

Dig deep to make Sure Start just as brilliant as it can be [GB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Hollingdean is a spectacular new Sure Start children's centre gleaming down on to an estate in one of Brighton's deprived areas. A welcoming cafe fills its fine frontage, warmly inviting local parents into a place that is home to all kinds of local schemes supporting families and children. Here too is a beautiful day nursery, the pride of local parents and community volunteers who worked together to design this model of what Sure Start should be.

But it is running into trouble - and this is echoed everywhere in the under-fives programme. The nursery has empty places it cannot fill, leaving a gaping hole in its funding. There are plenty of local parents who would dearly like a place for their child, but they cannot afford the cost, even though childcare credits pay 70% (next year they will pay 80%). A place here costs £145 a week, leaving over £43 for parents to find. A job on the sub-survivable minimum wage just doesn't leave enough to spare for nursery fees.

Meanwhile the nursery does have a few free places, paid for by the council, for children with families in crisis - but, shockingly, there is a long waiting list for those. This pattern is repeated right across the nation: empty places in most nurseries, leaving them in financial peril, alongside waiting lists for the children in direst need. Are there too many places? No, not nearly enough. All places could be filled 10 times over - if they were affordable.

The government has tried to create a universal childcare network without providing anything like the money needed. Its decision to fund this network through credits instead of biting the bullet and subsidising nurseries needs an urgent review. The Daycare Trust says only half a million children receive the credits to get them a nursery place. But there are 3.5 million children living below the poverty line, most of whose families would jump at the chance. When it comes to the new extended schools opening for breakfast and after-school activities, again the poorest children in families out of work will find that where there are fees they are excluded, widening the gap between them and the rest.

This makes no sense. It is grossly perverse. Sure Start and extended schools were designed for the poorest, set down first in the most deprived areas. Of course Sure Start is not just childcare: it does excellent work in reaching out to families within its catchment area to offer all kinds of help with home visiting, health visitors, speech therapy, with parenting and IT classes. Yet the nursery itself is out of bounds, unaffordable to children who should benefit most.

This is now-or-never time: a surge in funding has to embed it firmly and for ever, in the next spending round.

By 2010 there will be 3,500 children's centres, each with 50 daycare places. This, says the Daycare Trust, is not nearly enough: only one centre for every 800 preschool children. True, there are many other private and voluntary day nurseries. But it is worth noting that 10 out of the 13 nurseries branded as "inadequate" in Ofsted's report on childcare this week were private, not state-run. Private nurseries tend to have lower-paid, younger staff as the only way to survive.

On average nursery assistants are paid less than supermarket checkout staff. The small sum the government has put into upskilling and training staff amounts to just £500 per existing nursery assistant, not covering the large numbers more to be recruited for the new children's centres, who will be hard to hire at current pay rates. Without more cash, it will be 16- and 17-year-olds who themselves failed at school: 40% of nursery assistants have no GCSEs.

In Denmark every childcare worker has a three-year degree; it is well-paid, high-status work and there are long waiting lists for jobs. Britain pledges one staff member with a degree in each day nursery by some unspecified distant date. High-status training and good pay could transform this into a popular profession: when the government upgraded and enthused about teaching, applications for teacher training rose sharply (70% in the past five years). Nurseries need that too, because bad nurseries do harm, while the best do wonderful good.

Sure Start is what this government should be proudest of. Indeed every Labour MP boasts of it. But if they mean it, now is the time they have to dig deep and make it as brilliant as it can be. But there is shock now that it emerges that the money will not be ringfenced. Local authorities can spend it as they please. Although there will be targets for the under-fives, there is little to stop councillors spending Sure Start money on projects they prefer.

It was ever thus; in any clash over priorities the under-fives are always sacrificed first. Why did the Treasury agree? They know that every

pound spent at the youngest age achieves most. Yet education is funded in exact reverse to its effectiveness. Each university student gets most, although that adds least value - while least money goes to the youngest, whose life chances are most easily transformed. So much for evidence-based policy.

- reprinted from the Guardian

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