

Councils "must ensure child care" [GB] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

The Childcare Bill will force councils to fund private provision where there is a gap in the market.

Children as young as three will have to learn maths and English, with some education "from birth", the Department for Education and Skills said.

But Tories and Lib Dems said the plans could mean higher council tax bills because they included no extra cash.

The Childcare Bill, published on Tuesday, tells childcare providers to give a mixture of "integrated care and education from birth".

Education minister Beverley Hughes said young children's learning deserved "parity" with that at primary and secondary level, but denied this would come at the expense of play - a criticism sometimes levelled at the National Curriculum.

She added: "We are not talking about sitting down young children in chairs and making them learn numbers and letters where that's not appropriate."

The Department for Education and Skills said learning and childcare "happen together and are indistinguishable".

Under the bill, local authorities would have to ensure there was enough childcare to "meet the needs" of working parents, particularly low-income families.

However, councils would not get any more than the £600m they already receive.

Authorities would also have to provide the "full range" of information required by parents.

Theresa May, shadow secretary of state for the family, said: "The government's announcement to place the onus for childcare on local authorities is an abdication of responsibility.

"As a result of this bill, local authorities will literally be left holding the baby."

There was not a "penny of additional money", which could mean higher council tax bills, she added.

The bill calls for a "better start" for under-fives and to "close the gap" between those from different backgrounds.

Ms Hughes said local authorities would be required to "facilitate the market" to make sure there were enough places for children whose parents want to work.

- reprinted from BBC News

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