

Childcare policy - Step right up: the childcare auction^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the song Step Right Up, Tom Waits sings the virtues of a mystery product. For only a dollar, it does just about anything you would ever want, including mowing the lawn, picking up the kids, walking the dog and doubling on sax.

In recent times it has appeared that the mystery product, at least as far as policymakers are concerned, is the holy grail of affordable, quality childcare. It can boost children's chances of later school success, solve child poverty, hoist low-income families out of worklessness and boost the economy.

With all these benefits on offer, it is no wonder this field of policy has become increasingly crowded. We have had Government publications (More Great Childcare and More Affordable Childcare). There have also been significant reports in recent times from organisations such as the Institute for Public Policy Research, Policy Exchange, and now - most recently - the Lib Dem thinktank CentreForum.

The CentreForum publication, *Early Years: valuable ends, effective means*^[3], is a serious and persuasive piece of work. It argues that despite huge progress in the past 20 years, the childcare scene is hamstrung by a confusion of policy objectives. It is accepted that State intervention here can achieve three valuable objectives:

- Helping parents to work, with benefits to family incomes and the economy
- Fostering young children's development, and giving them a strong foundation for learning in their school years
- Tackling inequality and child poverty, helping to 'narrow the gap' for poorer children compared with those from better-off households.

The problem is, unlike in the Tom Waits song, we may not be able to do all those things equally well at the same time. Helping parents to work (leaving their children in the care of others without bankrupting themselves) and boosting children's chances of success in education are not necessarily conflicting aims. But they are not the same thing.

If children's development is your priority, evidence suggests you should invest in better-qualified staff, and making sure that two-, three and four-year-olds have access to high-quality nurseries. If your main concern is helping poorer parents work, you might instead focus on cheap or free childcare, at flexible hours, for children up to at least age 14.

CentreForum acknowledges this tension, and argues that the priority should be to use early education to 'narrow the gap'. It is a reasonable approach, and one that ought to appeal to more than just the Lib Dems; this is an area where Labour could find common ground. The evidence tells us that the right kind of pre-school experience is one of the few education interventions that can narrow the gap in this way.

Where CentreForum is less convincing is in the proposed methods to resolve this policy tension. It argues that progress will continue to be constrained unless (as the first recommendation puts it), the Government makes: 'an explicit statement about the outcomes to be

achieved through state intervention in early childhood education and care, in order to increase the likelihood of policy interventions being designed to achieve the stated outcomes.'

That is all well and good, but there is a limit to what is achieved by policy statements, however explicit. Indeed, the present Government has already made the kind of statement CentreForum recommends.

In the 2011 document, *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years* it said: 'First and foremost, we must be clear that the primary aim of the foundation years is promoting a child's physical, emotional, cognitive and social development so that all children have a fair chance to succeed at school and in later life ... The free early education that is available to all three and four-year-olds is just that - education. Universal early education, like school, may help parents manage their childcare costs and working patterns, but that is not its principal purpose.'

The trouble is that policy is often trumped by politics. From 2010 until 2012, the coalition policy in this area was led by Sarah Teather as children's minister. It was largely a continuation of the Labour emphasis on quality and child development. From 2012, after Teather was sacked and replaced by the Conservative Liz Truss, the same Coalition Government adopted a different approach, dominated by the desire to reduce costs and a quest to slash often illusory red tape.

This shift in emphasis was driven by politics, not by policy: the Conservatives perceived they had a problem with women, and opinion polls highlighted childcare costs as a hot issue with which the Government had to be seen to grapple. Grapple it did, and maybe Liz Truss's promotion as part of the recent election-focused catwalk display of short-term female ministerial appointments indicates that politically the change worked. But in policy terms, it has failed. The main legacy of the past two years, and the growing preoccupation with the cost of childcare, has been a blurring of what could have been a clear policy purpose.

It is important to pay close attention to what Government ministers do, not just what they say. They might claim, as Liz Truss did, that the most important measure of success is whether the poorest children are doing as well as their better-off peers by the time they start school. But the most significant reforms have been the complicated and yet-to-be-delivered tax-free childcare scheme (which will give more to well-paid couples using expensive nurseries than to poor families using local childminders), new early years teachers who are not in fact qualified teachers, and a half-baked and unpopular attempt to have more children looked after by each adult by relaxing ratios.

Worryingly, even Labour politicians risk being drawn into the Dutch auction over affordability, neglecting to emphasise the importance of high-quality nursery care for giving children the best start. What the political debate needs is some courageous statements about the importance of investment in that strong start.

As for the affordability debate, maybe it is time to point the finger at employers who barnham pay wages so low that parents find it hard to pay an hourly rate for their childcare that is less than half what many pay to have their dogs walked.

- Chris Barnham was until last year the senior civil servant in the DfE leading on policy on the EYFS, children's centres and early years workforce (overseeing the Nutbrown Review). He is now an independent policy consultant and writer.

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