

More than half a million children denied help from Tories' flagship free childcare schem ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

More than half a million children fail to qualify for the Tories' flagship free childcare scheme, the Mirror can reveal.

Labour blasted the "unfair" 30 hours policy after ministers admitted 58% of children aged three and four cannot benefit.

And the Tory chair of the Commons Treasury Committee told us the scheme should be expanded to parents who are training to get back to work.

The policy, which gives working parents in England 30 hours a week of free childcare for kids aged three and four, was a key boast in the Tories' 2015 manifesto and launched in September 2017.

But despite initial claims it would go to "all working parents", each parent must work at least 16 hours a week to qualify - locking out thousands of part-time and zero-hour workers.

Now Education Minister Nadhim Zahawi has admitted: "We estimate that 58% of three and four year olds are not eligible for 30 hours because either only one of their parents is employed or because their parent(s) do not meet the required minimum income threshold."

According to figures given by Mr Zahawi, that represents just under 540,000 children.

And the problem could be even greater, as Office for National Statistics figures show England has 1.35million three- and four-year-olds - which would suggest 783,000 are excluded.

By comparison, fewer than 1% of kids are ineligible because they have a parent earning over the maximum income threshold of £100,000.

Shadow Early Years Minister Tracy Brabin said the "simply unfair" gaps in service showed the Tory manifesto pledge "rings hollow".

She told the Mirror: "It's astonishing that hundreds of thousands of children aren't able access to the policy because their parents either don't earn or work enough.

"In many cases the children missing out are the ones that would benefit most."

Pre-school owner Toby Evans, 30, from Poole, Dorset, added: "We have a number of parents on zero-hour contracts, so they don't know how much they're working week to week.

"When they check their eligibility, they don't qualify. They're frustrated that other families get double what they do."

Mr Evans shut one of his three pre-schools in Poole, Dorset, in February because the "appalling" £3.77-an-hour funding rate did not cover his costs of £4.40.

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, added: "The government's funded childcare policy has inequality hardwired into it.

"It benefits well-off families while those at the bottom end of the income ladder – whose children often gain the most from accessing quality early years provision – risk getting left behind."

Commons Treasury Committee chairwoman Nicky Morgan, a Tory MP, warned the policy "excludes" many parents over 20 who are retraining or in education.

She said: "As the Treasury Committee's report into childcare concluded, the Government should remove age restrictions on childcare support for parents entering training or education."

Mr Zahawi revealed the figure after a parliamentary question by Labour.

The government offers 15 hours a week of free childcare to all three- and four-year-olds, but puts tighter restrictions on the 30 hours offer.

Some two-year-olds can also receive free childcare if their parents are on certain benefits including jobseekers' allowance or disability benefit.

Labour says it would roll out 30 hours a week of free childcare to all children aged two to four.

It comes after the Treasury Committee warned nurseries are charging for food and activities to make up for shortfalls in 30-hour funding from the government.

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "We are spending more than any other government on childcare – around £6 billion a year by 2020 – to make sure that every child gets the best start in life.

"Our 30 hours of free childcare offer is available to support working parents of three- and four-year-olds, saving them up to £5,000 per child, per year. The rollout has been a success with 294,000 children benefiting last term.

"Parents who aren't eligible for 30 hours are still entitled to a range of other benefits; for example, all three- and four-year-olds are entitled to 15 hours a week of early education and parents who are only working a few hours a week may also be eligible for 85% of their childcare costs through Universal Credit."

-reprinted from the Mirror

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