

An electoral strategy for childcare ^[1]

Author: Statham, R., & Wilkes, M.

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Summary

The public are ambitious about the potential role of childcare and early education. With a UK general election now announced, political parties should consider how they can meet this motivation with an improved early years offer.

Our analysis makes clear that childcare and early education matter hugely to voters. This extends beyond just parents themselves, with grandparents in particular expressing acute concerns about current levels of provision.

IPPR conducted two surveys of adults in England to learn about perceptions of our childcare system, including:

- A survey of a nationally representative sample of more than 4,000 adults
- A survey of more than 2,000 parents and grandparents

Crucially, both surveys exposed that swing voters are more likely than others to identify childcare as a priority, and to report dissatisfaction with wraparound, nursery and childminder provision where they live. This suggests that a strong early years proposition could play a crucial role in influencing outcomes in marginal seats.

This early analysis forms part of a two-stage programme from IPPR, with further work to come in summer 2024 focussed on funding and delivery models to unlock a childcare guarantee.

What do voters want from childcare reforms?

- Swing voters are more likely (2.3 times for those who are parents, 1.3 times for swing voters as a whole) to prioritise improving childcare availability and costs than the average voter. 13 per cent of them considered this among their top three priorities.
- Experiences of the current system vary widely, with parents of children with special educational needs more likely to struggle to find suitable childcare for their children, and parents on low incomes more likely to report low levels of satisfaction and confidence in nursery staff.
- Voters value the role childcare and early education can play in tackling disadvantage.
- There is strong support for expanding provision, with an extension of eligibility for two-year-olds particularly popular.
- However, with growing press coverage of providers' concerns about delivering an expanded offer, awareness of the fragility of the system was reflected by parents prioritising reinforcing support in the short term over a rapid expansion of free childcare places.
- Among the ways eligibility might be expanded, extending free hours to parents undertaking training is particularly popular.
- Despite acute continued cost of living pressures, 44 per cent of parents would be willing to personally pay more for childcare in order to subsidise costs to low income families.

Related link: Early education and childcare in the UK and beyond: Key challenges and lessons ^[3]

Region: Europe ^[4]

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