

United Kingdom: 30 hour free childcare policy in chaos as high-rent areas hardest-hit by delays ^[1]

Children's Minister Robert Goodwill has visited just three nurseries providing free childcare.

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EXCERPTS

The chaotic rollout of 30 hours' free childcare policy hit families in high-rent metropolitan areas the hardest, HuffPost UK can reveal.

Inner London, Outer London, East of England and the South East suffered most from the botched policy launch in September, with as many as 40% of parents unable to access the free childcare promised to them by Theresa May.

Cities in the Midlands and Yorkshire were also left with a vast shortage of places, with cash-strapped providers telling the Government they would have to charge for a place or face running at a loss.

The Government has also admitted 10% of eligible families across the country were still unable to access free childcare today, more than two months on from the policy's launch.

Labour's shadow early years minister Tracy Brabin MP said: "This is yet more evidence that the Government's 30 hour free childcare policy is seriously under-funded, something that is being felt particularly starkly in areas where property costs are typically higher.

[Table indicating the number of eligible families for the policy, number of families with a place and that figure shown as a percentage, according to neighbourhood--available to view online]

"This has clearly led to a situation where families in these four regions have been disproportionately affected. Too many have been unable to find a genuinely free childcare place, or a provider that suits their family.

"High quality childcare can be transformative and no child should miss out because of their postcode."

Theresa May's policy of up to 30 hours' free childcare for three and four-year-olds was aimed at getting more parents back to work, but opponents have called it undeliverable.

Children and Families Minister Robert Goodwill told the Commons this week that the Government had increased the funding to £4.94 on average from £4.56.

He claimed nurseries who were still unable to afford the policy were rare, telling MPs: "I have met a number of nurseries that seem to be outliers that, unlike most, are unable to deliver for that price. We have asked them to supply detailed information to find out why that is."

Brabin has discovered Goodwill has, in fact, visited just three nurseries to discuss the rollout.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance, a group campaigning on behalf of nurseries, carried out research in August which showed that as many as 74% of providers still could not afford to offer places at the new price.

Neil Leitch, the Alliance's chief executive, said: "It's simply not possible that only a small handful of childcare providers are struggling to deliver 30 hours when we hear daily stories of businesses struggling to stay open at current funding rates.

"The minister must know that, when providers are losing thousands of pounds per term, balancing the books is not a simple matter of tweaking ratios or finding other efficiencies.

"At present we have an unsustainable system where the onus is on providers to plug the gaps of underfunding by charging parents for 'optional extras' such as lunch and trips. That responsibility is for government to bear, not settings and certainly not the parents this policy was designed to help."

Brabin added: "Minister Goodwill appears to be the last person to realise that the funding rates for 30-hours of childcare are insufficient.

"Rather than grand standing and attempting to speak on behalf of providers, he needs to listen to the sector and take their concerns seriously.

"We should remember these statements are from a man who claims to visit nurseries up and down the country when in reality has only visited three and can't even get his fellow Ministers to understand the policy properly."

Goodwill has also committed to a review of the policy at the end of the autumn term, which is due to report in January.

He told Brabin in a written question: "The department will carry out an independent evaluation of 30 hours' free childcare during the first two terms of national rollout."

A Department for Education spokeswoman said: "Demand for the 30 hours free childcare offer has been high - over 216,000 parents have successfully received eligibility codes for the autumn term and as of 9 October 90% of these codes have been checked by a provider on behalf of a parent seeking a 30 hours place.

"As the Department has previously explained, a code can be issued by one local authority and validated by a different authority."

-reprinted from Huffington Post

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