

David Cameron's 30-hour free childcare plan 'underfunded' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Conservative plans to double free childcare for 600,000 families will cause "meltdown" due to a funding shortfall, childcare providers have warned.

David Cameron announced on Monday that he would bring forward a Childcare Bill, to be published on Tuesday, enabling working parents to benefit from 30 hours of free childcare a week for three and four-year-olds a year earlier than expected.

The childcare offer, which was one of the Conservative's key election pledges, will benefit 600,000 families and be worth the equivalent of £5000 a year.

But the Pre-School Learning Alliance, which represents 14,000 private, voluntary and independent groups, warned that councils were already paying them insufficient hourly rates to provide the existing 15 hours of free childcare.

Neil Leitch, its chief executive, said the current free childcare system was "grossly underfunded" and estimated that at least £354 million in additional funding would be required to deliver the Government's plans - a 20 per cent increase on the £3.88-an-hour currently available per child.

Nurseries are already forced to charge more for younger children or hours beyond the free allowance and some have to withdraw from the system because they are unable to offer the 30 hours, he suggested.

"I think we are at breaking point with just the 15 hours," he said. "Extend that to 30 and you will see a different position altogether."

"There are many nurseries that can't physically extend their number of hours. They may operate in a church hall or community centre. Nobody has considered whether in fact they will be able to offer the 30 hours."

Priti Patel, the employment minister, said she would be chairing a taskforce to review the overall funding model to increase the hourly rate.

Pilots of the 30 hours free childcare in some areas will begin in September 2016, with the scheme being rolled out nationwide the following year.

The government will also commit to increasing the average childcare funding rates paid to providers.

Mr Cameron said: "My message is clear - this Government is on the side of working people - helping them get on and supporting them at every stage of life.

"That is exactly why we are pressing ahead with these reforms - so that not a moment is lost in getting on with the task - going further than ever before to help with childcare costs, helping hardworking families and giving people the opportunity to get into work."

Ms Patel said: "We are doing more than any other government to improve the affordability and accessibility of childcare for working families.

"Having the right childcare in place will mean more parents can have genuine choice, security and peace of mind when it comes to being able to support their family."

-reprinted from The Telegraph

Region: Europe ^[3]

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