

Nurseries will be free to take more children to cut childcare costs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Nurseries will be allowed to nearly double the number of toddlers they care for under plans aimed at cutting childcare costs.

Ministers hope that increasing the places available will bring down fees, making it easier for mothers to return to work, while boosting the Government's low popularity among women.

Currently, the average cost of a full-time nursery place is about £115 a week but some nurseries in London can charge as much as £300.

Childcare costs account for 26.6 per cent of the £26,500 average wage in the UK, more than double the 11.8 per cent average among advanced economies.

Under the new measures, the current limit of one member of staff to every four toddlers will be scrapped. Nurseries will instead be able to take on six two year olds to every childcare worker.

The ratios for babies under one and for one year olds will also go up from 1:3 to 1:4.

The move will be contingent on nurseries employing a high proportion of well-qualified staff.

Childminders, who can currently care for up to three under fives, will now be able to take up to four.

The relaxing of the cap on toddler numbers will bring the UK in line with other countries in Europe. In nurseries in Denmark and Ireland the figure is six, while in French crèches, one adult can supervise up to eight toddlers.

Elizabeth Truss, the education minister spearheading the reforms, blames regulation and bureaucracy here for keeping fees high and restricting the amount childcare workers can earn.

A Whitehall source said: "Childcare in England is too expensive and often not good enough.

"We are going to free up high quality nurseries to offer more places. That means parents will have more choice of good quality childcare at lower cost. These new ratios will move England into line with other countries where affordable high quality childcare is readily available."

Ms Truss will also introduce tougher academic standards for early years staff.

Teenagers training to work in nurseries will be required to have at least a grade C in GCSE maths and English to prevent children being looked after by staff who struggle to read stories aloud to them.

Currently there are no minimum requirements and many colleges take recruits with D grades or lower.

At the same time, a new "early years educator" qualification will be created, bringing the standard of courses up to the equivalent of A-level.

Many of the "bewildering array" of more than 400 childcare courses currently on offer are unlikely to be sufficiently challenging to survive, the source said.

An official report last year found higher qualifications were demanded from students training to look after animals than for those who will care for babies.

However, some early years academics are sceptical that the cost of childcare would come down as a result raising ratios and fear quality will suffer.

Eva Lloyd, of the University of East London and co-author of a report, commissioned by the Department for Education but yet to be published, on childcare costs across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 20 member countries, said: "In The Netherlands, there has been deregulation to expand childcare numbers and the effect on quality has been significant.

"It has tightened up the restrictions on numbers recently because of concerns about quality. Doing it more cheaply by packing them in is not the way to go."

She also questioned whether relaxing restrictions on numbers would cut prices.

"There is no evidence that it will produce the goods in terms of more, cheaper places.

"Childcare in other parts of Europe looks cheaper than here because the OECD figures show childcare costs before parents have received tax cuts to help pay for them, which apply in countries such as the US, Australia and the UK.

"Also, there is no guarantee that nurseries and childminders will lower costs if they are allowed to take more children."

The ratio changes follow the emergence of radical plans to offer tax brakes to parents. Initially, the Governments said families could be entitled to claim up to £2,000 per child every year from their tax bills to cover the cost of childcare.

But last week, the Coalition was forced to row back after haggling between senior ministers over the detail and funding of the scheme. Nick Clegg, the deputy prime minister, suggested that rather than being a universal scheme it would now be "targeted".

CURRENT RATIOS

Nurseries

Under ones - 1:3

One - 1:3

Two - 1:4

Three plus - 1:8 or 1:13

Childminders

Under threes - 1:3

NEW RATIOS

Nurseries

Under ones - 1:4

One - 1:4

Two - 1:6

Three plus - 1:8 or 1:13

Childminders

Under threes - 1:4

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