

The government's stance on childcare reveals its character – and it's ugly as hell ^[1]

As a parent, it's hard to contain your anger as services collapse and costs rise, while hard-working staff are paid a pittance

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EXCERPTS

Nelson Mandela famously declared that “the true character of society is revealed in how it treats its children”. If this is true, then our country's soul is in a parlous state indeed. Rishi Sunak's do-nothing spring statement is set to plunge 150,000 more children into poverty. And despite promising to help families, the chancellor made precisely zero mention of something all families know is in deep crisis: childcare.

Almost everyone involved in caring for young children is at breaking point – physically, emotionally, financially. One recent study documented “a strong sense of fatigue and exhaustion” after two years of pandemic disruption: as one parent said, “you start to feel kind of buried under it”. In a survey of mothers by the campaign group Pregnant then Screwed, almost half of respondents had considered quitting their jobs because of childcare issues.

The average price of a full-time nursery place for a one-year-old is £14,030 a year – among the most expensive in the world. Small wonder that one in three parents spend more than a third of their entire income on childcare. Indeed, for many it is their single biggest expense – outstripping even the notoriously high cost of housing. One in four respondents to the Pregnant then Screwed survey were even skipping meals or heating to pay for it.

Wherever these high costs are going, it's not into the pockets of childcare workers. The average wage for these essential and highly skilled professionals is £7.42 an hour. Researchers at the University of Leeds tracked their experiences through the pandemic – and their findings make for desperate reading. Dr Kate Hardy, who led the project, tells me it was partly motivated by her own experience as a parent of two preschoolers: her monthly nursery fees amount to £1,600. “To think that the staff are being paid poverty wages while we pay more on childcare than our mortgage is really upsetting.”

Working on the frontlines of exposure to the virus, often lacking sick pay or basic protection, and picking up ever-wider responsibilities for the children in their care, staff felt devalued and ignored. Shockingly, more than one in five childminders had resorted to selling personal belongings to make ends meet. Childcare now faces a severe recruitment crisis, with demoralised staff leaving the profession in droves. As one told the researchers: “Whether it's a school cleaner, dinner lady, Tesco's, I'm willing to go anywhere now.”

The principal culprit for this disaster is government itself. Childcare has been not just neglected, but deliberately starved of funding. Documents released under freedom of information reveal that in England ministers knowingly gave providers of state-funded “free” childcare less than two-thirds of what it actually cost to deliver the service. Never mind that investing in care delivers more than twice as many jobs and more tax revenue than investing in construction. Those in charge knew the shortfall would be met by higher fees and fewer staff – hurting parents, children and childcare workers alike.

The documents prove what any parents of toddlers already know. When my son turned three, I naively expected my childcare costs to disappear, since the government promised to fund 30 free hours a week in England – conveniently, exactly how many we needed. But it transpires that, unlike people's actual jobs, this entitlement only covers term time. Stretched across a year, it shrinks to 22 hours a week. Making up the difference costs £22 a day. And since even those hours aren't properly funded, the nursery has to find other ways to cover its costs – like charging £16 a day for lunch and snacks. (Call me crazy, but I just don't think my toddler's appetite is that gargantuan.) As Hardy says, this segregates and holds back children from low-income families, whose parents simply can't afford these top-up fees. “We had a woman who can't use the ‘free’ childcare, because she can't afford the bus to the nearest nursery that doesn't charge extra.”

Even with extra fees, many settings are struggling to stay afloat. Always the poor cousin of schools, the early years sector was largely abandoned to cope with the demands of Covid as best it could. One in 20 registered providers shut their doors for good in the first year of the pandemic. Most were small independent businesses whose physical or financial reserves had been exhausted. This has left some parents – disproportionately in deprived areas – unable to find childcare at all. Those providers left standing are hiking fees even further in order to survive. Rising costs will undoubtedly push even more over the edge.

While this state of affairs has been a catastrophe for some, for others it is a lucrative investment opportunity. Big profit-driven chains – often backed by private equity investors and laden with debt – have snapped up struggling nurseries. Undeterred by the scandalous collapse of care home chains such as Southern Cross, we are now about to repeat the same failed experiment with our children. Yet again, vulnerable children will suffer most – not least those with special educational needs and disabilities, who for investors are not human beings to be nurtured but costs to be minimised. In what universe is this acceptable? By what twisted logic should vulture capitalists be allowed anywhere near babies and toddlers?

The solutions to the childcare emergency are not rocket science. Government needs to invest properly in the system and its workers. It should use this investment to ensure high-quality childcare and early years education is available everywhere and to everyone, as essential public infrastructure – just like schools. Instead, it continues to toss inadequate subsidies at parents, let the market decide where and how childcare will be provided, and wash its hands of the consequences.

Even when campaigners finally succeeded in forcing childcare costs on to the agenda, ministers' only response was to suggest cutting regulations – allowing more children to be looked after by fewer staff. This is an idea so mindbogglingly out of touch with reality, it would be laughable if the stakes were not so high. Yet it is somehow grimly predictable that the only solution these people can conceive is to demand even more of workers who are already stretched to their limits. They seem unable to comprehend that the answer is to value care work more, not less.

Writing about all this, I struggle to contain my rage. This government has made crystal clear that it does not give a damn about my son's welfare, let alone the children they have consigned to poverty and isolation. The amazing staff who help us care for him deserve the earth, yet they are paid a pittance while extractive owners are allowed to treat nurseries as cash cows. Mandela was right. The government's stance on childcare does indeed reveal its character – and it's ugly as hell.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: child care shortage ^[4]

child care costs ^[5]

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