

Labour and the Conservatives both plan to boost childcare by relying on the private sector ^[1]

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Excerpts

Childcare features prominently in both major parties' plans for work and personal finance. Keir Starmer wants to make early-years provision as universal as possible while the Conservatives claim they're already transforming childcare and increasing funding to both boost children's development and get mothers back to work.

Labour's pledge is to boost the number of available nursery places in England by 100,000, by using empty classrooms in existing primary schools. These will reportedly be run by the schools themselves, or local private providers as opposed to the government investing in state-run children's centres with properly qualified and remunerated staff.

What Rishi Sunak's government has been working on, already, is a multiphase plan to secure 30 hours of free childcare for preschool children of working parents by September 2025. This has also relied heavily on the private sector. Staffing problems (acute shortages and low qualifications) have led the government to expand its apprenticeship schemes, delivered mostly by private companies. So far, however there has been poor up-take and a 50% drop-out rate for those who sign up as apprentices.

Since the 1990s, under New Labour, childcare has been increasingly privatised. Because of government subsidies to the sector, under the successive Conservative governments since 2010, the most successful businesses became investment vehicles. The impact for families and staff both has been disastrous.

Childcare goes private

British state-funded nursery education dates back to the 1920s. To begin with provision was free, delivered by highly trained teachers, and situated in generous premises with outside space and equipment. But it was limited.

Although originally intended for working families, by the 1950s, because of prevailing views about mother's domestic roles, it was mostly offered on a part-time basis, two to three hours per day. In the 1970s and 1980s, women began campaigning for the right to be more than housewives. This included access to childcare and nursery education.

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Ferocious acquisitions and mergers consolidated the biggest nursery firms and created large companies funded through debt and managed through offshore accounting. Currently, like many other privatised industries, there are patterns of excessive profits, large bonuses for senior company staff, and payouts to shareholders, whilst the service itself is squeezed as much as possible.

The regulatory body, Ofsted, which monitors standards in schools, is ill-equipped to deal with the private nursery sector. It has no remit to explore value for money: it does not ask about ownership and it cannot raise any financial questions.

Ofsted also only inspects once every six years and, in terms of child wellbeing, the standards against which it assesses establishments are very low. It does not even include a mandatory requirement for outside space for nurseries even in urban areas.

It is clear, however, that these childcare policies have had disastrous results. The poorest families or those with children with special needs have been excluded from private childcare nurseries.

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