

# Sure Start children's centres told to charge for some services <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Middle-class parents are likely to be charged for an increasing number of services at their local children's centres under radical plans to overhaul Sure Start - the Labour government's flagship childcare programme.

Sarah Teather, the children's minister, will tell councils and charities that run the 3,500 centres to target resources towards the "neediest" families and consider charging the better-off for "fun" activities. Teather told the Observer that children's centres would keep their "universal front door".

"I'm not saying that Sure Start children's services will be closed to some families in the area. We want it to be a non-stigmatising service. But within that service, we want it to be much better at targeting the resources," she said.

The plans have already been denounced as a "disaster" by one Labour MP, who said that they were the first step towards ending the programme's comprehensive nature. "The beauty of Sure Start is that it brings together families from different backgrounds - the entire community buys into it," said Lisa Nandy, the MP for Wigan, who used to work at the Children's Society. Even charging for a few services would change the whole ethos, she argued.

Teather said that she believed it was fine to offer fun activities, such as baby yoga. "But there is no reason they should not be able to charge for those services. I want them to think of the core offer - what we provide to all families, and to think about the evidence-based programmes they use to target the most vulnerable. If they want to provide other things, well fantastic, but they won't necessarily be open to everybody."

The plans are part of wide-ranging reforms to Sure Start. Teather also revealed that the government will introduce a scheme of "payment by results", which will see money withheld from councils and charities until they prove that they have turned around the life chances of the poorest children.

She said that she wanted centres to think less about the number of people they get through the door, and more about outcomes: "Did it help, did it make a difference, did it change lives?" are the questions that should be asked, she said. Ministers are still grappling with how this could be measured in the early years. But for older children, Teather gave the examples of preventing teenage pregnancies, reducing drug-taking or tackling antisocial behaviour.

Teather will take advice from reports by two Labour MPs - Frank Field, who is carrying out a review on poverty, and Graham Allen, who is considered an expert on early intervention. Allen said that failure to intervene early in children's lives was costing billions in the long term.

In the interview, the minister also revealed that there will be a new provision in the decentralisation and localism bill, to be published later this year, for voluntary groups to challenge for the right to run children's centres. Should they do that, councils would be forced to put the contracts out to tender. She is also hoping to fast-track plans to provide a free nursery entitlement of 15 hours a week to disadvantaged two-year-olds.

There was mixed reaction to the proposals. Ryan Shorthouse, a researcher from the Social Market Foundation, worked for the Conservatives on early years when the party was in opposition. He said payment by results could incentivise centres, but warned: The options would be for a "nationwide assessment" looking at factors such as vocabulary or fatherly involvement, which would be expensive.

"Or you could assess on broad outcomes such as improved school results or a reduction in child poverty. But what happens in Sure Start centres is by no means the only factor which contributes to these outcomes. So Sure Start centres in local authorities could be penalised, or indeed close, for worsening outcomes that had little to do with them."

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