

Think-tank weighs up parties' childcare policies ^[1]

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Source: Nursery World

Format: Article

Publication Date: 25 May 2017

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

The Education Policy Institute has analysed the early years and education policies set out in the party manifestos and given its verdict.

The analysis considers the extent to which each party addresses some of the key challenges facing education today, as well as whether their policies appear to be based on credible evidence of likely impact. Where possible, the EPI has compared each party's spending commitments with its own estimates of likely costs.

On early years and childcare, it says that both the Labour and Liberal Democrat policies are 'ambitious and costly', while the Conservatives have promised capital funding to help schools to open nurseries without giving any cost estimates.

Labour has costed its policy to extend the 30 hours to all two-, three- and four-year-olds, employ more graduates to work with pre-school children, and £500m for children's centres at an extra £3.5 billion a year.

However, the EPI estimates that this would cost £6.4bn – not taking into account more capital funding, subsidies for childcare over 30 hours a week and rises to staff salaries.

It says there would be some savings from tax credits and tax-free provision, 'but the overall early years budget would likely need to double to meet these extensive commitments'.

It points out that international evidence suggests that more intensive investments targeted at the most needy may provide better value for money. Liberal Democrat plans to triple the Early Years Pupil Premium are 'promising in this respect, but there is not yet any clear evidence of impact from the current level of funding,' it says.

'A significant challenge' for Labour and Lib Dem plans 'is ensuring that there is sufficient capacity in the early years sector, in terms of both the capital investment needed and the investment in upskilling the existing workforce'.

The Conservatives have promised to set up a capital funding pot to enable primary schools to develop early years provision, and a presumption that new primary schools will have nurseries. The report points out that they 'have not given any estimates of how much they would allocate to this but, as well as capital funding, this commitment will also include additional salary costs due to staffing regulations in maintained settings'.

It concludes, 'While it is clear that some form of additional investment is required to raise attainment and school readiness at age five for disadvantaged children, it is not at all clear what form that investment needs to take.

'There is a risk that further investment in additional quantity of childcare provided by low-paid staff could prove to be ineffective, and simply increasing low-cost universal provision may result in more deadweight costs and have little impact on child development outcomes. A better strategy given the absence of clearly evidenced policy options would be to pilot and rigorously evaluate any new approaches before committing to them at a national scale...Proposals to raise the quality of care and education through a more graduate-led workforce or by opening new school-based nursery classes are also not currently underpinned by convincing evidence, but could be evaluated through phased pilot programmes.

'EPI believes that the next Government should make it a priority to establish a stronger evidence base in this area.'

Natalie Perera, executive director and head of research at the EPI, said, 'The general election has provided parties with the opportunity to address critical issues in education, such as the wide socio-economic attainment gap, access to good schools, and the opportunity for high quality qualifications beyond the age of 16. These should all be high on the list of priorities for the next Education Secretary.

'Our report is designed to inform and stimulate debate about education policy options in the next parliament, and help to ensure that policy development is based on research evidence and not political hunch. We hope our detailed report is of interest to policy makers and the public alike.'

-reprinted from Nursery World

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Tags: child care ^[4]

policy ^[5]

qualifications ^[6]

entitlement ^[7]

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<https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/think-tank-weighs-up-parties-childcare-policies> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/policy> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/qualifications> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/entitlement>