

Denmark invests to improve staff:child ratios ^[1]

Author: Roberts, Liz

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EXCERPTS:

As the British Government considers controversial proposals to relax staff:child ratios to reduce the cost of childcare, Denmark is investing substantial sums in improving ratios as part of its Daycare Development Programme. Speaking at the Reform roundtable this week (28 June), Christine Antorini, Danish minister for children and education, said that £59m was being provided to employ more staff as ratios were beginning to worsen under current funding constraints.

Denmark's childcare system, consistently praised for its universal, high-quality, low-fee structure, with very highly-qualified staff, typically has ratios of around 1:3 for under-threes and 1:6 for three to fives. Figures are not prescribed by regulation, but government believes that greater ratios will be detrimental to quality.

Ms Antorini said, 'We will continue to raise the bar.' The Daycare Development Programme will also seek improvements to the pedagogical curriculum and to parental engagement.

The government is also looking at investment in bigger childcare centres, in a move away from the Danish tradition of very small, local kindergartens and schools, in a bid to benefit from economies of scale.

Most childcare provision in Denmark is public, although since 2004 private operators have been allowed to set up and now make up a small but growing part of the market at five per cent.

Labour MP and shadow work and pensions secretary Liam Byrne, who is on the party's recently-established Childcare Commission, said the Danish system 'is what welfare reform should look like'.

Mr Byrne, who visited Denmark earlier this week, said that points raised to be considered here included:

- The role of local authorities as market makers - in Denmark, municipalities have a legal obligation to provide enough childcare or they are financially punished.
- Giving a guarantee to parents that is real from birth through school.
- A very generous cost share between state (75 per cent) and parents (maximum of 25 per cent).
- Regulation - Denmark has very high-quality childcare but this is not 'hard-wired' into legislation.

He added that a wholesale move to a system such as Denmark's would not be possible, but that Labour's commission would consider what the guarantee to parents should be - perhaps 8am to 6pm for all school-age children, followed by increases in hours for three- and four-year-olds, then two-year-olds, and what the cost share should be.

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