

Two in three councils fail struggling parents who want to work, childcare survey claims ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Two out of three local authorities in England and Wales are failing to provide enough childcare to support parents who work, according to figures to be published this week.

For families with disabled children the picture is even bleaker, with only one in seven local authorities meeting their statutory duties to ensure they have enough childcare provision.

In the Childcare Costs Survey 2013, the newly merged charities the Daycare Trust and the Family and Parenting Institute say the situation is increasing pressure on already struggling families and preventing parents who want to work staying in their jobs.

The group said the failure by local authorities to meet their responsibilities under the 2006 Childcare Act - designed to encourage parents back into the workplace - was almost entirely due to funding shortages. Anand Shukla, chief executive of the organisation, said: "At a time when one in five children lives in poverty, the failure to provide this essential service for parents who want to provide for their families is a national scandal."

The figures show that only one in five local authorities in England reports having enough provision for parents with children under two and only one in seven - 14% - say there is enough care for disabled children. Research by the Department for Work and Pensions has shown that a third of parents who do not currently work say it is because of the unaffordability of childcare.

"Councils are failing families," said Shukla. "It's no wonder we are struggling to find economic growth when parents are held back from doing more by a lack of accessible and affordable childcare. Not only is childcare vital for child development and the wellbeing of families but it is central to economic growth in a modern economy."

Childcare providers in many less wealthy areas rely on funding from local authorities and many point to the financial squeeze as exacerbating differences in quality and availability of care for parents in different areas across Britain. Childcare costs are already rising at above inflation rates while there have been deep cuts in tax credits and child benefit.

Amid much controversy, the government has indicated it plans to reduce the adult-to-child ratios to ease the pressure on nurseries, child-minders and after-school clubs, but the Daycare Trust and the Family and Parenting Institute argues that there will be little or no impact on costs for parents.

"Staffing costs are just one part of a complex picture, so allowing adults to look after more children at once is not only a risky idea but doesn't seem to provide any cost savings," Shukla said. "With private and non-profit childcare providers struggling, I doubt whether parents will ever see any of the money saved by increasing the numbers of children per staff member."

The charity, which will publish its report on Wednesday, is calling for more government support to local authorities. The Childcare Act 2006 obliges all English and Welsh local authorities to ensure there is enough childcare for working parents and those undertaking training and education with a view to returning to work.

-reprinted from the Observer

Region: Europe ^[2]

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