



Labour Friends of Sure Start

Government Childcare Plans: Under-Funded, Incoherent Chaos.

The Government has recently unveiled three high profile childcare policies.

- Free nursery places for disadvantaged two year olds.
- Childcare providers will be able to change carer-child ratios so one adult can care for six two-year olds, instead of the current four children – and one adult can care for four one year olds, instead of the current three. These proposals have been met with virtually unanimous opposition from the childcare profession.
- From 2015 working families will receive vouchers to fund up to 20% of their childcare costs.

Labour Friends of Sure Start believes that all three of these policies are deeply flawed.

The Government funded its nursery places commitment by slashing Sure Start.

It has compounded this dreadful decision by making an utter mess of its own policy.

The nursery places policy is critically under-funded. This is having a devastating ripple effect.

Rather than investing the necessary amount, the Government is dangerously deregulating the sector.

The ratios plan is outrageous and utterly incoherent. But this is only the tip of the ice-berg: the Government's whole agenda is to reduce quality and care in order to shoe-horn ever more babies into nurseries.

In the longer term the Government's childcare voucher scheme will collapse under the inflation it creates. The only long term solution to the childcare crisis is to invest in nursery capacity.

Sure Start should never have been slashed but it is a tragedy that it has been slashed to fund such incompetence and incoherence.

Nursery Places for Disadvantaged Two Year Olds: Critically Under-Funded.

The Government's plan is ill-thought-out, inadequately resourced and is having a devastating ripple effect on the childcare sector.

The policy aims to provide 130,000 places by September 2013. But as of May 2013 only 75,000 places have been identified.

Free nursery places are usually effectively subsidised by working parents topping up their free hours by buying additional hours of care from nurseries. The new policy covers parents who cannot afford this, so the funding model breaks down – leading to the 55,000 shortfall in places.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-22338342>

This shortfall is bad enough, but the steps the Government is taking to redress it are even worse.

Relaxing Ratios: Baby Warehouses.

Rather than investing the funds necessary to make their policy a genuine success, the Government is trying to meet the shortfall of nursery places by shoe-horning more and more children into nurseries.

The proposed relaxation of carer:child ratios is opposed by all five of the biggest childcare providers in the UK, as well as by Mumsnet and Netmums.

Children will miss out on dedicated care and childcare workers will be overwhelmed.

"Children will suffer physically and emotionally" says the Pre-school Learning Alliance.

Hardly surprising then that 84% of mums oppose relaxing ratios.

<http://m.guardian.co.uk/education/2013/apr/27/parents-join-nurseries-protest-ratios>

Relaxing Ratios: Utterly Incoherent

But the plans to relax ratios are not simply unfair on families and employees, they are also utterly incoherent.

The Government's calculations rely on nurseries being 100% full for 52 weeks of the year. Yet the small print in the Government's own report acknowledges that this will not be the case.

Similarly Government calculations are based on the higher ratios being in place full time. But their own policy is that the new ratios should only be used for *"shorter periods of time."*

Even if these fantasy calculations are ignored, the Government's claim that their policy could cut childcare costs by 28% relies on no increases to staff salaries. Yet part of the Government's policy is to make childcare a graduate profession.

Even if their plans work, the savings can either cut costs or increase salaries to graduate level. The Government is cynically double-counting in claiming both.

No wonder the Pre-school Learning Alliance denounces the plans as “a work of fiction.”

<https://www.pre-school.org.uk/media/press-releases/377/pre-school-learning-alliance-dismisses-government-s-childcare-ratio-profits-report-as-a-work-of-fiction>

Not Just Ratios: Lowering Standards.

As the debate about ratios rages, the Government is quietly proposing a series of equally dangerous steps to deregulate the sector

Currently childcare providers must be inspected by Ofsted before they can receive funding from the nursery places entitlement. The Government proposes to change this so nurseries must simply be registered with Ofsted - but need not have been inspected yet.

Currently childcare providers have to be Outstanding or Good to be guaranteed funding. The Government proposes to extend this to Satisfactory providers too.

And the Government proposes to limit the funding conditions that local Councils can impose on childcare providers.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-proposed-changes-to-the-role-of-the-local-authority-in-early-education-and-childcare>

So nurseries which previously were not good enough to receive funding will now be able to do so. And nurseries with completely unknown quality levels will also now be able to receive funding. At the same time the vital role Councils play in guaranteeing local quality will be drastically reduced.

The message is simple: the Government has not invested enough to make its nursery places policy work. So it is desperately lowering quality standards to try and create additional places. The fact that these places may be utterly substandard is completely ignored.

2015 Childcare Voucher: Right Problem, Wrong Solution.

Childcare vouchers are a misdirection of precious funds.

Because Government plans are to pay a percentage of childcare costs rather than a fixed sum, they include a perverse incentive for childcare providers to increase fees.

Vouchers lead to inflation. This means the taxpayer will pay more and the parent may well end up paying the same amount as they did before.

Even leaving aside the fact that vouchers inflate prices, it is vital to remember that the Government plans would not begin until 2015. Childcare costs are already rising at 6% per year - so parents will receive 12% less in real terms than the day the policy was announced.

Finally the IPPR show that the policy is regressive. It will disproportionately favour the affluent and it offers relatively little to the squeezed middle.

http://www.ippr.org/?p=1019&option=com_wordpress&Itemid=17#.UUhX74ycO_g.twitter

The 2015 Childcare Voucher policy offers little to parents. The only long term solution to the childcare crisis is to invest in extending nursery capacity.

The Government failed to do this when it extended nursery places for two year olds and all the subsequent problems flow from this.

The Government should never have cut Sure Start to fund nursery places – but the incompetent way it has done so is an absolute tragedy.

