

How do you fit six toddlers into a buggy? Ask Liz Truss^[1]

Childcare is in crisis and Sure Start has been decimated, but the minister's deregulation plan can only make things worse

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EXCERPTS:

I have challenged Elizabeth Truss before, and today I challenge her again. Show us, oh super-minister, exactly how you manage - all on your own - to care for two babies alongside four toddlers? We would all enjoy watching you try it on a reality TV show, where you illustrate your new cost-cutting plan.

Most childminders have modest homes. Regulations say they don't need a garden but must take their charges out once a day. How do you manage your double buggy with four toddlers on leads? Can you get six in a car? Or on the bus to the park or library? How do you manage journeys to nursery school and back? We need you to show us how you do it, as you plan to deregulate childcare, increase child-staff ratios and reduce or remove childminder inspections - though your speech talks so beguilingly of improving quality.

On Tuesday the children's minister announces her new plan, called "More Great Childcare". Her policy has an admirable intention, to increase the number of childcare places and cut costs to get more mothers back to work. British mothers have one of the lowest employment rates in the OECD because we have the third most expensive childcare, sometimes of mediocre calibre. But that quality is in danger of getting worse as her new rules will let nurseries have a 1:13 staff-to-child ratio that allows more babies, while childminders on their own can have 1:6, again with more babies. No doubt children can be kept safe, fed and reasonably clean - but this risks becoming warehousing, not care.

There has been such an outcry that the minister's tone has changed from her original brash proposal. A member of the rightwing Free Enterprise Group, she earned this ministerial post with her chapter in the group's Britannia Unchained book, promising to magic up cheaper childcare with no extra money. She uses often deceptive foreign comparisons, where other countries, with far better qualified staff and big state subsidies seem to allow higher staff-child ratios; indeed, some have no official fixed number. When Norway is quoted, its figures conveniently omit nursery assistants from staffing figures - yet an extra pair of even unqualified hands makes all the difference.

The minister may expect childminders to relish taking on more children to earn extra fees - but the National Childminding Association, to which 70% belong, says its members are strongly opposed: they have raised a petition. Only the least scrupulous would consider it, says the chief executive. Though Ms Truss has drummed up a handful of tame supporters, Nursery World magazine reports almost the entire sector against. The Daycare Trust says good-quality care just can't be delivered on higher ratios. The National Day Nurseries Association, speaking for the private sector, is not in favour either, though half of private nurseries are making next to no profit this year.

The minister's advisers sound on the back foot. The ratios are purely voluntary, they say: no one has to take in more toddlers. Besides, the minister is raising quality by raising qualifications, so more staff must have C grades in GCSE English and maths. A new early-years educator's qualification will be set at level 3 (A-level, approximately). However, what proportion of nursery staff need any of these is up for consultation. Everyone agrees that nursery staff lack vital professional training, but with average pay of £6.60 an hour, and supervisors earning only £8.10, how do you raise staff quality and status without higher pay?

In new research Policy Exchange, the centre-right thinktank where Truss is making her announcement, finds what everyone knows: in poor areas childcare is worse for the obvious reason that hard-up mothers can only choose by price. The best nurseries are mostly in affluent areas where mothers can afford better. Policy Exchange rightly suggests that state funding go towards children who need it most, with incentives for top graduates to join Teach First, a charity that works with schools in deprived areas. All the voluminous research shows that it's deprived children who gain most from the best nursery teaching, which has far less impact on children who already have books, conversation and encouragement at home.

That goes to the heart of a hot dispute inside government. Does it target funds at children who need it most - or use universal childcare vouchers to appease higher earners for their lost child benefit? The signs are that George Osborne will choose political advantage. Unsurprisingly the Tories are 16% behind among women voters, so offering all mothers a voucher worth over £1,000 a year looks more electorally appealing than wasting extra on poor mothers, who never vote Conservative. The Institute for Public Policy Research and the Resolution Foundation are calling for good childcare that is universal and free, something Labour should have done from the first. This, they suggest, can be paid for by freezing child benefit for 10 years: others suggest the pension tax relief of the well-off would be a better source. Either way, it can be done.

Truss is right that childcare is in crisis. State funds and fees don't cover the cost. A cat's cradle of funding streams is so complex many mothers don't get the money they are due. Many nurseries are near bankrupt - and only 11% are state run, the best beacon training

centres. The quality of Ofsted inspections is doubtful, and some care is almost as rock-bottom as the pay. Labour's best programme - Sure Start children's centres - staggers under cuts, with 400 shut down, and half sad shells offering no childcare. The early intervention grant for local authorities has been raided time and again: last week Michael Gove stole more millions for his adoption scheme. Bold announcements to give deprived two-year-olds nursery places turned out to be stolen from the same fund: many nurseries say they can't afford to offer two-year-olds places anyway. As the ring-fence is removed, cash-strapped councils divert it from childcare and respite care for disabled children to pay for basic services.

Let's hear no more pieties from Cameron and Clegg about "social mobility" when they both know the evidence. The extreme inequality of British society is almost insurmountable, but the best hope of changing life chances is intense family support from a friendly local children's centre with infants at the best nurseries with well-trained teachers. Packed in with just one minder for six toddlers, many will be strapped into high chairs in front of the TV. Minister Truss, if you know any other way to manage, show us how it's done.

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