# Petition launched to save Middlewood Nursery amid Ofsted concerns



A petition has been initiated to save Middlewood Nursery, a forest-based childcare facility in Sheffield, after concerns arose over potential funding withdrawal following an Ofsted inspection rating it as ‘Inadequate’. Middlewood Nursery, which has been operating since 2014, was informed in January that four out of the five evaluated criteria, including quality of education, fell short of acceptable standards.

Sarah Blackell, the nursery's owner and advocates of the ‘Forest Schools’ approach, expressed her devastation at the findings, stating she was “beyond words” at the implications for the nursery. With reliance on Sheffield City Council’s Funded Early Learning (FEL), there is a risk that the funding may be withdrawn automatically, as indicated by Ofsted protocols when an establishment receives such a rating. Although the council has not yet made a final decision regarding the funding, it raises significant concerns about the nursery’s future.

The nursery, located on Winn Gardens, has an enrolment of over 60 children, and if the funding is indeed ceased, it would face closure by May 2025. Parent Rebecca Gibson, whose daughter has attended the nursery for two years, voiced her outrage over the situation. She remarked, “There are around 65 children who now need alternative placements, and with just four weeks' notice, many families are left with nowhere to turn.”

Parents have praised the holistic approach of Middlewood Nursery, particularly its emphasis on outdoor education, as children spend a minimum of two hours daily in the woods with caregivers. Gibson noted a remarkable transformation in her daughter, Harriet, who was previously shy and anxious but has since blossomed into a confident and outgoing child. “That kind of growth doesn’t just happen, it’s the result of a setting that genuinely cares,” Gibson added.

Despite the positive feedback from parents, the initial Ofsted report raised concerns regarding the nursery's teaching methodology, particularly related to safeguarding measures, which they described as ‘not effective’. Specific criticisms included the lengthy walks children undertake to reach wooded areas in inclement weather, with staff reportedly failing to provide adequate shelter or ensure children are properly dressed to stay warm.

Parents have expressed that these claims feel like an unjustified attack on the forest schools’ educational ethos, which prioritises children's wellbeing. Gibson commented on the Scandinavian model on which the nursery’s approach is based, pointing out that outcomes for children in those environments are among the highest globally.

In response to the Ofsted report, Robin Hindle, Chief Operational Officer of the nursery, stated that it contained inaccuracies, insisting that the nursery had filed a complaint regarding the assessment's validity. Although Ofsted later upheld their initial rating, they did make amendments to the report published on April 14, correcting several previously noted issues.

Currently, Middlewood Nursery is in the 'Notice of Concern' process with the council, and a decision regarding its funding is pending. The petition, aimed at reinstating funding, has garnered nearly 500 signatures, and supporters are awaiting a response from local authorities regarding the future of the nursery and the children it serves.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)