

Tory plan to expand free childcare is 'undeliverable', nurseries in England warn ^[1]

Survey reveals large numbers of childcare providers will not increase capacity because of staff, cost or space concerns

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AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

Rishi Sunak has been warned that high-profile plans for a huge expansion of free childcare are “undeliverable”, as hundreds of nurseries across England said it would lead to a chronic shortage of places and leave many parents still having to pay.

A survey of hundreds of childcare providers seen by the Observer reveals a sizeable mismatch between the free places parents are expecting and what nurseries and childminders can provide. They also warn that many parents will continue to be charged, or face higher fees, as providers face a growing shortfall.

The Conservatives regard the proposals on childcare as a key part of their election pitch to voters. The chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, used his budget in March to announce eye-catching plans to extend the government’s existing offer of 30 hours of “free childcare” to children aged between nine months and two years by 2025.

However, with eligible parents expecting the free hours and nurseries already facing surging inquiries for when the full package is introduced, the vast majority of childcare providers said they were not planning to increase their capacity, due to costs, staffing levels or the space they had available. More than 40% of all providers surveyed said their service was already full, with a waiting list.

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Concern is acute because childcare providers have traditionally used the fees provided by younger children to cover the shortfall created by the “free” provision handed to three- and four-year-olds. In reality, they say, state funding for older children has never covered their real costs. Under the expanded scheme, they will have less scope to make their services economically viable.

Even before the new offer kicks in, 86% of nurseries and childminders currently offering funded places for three- and four-year-old children said the government funding pledged from September would be less than the cost of delivering the places. Some 70% said they would cope by increasing fees.

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Early Years Alliance, said the government had “blindly made a promise to families that many providers simply will not be able to deliver on”. He said: “A combination of poor funding, a lack of capacity and insufficient time to prepare means that many preschools, nurseries and childminders may – quite understandably – choose to limit the number of funded places available under the expanded offer, or in some cases opt out entirely. As a result, many of the parents and carers who are pinning their hopes on benefiting from the new offers when they roll out next year are likely to be left sorely disappointed.”

Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, accused the government of trying to “hoodwink parents” with the pledge. “These findings suggest that the chancellor has written a postdated cheque to Britain’s children, and at this rate the cheque will bounce.”

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The introduction of 30 hours of “free” childcare for eligible working parents, which chancellor Jeremy Hunt promised by the end of 2025, has not only created a worrying gap between what parents think they have been promised and what many nurseries think they can deliver: it has also left nurseries with unanswered questions about how they will fund the places.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: data ^[4]

child care crisis ^[5]

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Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/23/07/tory-plan-expand-free-childcare-%E2%80%98undeliverable%E2%80%99-nurseries-england> [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2023/jul/29/nurseries-in-england-warn-governments-plan-to-expand-free-childcare-is-undeliverable> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/data> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care-crisis> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care-policy> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8981>