

Government amends 'misleading' claims for 30 hours free childcare scheme ^[1]

Education department issues clarification after man complained to advertising watchdog about '30 hours a week' claim

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EXCERPTS

The government has been cowed into clarifying the facts about its "free" childcare offer after a father complained to the advertising watchdog that the Department for Education's description was misleading.

The complaint centred on the government's marketing of the scheme as 30 hours of free childcare a week, implying it is available all year round. In fact the 30-hours entitlement is available for just 38 weeks of the year, a point the government only clarified on its childcarechoices.gov.uk website after the Advertising Standards Authority flagged concerns over the man's three-year-old son.

The clarification matters because children are only eligible for the scheme if both parents work - and most working parents are not able to take 14 weeks' holiday a year.

The DfE also amended the website to clarify that nurseries and childminders are entitled to charge a fee for meals, nappies and day trips. Many providers have started levying these and other charges since the introduction of the scheme, as they claim the government's funding is inadequate, leaving them with a shortfall.

The father who made the complaint to the ASA, who wished to remain anonymous, said: "As my three-year-old son hopefully will learn, there are 52 weeks in a year. However, the scheme assumes there are only 38. When the hours are stretched over a full year it only delivers about 22 hours per week. What is the government going to tell us next - that its pledge to deliver a seven-day NHS was limited to the first 38 weeks of the year?"

He added that he thinks the government's website is still misleading on a wider point: "The 'free childcare' pledge is not being delivered. It's galling that the government are still saying it's free. They are using taxpayers' money to tell us lies."

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, said: "At the root of this confusion is the government's unwillingness to admit that the true cost of 'free' childcare can only be met by asking parents to foot the bill. Childcare providers are being forced to ask parents to effectively subsidise a service that has been advertised as free - often by charging for goods and services previously offered for free - or risk facing closure."

After meeting with childminders and nurseries, some local authorities, such as Suffolk and East Riding of Yorkshire, have already removed the word "free" from their marketing and publicity about the 30 hours of entitlement. Other councils, including Bromley, Somerset and Surrey, already refer to it as a "funded" scheme.

The Conservative party has been on the back foot since it rolled out the childcare scheme in September. It has now said it will hold an independent evaluation of the implementation and impact of the beleaguered scheme. It plans to publish the report next September.

The ASA stopped short of taking formal action against the government after the DfE moved to resolve its concerns. Children and families minister Robert Goodwill said: "The Childcare Choices website helps parents understand what support they are eligible for. It is routinely updated with additional information and resources for parents. The Advertising Standards Agency's response shows that the information available is sufficient for parents to make informed choices."

A DfE spokesperson later confirmed that the website had been updated directly in response to the concerns raised by the ASA.

-reprinted from The Guardian

Region: Europe ^[3]

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