

Childcare in England failing and falling behind much of world, charity says ^[1]

Fawcett Society warns sector is lacking in ambition and delivery and calls for free 'universal' hours

Author: Grierson, Jamie & Bland, Archie

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Excerpts

England's childcare system is failing and falling behind those of much of the rest of the world, a UK charity for gender equality and women's rights has said.

The Fawcett Society said childcare in England was failing on several fronts: affordability, quality and levels of public spending.

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The findings echo numerous warnings on the state of childcare in England, with surveys finding that a third of parents with young children say they are struggling to afford childcare, nurseries warning that government plans for free childcare are undeliverable, and about a quarter of a million mothers with young children leaving their jobs because of difficulties with balancing work and childcare.

The most recent change to England's childcare system, which came into force this month, was an expansion of free hours. The Fawcett Society said that while this was welcome for some families, the narrow focus of the expansion would not help those who are disadvantaged and would not address the wider issues with the system.

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"There are plenty of countries around the world who simply do childcare better and we should be learning from their ambition. As we approach a general election, all parties need to be aware that any credible vision for transforming childcare mustn't simply offer bolt-ons to a crumbling system. We must be more ambitious, particularly when it has such an impact on both children's life chances and women's ability to work."

The report outlines a plan for long-term reform in England that includes building on and expanding the existing "free hours" to make the offer open to all children, not just those of working parents, with extra subsidies for the poorest to enable them to afford to supplement the universal offer, and fee freezes for everyone.

The report also recommends providing funding to nurseries so they can operate in unprofitable areas, and support inclusion for all children.

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The Fawcett Society report warns that "designing a system which is focused narrowly on [affordability] without strengthening and resourcing the system ... may ultimately be counterproductive and unable to meet the demands it has set up".

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