

Child care places to be made available for all working parents [GB] ^[1]

Author: Frean, Alexandra

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EXCERPTS

When the welfare state began nearly 60 years ago, the Government promised to provide for the British people from "cradle to grave". Today ministers are finally making good the first part of that pledge: for the first time, childcare will be added to the list of basic services that every Briton can expect to be guaranteed by the State.

Under a consultation paper on childcare published by Beverley Hughes, the Minister for Children, town halls will be required by law to ensure that there are enough childcare places to meet the needs of all working parents in their area.

The paper does not provide for free childcare. Like other parts of the welfare state, users will be expected to pay. The measures nevertheless mark a watershed in the provision of children's services.

In another first, the paper will require local authorities to improve the "life chances" of all children under the age of 5 by closing the gap in educational and social development between those from the poorest families and the rest, through the provision of integrated and accessible early-years services.

"With this step we are changing what we expect a modern welfare state to make available to today's parents," Ms. Hughes told The Times.

She added that the consultation document, which will lead to a childcare Bill this parliamentary session, was the next step in a journey that began in 1997 when Labour put childcare at the top of the political agenda with the publication of a national childcare strategy.

In recent years a powerful body of research evidence has built up showing that babies' development and vocabulary, understanding, social skills and even IQ can improve in great bounds with intense stimulation from a very young age. Research also suggests that it is children from the poorest families, with the least education at home, who benefit most from good pre-school childcare.

The Sure Start scheme of support for families with children aged under five, which plans to create 3,500 Children's Centres across the country, each with 50 daycare places, has been established in response to such findings.

Today's measures go a step further. Local authorities will have a duty to ensure that provision exists within the state, voluntary or private sector for all children up to the age of 14 (16 for disabled children) and to make sure that it is accessible to even the poorest families.

Today's document, open for consultation until October 7, will also place a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure that people have access to the full range of information they may need as a parent.

Tony Travers, the local government expert at the London School of Economics, said: "What we are seeing here is an attempt at a comprehensive, seamless, lacking in postcode-lottery, extension of the welfare state."

The document is published against a background of growing uncertainty in the childcare market. While the introduction of the childcare tax credit, which gives working parents on low incomes financial help to pay for childcare, has assisted many people, many nurseries and childcare providers still have empty places and are struggling to survive.

This is despite an overall shortage of childcare places. According to the Daycare Trust, there is only one childcare place for every four children under the age of 8 who need one. The problem lies in the fees that nurseries need to charge parents to cover their costs.

Many parents cannot afford the £150 or so a week it can cost to put a child in a nursery.

So far calls for the Government to subsidise supply rather than demand, by giving money to daycare providers, have met with a cool response from ministers, but Ms Hughes said that the Government is prepared to explore the possibility of supply-side subsidies in areas where affordability is a problem.

- reprinted from the Times of London

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