

Why the Tories' so-called free childcare will punish children and families ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When, just a few weeks before the 2015 general election, the Conservative party announced that it would be introducing 30 hours of so-called free childcare for working parents in England – promptly overshadowing Labour's own 25-hour pledge – parents rejoiced.

In a country where parents can spend more on childcare than they do on their mortgages, this offer was seen as a lifeline for many families. Unfortunately, the closer we get to the September 2017 rollout of the extended offer, the clearer it becomes that this policy has been rushed through, is ill thought out, and crucially, is massively underfunded.

Earlier this month the government published a disappointing response to the long-awaited consultation on early-years funding. Despite repeated warnings from the early-years sector that the 30-hour offer is not being properly financed, the Department for Education confirmed that it is ploughing ahead with its "ambitious" plans.

What makes this so frustrating is that the problem of early-years underfunding is not new. For years the amount that the government pays providers (nurseries, schools, pre-schools and childminders) to deliver early-years places hasn't come close to covering the actual cost, meaning that providers lose money on every "free" hour they provide.

As it stands, all three- and four-year-olds, and the most disadvantaged 40% of two-year-olds, in England can receive 15 hours of government-funded early education and childcare a week, but independent research commissioned by the Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA) in 2014 found that for every five children currently accessing funded places as part of the 15-hour offer, government funding only covers four.

So you can imagine our frustration when, instead of addressing this problem, the government – in a fit of pre-election pledge-making – decided to exacerbate it. A 2015 government review of the cost of delivering childcare places prompted a small increase in average funding rates, but nowhere near enough to plug the funding shortfall. In fact, in its consultation response the government confirmed that 20% of local areas will actually see their early-years funding decrease when the new funding rates come into effect in April 2017.

Worse still, the government has confirmed that these new funding rates – rates that so many have warned are insufficient – will be fixed until 2020, even as national minimum and living wages, mortgages, rents, utilities and other business costs inevitably rise. Last week the government admitted that it has no plans to formally review the costs of delivering childcare and early-years education.

In what world is this an acceptable approach to policymaking, especially for the delivery of a flagship manifesto pledge? The government cannot shut its eyes and hope this problem goes away. Without sufficient funding, we're likely to see more and more early-years providers restricting the number of funded places they offer, if not opting out of the scheme completely in order to stay in business: and, consequently, more and more parents struggling to find a "free" place for their child.

The simple fact is that the 30-hour offer can only work if government funding actually covers the costs of delivering early-years places, something that the PLA's Fair Future Funding campaign is calling on the government to ensure. This is not about asking for endless investment. It's about the government committing itself to properly funding a pledge that it chose to make.

And it's not about taxpayers paying for other people's children to be looked after. It's about investing in quality early education, just as we do for state-funded primary and secondary education.

Either the government can afford to fund this policy properly or it can't – and if it can't, it needs to come clean and admit that the childcare it is offering parents isn't free after all, but merely subsidised.

This is a government that has talked a lot about life chances, about closing the gap and ensuring that all children get the best start in life. And yet, somehow we are in a situation where its childcare policy is falling apart at the seams, children's centre closures are on the rise, and no one seems to be willing to admit there's a problem.

If the government is truly committed to supporting children and families, its actions need to start matching its rhetoric.

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