Young, operations manager, Cambridge Montessori and Smiths Children Montessori



'Respond to the parents by saying you understand their position. Have a face-to-face meeting if it is a large group. It is usually easier to pull everybody together and have a conversation. Then they know that you are taking concerns seriously.

'During this meeting, explain that your terms and conditions, and fee structure, clearly state these charges are allowed. Always refer to those policies and procedures. Make sure you have a member of staff with you to take minutes. Once you have had that meeting, pull all the meeting comments together into a fact sheet and circulate it.

'Nine times out of ten, parents do not fully understand the reason behind the charges. This is because the [previous]

Government always described funded places as "free". But you are allowed to charge your consumables at a rate that is suitable for you. Every local authority has different rules about what you can charge for, so make sure you are following these.

'Also be sure to follow your own complaints procedures. For any normal complaint, parents go to speak to the manager. But if they email us, and say it is a formal complaint, that triggers our formal complaints policy. If parents felt their complaint was being badly handled, they could then take steps to refer us to Ofsted. However, if you have followed the local authority's and your own policies, this should not be a concern.'

### Susan Mead, owner, Friendly Faces Nursery and Childminding



'You are allowed to charge for extra costs, because the Government has not allocated funds for things like meals and nappies. We charge for food at our nursery, but that actually makes up our staffing costs because the national minimum wage has gone up. We have no choice, really. When we put up our nursery costs, or we have added any costs, we have given parents adequate notice.

'I have given big speeches in Manchester about the childcare crisis as part of the March Of The Mummies protest. One of the campaign points of this movement is the fact that England has the second-most-expensive childcare system in the world due to years of government underfunding. Early years funding is a national

problem – all nurseries are struggling. Sit down and talk to the parents about this and explain to them that we are in crisis. Tell them they can get on board and help. They can go on protest marches too.

'If you can explain to parents what is happening nationally, they will understand. If they do not understand the situation, they will just get cross if they see prices going up. Show them how much funding you receive per hour, and how much it costs you to provide that care. Sometimes just showing the staff wage versus what you get paid is enough.

'Most people will understand that costs and prices are going up, and that is just the way the economy is at the moment.'