

Ken Livingstone pledges childcare fund for London ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Labour's London mayoral candidate has pledged to help families struggling with childcare costs in the capital.

Ken Livingstone said he would offer low income families returning to work a full grant for the upfront costs of childcare up to £700.

He would also offer interest-free loans to families earning less than £40,000.

Current mayor and Tory candidate Boris Johnson said a similar scheme set up by Mr Livingstone when he was mayor was scrapped due to a lack of interest.

Mr Livingstone also said he would provide funding to create more out-of-hours childcare places at 200 nurseries across London.

A London Assembly report published last month said many parents in the capital could be prevented from working because of high childcare costs.

Childcare in the capital costs an average of £119-per-week for a child under the age of two.

This is up to a third higher than elsewhere in the UK, the report added.

'Economic interests'

Mr Livingstone said: "Families in London are facing a childcare crisis which I believe the mayor has a duty to address.

"Not only is this in the interests of millions of families across the capital, it is in the economic interests of London." Mr Livingstone claimed the scheme would cost about £3.4m a year and would be funded through uncommitted contingency money in the Greater London Authority's budget.

But Mr Johnson said: "The Childcare Affordability Programme, set up by the last mayor, failed and was terminated when it was discovered that it had delivered less than 20% of its original target to get 2,000 low income parents back into work."

The Liberal Democrat mayoral candidate, Brian Paddick, said his party in the central government coalition was making childcare free for those who needed it most.

"Why give people handouts to pay for something when you can make it free?" he said.

Green Party mayoral candidate Jenny Jones said: "Ken's right to highlight childcare as a growing problem in London, but families in London need a more comprehensive approach than merely papering over the cracks with occasional grants.

"The next mayor must prevent the closure of breakfast clubs and work with schools to extend their opening hours."

The London mayoral election takes place on 3 May.

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