

Conservative MP's plan to overhaul childcare 'not the answer', say experts ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The average UK family now spends more than a quarter of net income (27%) on childcare suggests a report by Conservative MP Elizabeth Truss for the CentreForum think tank.

Yet measures suggested by Truss to overhaul childcare provision in the UK have met with little enthusiasm from experts.

In her report, Truss, MP for South West Norfolk, claims that while the number of nursery places has increased since 1996, the number of childminder places has dropped drastically in the same period to 245,000 in 2010.

The report argues this has led to price inflation, while at the same time, becoming a childminder is now fraught with red tape.

She calls for childminders to be allowed to take on more children (so one minder could look after five children aged five or younger, rather than three), a single funding system, and for childminders to be able to register with a local agency, nursery or network that would take responsibility for inspection and training and be regulated by Ofsted.

However, according to national childcare charity Daycare Trust, the 'deregulation' of childminders would not solve the UK's childcare crisis.

In her report, Truss suggests Britain adopt a framework used in the Netherlands for childminders.

In the Netherlands childminder or 'host parent' agencies operate locally, training and monitoring registered childminders, while parents pay a monthly fee for childminding.

An equivalent system in the UK could be based on existing networks, agencies and local authorities, Truss proposes.

However, Anand Shukla, chief executive of Daycare Trust, argues the model implemented in the Netherlands since 2005 has not worked - and many of the changes have since been reversed.

"The Dutch reforms led to lower quality childcare, did not increase the number of high quality childminders in the profession, as the increase in numbers was largely due to grandparents registering as childminders; did not have a noticeable impact on maternal employment; and saw bureaucracy increase, due to the introduction of a layer of agencies," he says.

Further criticism of the report's proposals comes from the NCMA, the membership organisation for registered childminders.

Stuart Turner, director of policy, says: "NCMA does not see the suggestions as a step in the right direction. The system in the Netherlands is now in the process of being abandoned because it wasn't successful; costs increased and quality was driven down."

"In the UK, parents receive money and/or tax breaks to spend on private services, whereas in many EU countries where parents pay less, government funds services directly, thereby cutting out a level of bureaucracy," he adds.

The NCMA's Individual Inspection Matters campaign calls for government to retain the current system and increase state funding for childcare.

"EC data shows that in countries where childcare is cheaper for parents there are high levels of government funding channelled directly to services, so local authorities finance around 80% of the cost of an early years' place, and parents pay the rest. In the UK, around 13% of childcare costs are subsidised by Government," says Turner.

In a statement, Ms Truss said: "The coalition Government has a great opportunity to simplify the provision of childcare and get better value for money for parents.

"Reform could lead to an increase in availability of flexible childcare and an end to spiralling costs."

- reprinted from the *Huffington Post*

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