

More hours must not come at the expense of quality, or the future of disadvantaged children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ministers have long-ignored the siren calls warning that their childcare policies risk further damaging the childcare market. Unless they act soon their new 30-hour offer will be sunk.

Investing in early education and care is one of the best investments a country can make: it literally is investing in our future. Good quality early education and care can boost children's attainment, help narrow the gap between poor children and their wealthier peers, raise family incomes by enabling parents to go out to work and provide businesses with a reliable workforce. Everyone benefits from strategic investment in childcare.

The current Government has recognised the potential of childcare even with their austerity agenda. They have promised much to parents, pledging at the election to double the amount of free childcare working parents with three- and four-year olds can access.

However, crucially, they have failed to recognise and realise the twin economic and social infrastructure imperatives of childcare investment which means that they risk missing out on the full potential of all the £6billion we spend on early education and care.

Good quality childcare is key to realising the great potential of all of our children. It is in these crucial pre-school years that children learn the skills that set them up for life. Beyond letters and numbers, they will be learning how to share toys, take turns with other children and manage their emotions.

Current Government policy focuses on enabling parents to work, and, while this is an important goal and one I fully support, the current approach is putting the quality of childcare at risk. New research from the Family and Childcare Trust looks at the Government's flagship policy of providing 30 hours of free childcare for children with working parents and what it could mean for the wider childcare market. Their findings raise some very serious concerns.

There is plenty of debate about whether the new 30 hour policy will work and whether parents who are eligible will even be able to find a place. But we also need to ask what price we are willing to pay for it to be delivered. While hard pressed working parents will welcome the extra money in their pocket, they certainly didn't sign up for poorer care for their kids.

One in three councils do not know whether this will reduce quality in their local area. The families living in these areas could see their childcare choices cut back, and children could miss out on the boost that high quality childcare provides.

The report raises particular concerns for the most vulnerable children. All three and four year olds and the 40 per cent of the most vulnerable two year olds are entitled to 15 hours of free childcare. This was first introduced by the last Labour government and continued by the Coalition with the aim of boosting child development. And it works. We must make sure that we don't do anything that puts this achievement at risk.

But councils and childcare providers are raising the alarm that the 30 hour policy could do just this. Half of local authorities say they don't know whether there will be enough childcare for the 15 hour offers for two, three and four year olds.

Feedback from providers and local authorities highlights that they are particularly worried about how disabled children would be affected. They are already less likely to get their free childcare place, and this could make matters a lot worse.

We will only truly get value for money if we value the quality of childcare. As well as helping children and parents today, high quality early education and care helps children to develop the skills they will need for tomorrow.

We are in danger of losing sight that only the highest quality early education and childcare reaps social and economic dividends. Britain desperately needs a new childcare strategy so we can get the greatest bang for our buck.

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