

# Analysis: Who cares? [GB]<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

This week the government announced extra spending on childcare, but confusion at the heart of its policy is undermining the good intentions.

The spokeswoman from the Department for Education and Skills sounded hurt. She was most disappointed that childcare campaigners did not recognise the government's unprecedented commitment.

This week's plan from the prime minister's strategy unit certainly boasts some big numbers. In 2002-03, £3bn is being spent on classes for pre-schoolers, childcare for under-eights and Sure Start, the programme for deprived children. In addition, £400m-plus is being spent on tax credits to help parents pay for care. Labour has already delivered free pre-school education for all four-year-olds and ought soon to offer the same for three-year-olds. Children's centres offering medical services and family support are due to open in poor districts.

Why then is the government not getting much kudos; why was the response of Daycare Trust and other campaigners this week so curmudgeonly?

In part, the answer is that the government has played fast and loose with the evidence. We know little about what is provided where. The chart apparently shows welcome expansion: one childcare place per 2.5 children by 2006, a huge improvement on 1997's ratio of one per nine children. But the projections for 2004 and 2006 conflate full and part-time places - ask a mother working in a full-time job how useful part-time care is.

Labour's child policy also suffers from initiativitis. Here's a teaser for anoraks. Why does the strategy unit make no mention of "children's trusts", the latest administrative wheeze for coordinating health, schooling and child protection? The answer is that health secretary Alan Milburn is shortly to make a big announcement and he is damned if he is going to be scooped.

But there is a deeper reason why Labour, for all its efforts, lacks credibility. What it is offering is supposed to be both "universal" - available to all parents - but also "targeted" on poorer households, especially the lone parents the government is keen to see working outside the home. It is not putting up enough money to do the former properly, but lacks the political courage just to concentrate on the latter.

Six out of 10 mothers with a child aged under five now have jobs. Over the past four decades, the proportion of men of working age in jobs has fallen, while women's paid work has expanded. Four out of 10 women of working age have dependent children. Many families, as a result, face a daily struggle to find someone to look after their children while they are at work - "families" often being a euphemism for mothers.

The problem is both undersupply of places and high cost. Reliable and stimulating care takes reasonably paid staff. The government is, rightly, putting a lot into better training, but keeps mum about the need to pay childcare workers more.

Before 1997 the famously family-friendly Tories did little or nothing. Childcare was deemed to be a private matter. On taking office Labour accepted two things. One was that state intervention in the lives of poor children could improve their life chances; the other was that women's employment was a precondition of prosperity.

Tony Blair could have done a Lloyd George. He could have said: we are expanding the welfare state and recognising a state responsibility for all children out of school hours from the age of three onwards. That could have led to state nurseries everywhere - a "comprehensive" service for all parents, rich and poor. Instead, Labour - typically - tried to address the problem by stealth. Its formula was a bit of bribery for private sector providers here, a dollop of cash for councils there, never quite letting on what it was doing.

The strategy unit report is encrusted in code. School rolls are falling. English primary schools have 10% spare capacity. Why not use this space for pre-schoolers and after-hours provision, the report coyly asks. The answer is that this would entail a reversal of the policy of giving schools more autonomy and might upset teachers.

Daycare Trust highlights another flaw in the grand strategy. Lately, we have heard a lot about the "new localism", Labour's wish to let councils, foundation hospitals and city academies get on with it, free of the targets and tape in which they have been cocooned. In childcare, the strategy unit promises to give responsibility to local authorities. But that is a recipe for big differences between different

areas, say the campaigners. Why is the London borough of Hackney, its population among the most needy, closing nurseries? The parents who most need help live in areas served by councils with the worst records.

As part of his efforts to get more low-income people into (low-income) jobs, Gordon Brown conjured up subsidies - tax credits intended to pay for childcare. But the government has not done anything directly about supply. Instead, it offers financial incentives for private, profit-making nurseries.

Professor Hilary Land of Bristol University compares the Blairite approach to childcare with what has happened to care of the elderly. In the early 1980s, two-thirds of places in old people's homes were public sector. Now seven out of 10 are private sector. The supply of places has fallen, and care workers are poorly trained and paid. If the government thinks the private sector will deliver childcare, she concludes, it is wrong. That figure for 2006 in the chart turns out to rest on a dubious assumption. The work-life imbalances facing working parents will be around for a while yet.

-Reprinted from The Guardian

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** funding <sup>[3]</sup>

pre-school <sup>[4]</sup>

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