

Accountability is Key to Operating Nurseries

By Arti Poddar

Recent reports that twelve nurseries in the Glasgow area are being investigated by police over suspicion that they may have links to organised crime, comes as a blow to an already hard-pressed nurseries sector.

As local authorities cut back on the number of children's places they are able to fund, nurseries already have their work cut out to continue to invest in enhanced facilities and improved learning environments for children.

Hitherto, cash businesses such as taxi firms and security companies have provided the main focus of worries over money laundering. Allegations that nurseries are being used as a front for money laundering by creating the fiction that children who do not exist are attending the nursery and that their equally fictitious parents are paying cash for their care are not entirely new. But cautious nursery owners have long been aware of the fact that their businesses are open to exploitation in this way.

The Care Commission, the regulator of nurseries and other organisations which provide care has an important part to play in this issue and is active in visiting nurseries to report on their performance. Every nursery has a rating from the Care Commission which can be found on the Care Commission website. Anxious parents can be assured that these checks are thorough and timely.

Part of the Care Commission's oversight role is to identify any existing or potential nursery operators who are involved, perhaps through connections to family members, with organised crime in the locality. Its brief, now enhanced by the money laundering reports, is to ensure that only 'fit and proper' people are allowed to run nursery services.

One way for owners and managers to avoid any taint of suspicion is to ensure that all children attending nurseries are recorded and catalogued, with individual files for each child that contain a photograph and a record of their date of birth, address, weight and height.

Attendance records, cross-checked against each individual file, are also required to ensure that there is a traceable link between the payments made for care and the number of times the child attends the nursery on a weekly or monthly basis.

A critical factor here of course is a payment record. Cash payments for care are not desirable since they leave the nursery and its management open to a taint of suspicion.

Best practice suggests that cheque payments, or credit or debit card payments, or better still, standing order payments, are to be preferred.

Nursery owners and managers have an obligation to put in place robust administrative and payment systems to make it transparent that their businesses are beyond suspicion.

Organised crime is a scourge on society and its involvement with such a sensitive and vital sector as nurseries needs to be stamped out decisively and quickly through the adoption of best practice throughout the country.

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