

# Clegg childcare plan 'could lower standards': Charity says flagship scheme should be postponed to find staff who are properly qualified <sup>[1]</sup>

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EXCERPTS:

Nick Clegg's flagship childcare policy to double the number of free nursery places for two-year-olds will lower standards and should be delayed, a leading education charity is warning.

The Deputy Prime Minister announced 260,000 youngsters from working families on low incomes would be eligible from this September.

At present 130,000 benefit - 20 per cent of the age category.

But the Sutton Trust said many of the extra 20,000 staff needed will be drawn from the army of childminders who are generally less qualified than nursery workers.

In a report, it said the scheme launch should be postponed to give more time to find staff with relevant A-level equivalent qualifications and make sure they have support from a supervisor with a degree.

Another option would be widening it to just 195,000 children this year, with the rest added as late as 2016.

The report said: 'Delaying the roll-out would enable current good quality provision to focus on catering for the most deprived 20 per cent of two-year-olds, whilst allowing the time and funding to ensure that sufficient good quality provision is available to meet the needs of the 40 per cent before this is offered as a legal entitlement.'

Relieving the pressure for extra places would mean those made available could be offered only by nurseries rated good or outstanding by Ofsted inspectors.

There are no legal qualification standards for childminders and only four in ten have a childcare qualification equivalent to an A-level.

Report co-author Kathy Sylva, professor of educational psychology at Oxford University, said: 'Research shows that good quality childcare can reduce behavioural problems and increase language skills among disadvantaged toddlers. However, there is strong evidence that if childcare is of poor quality there is no real benefit.'

'We know that qualifications for childcare workers are important for quality, therefore the government should first invest in raising standards before expanding the number of free places available to two-year-olds.'

The free childcare scheme unveiled by the Lib Dem leader in September is for families with incomes of less than £16,910 a year that receive working tax credits. Children who are in care, have been adopted or have a disability or special educational needs will also be eligible.

Parents who qualify will be able to claim up to 15 hours a week of free early education. The total cost is £534million this year, rising to £760 million in 2014-15.

The Sutton Trust also suggested pay should be increased to reflect improved qualifications in the industry and the status that goes with it.

The authors said average pay for childcare workers in England is £13,330, compared to £19,150 in Germany.

And they backed the current ratio of adults to children, which is 1:4 in nurseries for two-year-olds and 1:3 for childminders.

This will infuriate Conservative MPs, who were left angry by Mr Clegg's decision to wreck plans to cut the cost of childcare by changing the ratios.

Sutton Trust chairman Sir Peter Lampl said: 'In this tight funding environment, the government should focus the available resources on really good provision for the poorest children, rather than spreading the money thinly by expanding the scheme too quickly.'

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**Tags:** quality <sup>[3]</sup>  
funding <sup>[4]</sup>  
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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/14/01/clegg-childcare-plan-could-lower-standards-charity-says-flagship> [2]  
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [4]  
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/staff>