

Frank Field must not let the unthinkable happen to Sure Start^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A curious mixture of praise and pain greeted Frank Field's government-commissioned review of poverty and life chances. How right he is that more education money should be channelled towards Sure Start for the under-fives. Every year that passes in children's lives, the chance of changing destinies diminishes. The best return for every education pound spent is delivered through early education and family support.

Labour's great legacy was 3,500 Sure Start children's centres, most densely provided in the poorest places. The politically neutral Institute for Government this week listed Sure Start and the minimum wage among the most successful government policies of the last 30 years. Here at last, with universal nursery education for 3 and 4-year-olds and intensive family help, is the missing cradle in the cradle-to-grave welfare promise.

It's a mystery why Labour failed to make this its flagship emblem of progress. Like all services, some Sure Starts are better than others, and Field is right to refocus them on what works best. But will he challenge Sarah Teather, minister for children, who has downgraded the qualifications needed by nursery teachers, when all the evidence shows that intensive - and expensive - professional nursery teaching is what works. Sure Start was based on research showing the importance of children being talked and listened to, growing their vocabulary, empathy and understanding. Brains harden by the age of three, yet most education debate revolves around exam standards and grammar or comprehensive. Most children's future is all but set before setting foot in reception class, and every year thereafter the gap grows between the better- and worse-off.

Field makes a good new suggestion: Sure Start should take over registering births, so every child is known to their centre and every family knows where to go. All this the government should do, if they mean what they say about social mobility. No need here for a theological debate on the doubtful concept of social mobility: whatever lifts life chances for young children is a good thing. But can Field persuade the government to reverse its silent destruction of Sure Start? Politely, he makes no mention of what is taking place before his eyes.

Frank Field, being the "unthinkable" rum old bird he is, offers typically perverse ideas. Poverty is not the main reason why people are poor, is essentially his view. Lack of money should be downgraded as a measure. Cut benefits to pay for Sure Start - taking from the poor to pay for the poor. David Cameron and Nick Clegg say the same: Clegg contemptuously refers to the poverty threshold as "poverty plus a pound", as if it were a meaningless statistical trick. No doubt some families can be poor, happy and exam successes - the well-nurtured, poor-as-a-church-mouse curate's children seem to be Field's model. Of course love and intellectual stimulation matter most, but the overwhelming evidence, across countries and over any length of time, is that money is the most reliable predictor of a child's fate. There is a disastrous symbiosis between poverty and deprivation, mental illness, addiction, depression and giving up - or "lack of aspiration" as it's called. Measure it how you will, families on low incomes do worse.

Set aside the lurid "Shameless" image of the bottom 2% of profoundly dysfunctional families (though those who want to blame the poor prefer to see them all as Frank Gallaghers. The government promotes that image day after day). Consider this: the majority of the 22% of families living below the poverty line are in work. Rowntree research next week will show the number of children in working but poor households is rising. These families are not feckless, but they earn too little, despite top-up benefits, with bad consequences for their children. Why? Because the child who never goes to parties, unable to afford a present, knows they are excluded. The child who has never been away is left out of playground holiday chat. The child with no internet is educationally limited, and no mobile phone means life outside the group conversation.

Yesterday, as if on cue, a report from Unicef hammered home precisely this point. Money does matter. The international poverty measure, until now agreed with by Cameron and Clegg, counts anyone living on less than 60% of the median (the average is higher). It is a relative measure of inequality. Unicef, surveying 24 developed countries over many years, finds a reasonable level of income equality vital to child wellbeing: children flourish best in countries with least inequality. If that sounds blindingly obvious, it is a concept now under heavy artillery from the right. The government may seize on Field's report to abandon its commitment to reducing child poverty, just when unemployment and benefit cuts cause many more to fall below the line. No wonder Cameron and Clegg warmly endorse Field's review as "a vital moment in the history of our efforts to tackle poverty and disadvantage".

Field's suggested cut in benefits is already happening: shortly any family out of work for a year loses 10% in housing benefit, with cuts in council tax benefit, childcare credit, education maintenance allowance for their teenagers and some 2% lost every year on all benefits by not uprating with RPI inflation. Women, because many are mothers, take 70% of the cuts: a protest outside the Royal Courts of Justice on

Monday at 12.30 is supporting the Fawcett Society's challenge to the budget's legality under the Equalities Act.

That money is not being siphoned off to pay for better Sure Start services. A gathering last week of children's centres from nearly 100 councils, held at the pioneering Pen Green centre in Corby, exchanged news on how funds are being drained out of Sure Start. Warnings of redundancy notices have already gone out to many employees so they can be sacked before the new financial year. Councils setting their budgets this month are agonising over what to cut: there often isn't enough for statutory services. Cunningly, the government claims there is money for Sure Start, but with the ringfence removed, hard-pressed councils will cut it. That's called the new localism, or devolving the axe.

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Region: Europe ^[2]

Tags: poverty ^[3]

affordability ^[4]

quality ^[5]

child development ^[6]

funding ^[7]

staff ^[8]

demographics ^[9]

spaces ^[10]

family resource programs ^[11]

federal programs ^[12]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/10/12/frank-field-must-not-let-unthinkable-happen-sure-start> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/poverty> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-development> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [8]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/staff> [9] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/demographics> [10]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/spaces> [11] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/family-resource-programs> [12]

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