

Baby boom and poverty 'fuelling nursery education crisis' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The government has badly underestimated the impact of the new baby boom and predicted rises in poverty rates on its latest childcare initiative, according to a new report.

The soaring birth rate that is already causing a crisis in the provision of primary school places in England is likely to be reflected in nurseries - because a shortfall in numbers of staff and a rise in eligibility have not been accounted for in the government's plans for free childcare for toddlers in the poorest families, according to research produced by the national charity 4Children.

Last week deputy prime minister Nick Clegg announced that, from next September, families in England earning less than £16,190 a year would be entitled to 15 hours a week of free childcare provision for their two-year-olds. That covers around 40% of the age group, double the present number entitled.

But the 4Children figures suggest each English local authority will need to employ an average of 51 more childcare workers each year to keep pace with demand over the next five years as poverty rates rise. It says an additional 7,795 childcare professionals will need to join the current early years workforce, including childminders and nursery staff.

On average an extra 31,880 two-year-olds will become eligible for free childcare places each year - on top of those the government has already planned for.

The figures correlate with those released in research earlier in the week by the Local Government Association showing a growing demand for primary school places due to rising population.

Families have been badly hit by both rising energy and food prices and the cuts to early years provision, as well as cuts to financial help with childcare costs through working tax credit. The government says it is investing £534m in free childcare for two-year-olds, rising to £760m next year. The plans are an add-on to the 15 hours of free childcare for three- and four-year-olds cleared by the last Labour government.

It is still far from the universal childcare that many campaigners are calling for. The Institute for Public Policy Research has estimated that 25 hours of free care for one- to four-year-olds would earn the government £20,050 in tax revenue over four years from each mother returning to full-time work after maternity leave.

Anne Longfield, 4Children chief executive, said the organisation "strongly supports the fact that the government has made early education such a priority. But our research shows clearly we cannot afford to take our foot off the accelerator. The primary school crisis shows how people haven't been planning ahead and missing vital signs of what's happening in our population. We can't afford for that to happen with early years [education], we have to recognise the long-term growth in this area. We have to recruit young people into what is a rewarding career in childcare provision and we have to make sure the budgets are there to cover the immense developments happening in our population.

"By 2018 we are set for a 200,000 shortfall in childcare places for two-, three- and four-year-olds. Only action to grow the workforce and the number of childcare providers will ensure the government can continue to guarantee childcare places for all eligible families.

"Finally, government must be absolutely clear that they will only fund high-quality childcare providers to deliver this programme. Evidence shows it is only high-quality care that can deliver the impact for children that this programme aspires to."

-reprinted from the Guardian

Region: Europe ^[2]

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