

Labour sets its sights on free childcare for all ^[1]

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Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 30 Dec 2013

EXCERPTS:

Labour is to pursue the policy of universal childcare for all pre-school children in the runup to the general election.

As Ed Miliband pledges in his new year message on Monday to make childcare one of his priorities if he is elected as prime minister, the shadow minister with responsibility for the issue has made the case for the introduction of free universal provision.

In a Guardian interview the shadow childcare minister, Lucy Powell, said of free universal pre-school childcare: "I'd love it to be [introduced]. My job is to make the political and economic case for childcare, not just the childcare offer that we have right now but an extension of that. I am absolutely firmly of the belief that if you invest in childcare it pays for itself over time because it increases maternal employment rates."

The remarks by Powell are the strongest indication that the Labour leadership would like to take a dramatic step on childcare at a cost of billions of pounds, though Powell insists the state would eventually reap savings as women return to the workforce in greater numbers.

Labour is already committed to using a levy on banks to provide 25 hours of free childcare a week for working parents with three and four-year-olds, worth £1,500.

It is also to offer "wraparound" provision between 8am and 6pm - from breakfast to after-school clubs - in primary schools. The coalition has introduced 15 hours of free childcare for parents with three and four-year-old children for 38 weeks a year.

Powell, who was Miliband's deputy chief of staff before she became MP for Manchester Central, said she would probably phase universal free childcare in over longer than a parliament. "It's very expensive. I mean, it's certainly not something you could deliver anyway overnight. Those kind of goals would be 10, 15-year strategies to get there.

"But you need to think about those steps that you take along the way and making sure that they are getting you there rather than not getting you there."

Powell's comments came as Miliband said in his new year video message: "People don't want the earth. They'd much prefer some very specific promises, specific things about what a government will do - whether it's freezing energy bills, taking action on payday lenders or tackling issues around childcare which lots of working parents face.

"All of this is adding up to a programme for how we can change things. It's clearly costed, it's credible and it's real."

Miliband's new year message is designed to show he has plans to broaden his cost of living campaign after his pledge at the Labour conference to freeze energy bills for 15 months. The Labour leader wants to show that he will not just offer one-off pledges but will deliver proposals to change the economic face of Britain.

Powell said universal free pre-school childcare would have a deep impact on the wellbeing of children as well as on the economy. "We've got some of the worst maternal employment rates in the OECD countries," she said.

"Enabling women to go back to work who want to go back to work, in the same jobs they were doing before - so that they don't pay that pay and status penalty for the rest of their careers - will increase revenues to the exchequer significantly, such that over time it pays for itself."

Powell says universal childcare would work alongside a transformation of the Sure Start services for babies and young children. In Manchester, the Labour-controlled council has introduced a system in which midwives, health visitors and outreach workers sit down together and identify parents and children in need under what is known as a "common assessment framework".

Under the current nationwide system the three groups work in parallel and often do not share information.

Powell said: "I think effective, universal but also targeted early intervention work can more than pay for itself over time in those situations. This avoids being scaled up to crisis later on in that child or family's life and costing the state a hell of a lot more."

Labour is waiting for the publication of a report on childcare by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) due to be published in the new year.

In an interim report published earlier this month, the IPPR said a wide-ranging expansion of childcare would pay for itself over time. It

estimated that attracting 280,000 mothers back into the workforce would generate an extra £1.5bn in tax revenues and make savings in benefit payments

-reprinted from the Guardian

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