

Liberal Democrats Policy Consultation

Women's Policy – Consultation Paper 93

Daycare Trust Response

Daycare Trust is the national childcare charity, campaigning for quality affordable childcare for all and raising the voices of children, parents and carers. Our response below will focus on issues surrounding childcare, maternity leave and flexible working, as that is where our expertise lies.

Section 2: 'I can have it all'

2.1 Amend to read "...juggling several working commitments with family responsibilities".

Questions

2. Can government encourage changes to how we think about gender inside and outside the home?

Yes – by pro actively encouraging more men to work in Early Childhood Education and Care. This will involve increasing the professional status and pay and conditions of all childcare workers.

Having a mix of male and female childcare workers has largely been acknowledged as a positive thing – providing positive role models for all children and addressing the needs of young boys and girls. In 2001 the Government set a target for 6% of the childcare workforce to be male by 2004 and yet according to figures from the DCSF, the proportion of male childcare workers has remained more or less stagnant for the last ten years (currently 2% of the early years workforce is male).

The DCSF currently have a Departmental Strategic Objective (DSO) to: "Support the development of diversity within the workforce working with children, young people and families", and CWDC are responsible for delivering this objective through recruitment, research and public information campaigns. Recent history would suggest that meeting this objective represents a serious challenge for public policy both in central and local government, so it is more important than ever that creative responses are found to lower barriers to recruiting men to work in early childhood education and childcare.

In 2003, Daycare Trust produced a policy paper (written by Charlie Owen, Thomas Coram Research Unit) exploring the role of men in the childcare workforce. The paper considered issues around gender equality, the labour market, the needs of the children, and child protection. More recently, academics in University of Derby and PLA have launched a research campaign looking at why men are reluctant to join the childcare workforce.

Research in this area shows that there is a two-layered deterrent for men, whereby shared social assumptions about gender roles in relation to caring for children are reinforced through the perception of childcare as a low-paid (average wages are barely a pound above the minimum wage), low-skilled job, dominated by women. These gender assumptions also lead to corollary issues around child protection and a lack of promotion of childcare as a career for males. Together these create barriers to uptake among men.

Increasing the pay and conditions of all childcare workers and changing public perceptions of the professional status of childcare workers, will make it far easier to attract men to work in early childhood education and care.

3. Can women really 'have it all'? Can men? What is 'it' anyway and is it worth the effort?

With sufficient high quality affordable childcare available to all women, accessible when and where they need it, there is no reason why women cannot enjoy a career without negative effects on their children, whether they are co-habiting or a single parent.

Childcare needs to be available in places and at times that women need it, and affordable, with a range of measures in place to promote affordability.

Current gaps in availability include care during the school holidays and out-of-school care for secondary school aged children. There is also a dearth of places for families working atypical hours. Daycare Trust's own childcare costs survey recently found that 59 per cent of Family Information Services said that there was not currently sufficient childcare for children aged 12 and over, and 27 percent said there was not sufficient childcare for under 5's, which has typically been the area of most supply. This will have a huge impact on the Government's welfare reform agenda, with more families of older children needing childcare. More detailed evidence on sufficiency is becoming available through local authorities' sufficiency assessments. A number of these have been published and 93 percent of authorities' report some gaps, including: childcare before and after school, holiday care, provision for children with disabilities and special educational needs, and care for under-tuos.

On the issue of affordability, Daycare Trust believes that the most appropriate way of enabling women to work is through the provision of high quality childcare.

The most successful way of doing this is through free places, as is seen by usage of the free early education places for three- and four-year olds. We welcome the pilots extending this to some two-year olds and would like the two-year old places to be available universally. As outlined below we also believe that free places should be increased to 20 hours a week.

The childcare element of the Working Tax Credit is an important component of the Government's welfare to work and childcare strategies, and it is valuable in assisting low-income parents in paying for childcare. However, the way in which it is currently structured and operates presents complex and interlocking problems of take-up, eligibility, qualifying hours, the proportion of costs which should be covered and regional disparities. Take-up of the childcare element has increased to nearly 450,000 parents in April 2008. Yet, as stated above, only a quarter of these families also claim the childcare element. And while the latest figures show that the average amount claimed has now reached £65, it still does not cover the full cost of a childcare place. The bottom line is that the cost of childcare is still beyond most families, particularly those families on low to medium incomes and lone parent households. We believe the following steps should be taken to improve tax credits

- The childcare element should be separated from Working Tax Credit and either included under the Child Tax Credit or made into a separate programme. Attaching the childcare element to the Child Tax Credit might be preferable, however, as to further aid take-up, the application process could remain a single form for parents to complete.
- A more radical step could be to remove the work requirement for parents so that childcare support could be provided if a parent is claiming just the Child Tax Credit. This is based on the premise that we know that childcare brings positive outcomes for children and should not depend on whether both of their parents are in paid work. This would also enable parents who are students to claim the childcare element.
- Daycare Trust argues that the proportion of help with childcare costs available through the tax credits should be increased from 80 to 100 per cent, as is being piloted in London. At the very least, creating a 100 per cent childcare costs subsidy should be considered either for families on very low incomes, or for specific families – in a similar way that the Government is currently doing for 50,000 workless parents undergoing training to prepare for work.

Section 3: Money

3.3 In addition, childcare is not always available to women working atypical hours such as shift work, and the first round of Childcare Sufficiency Assessments showed a lack of childcare for older children and children with SEN.

Questions

4c) the inequalities caused by part-time working?

Supply side investment in childcare will provide more places in atypical hours for shift workers and increasing the free childcare entitlement from the proposed 15 hours to 20 hours for all children up to school age will allow women to return to work on a more sustainable basis.

However, women will only be able to take-up part-time working opportunities if there are sufficient childcare places available. As mentioned above under question 3, there are gaps in childcare during the holidays, for shift workers and people who work at atypical times. There are also gaps in suitable 'childcare' for older children, especially those in lone-parent households (and in the majority lone-mother households) who are now required to find work through the changes to welfare benefits.

As mentioned above, we believe that there should be further reform to the childcare tax credits so that they offer more effective support to families.

In addition, parents should be entitled to paid parental leave so they can cope when their children are sick.

5. What advice should be made available publicly (e.g. through schools, FE/HE institutions, the Citizens' Advice Bureau) to assist individuals in managing their finances and understanding the support systems available?

Investment in independent advice for parents such as Daycare Trust's Information Line and tax credit checker on www.payingforchildcare.org.uk will enable women to plan their financial situation on a sustainable basis.

Clear information also needs to be available from Families Information Services and children's centre staff. In some instances, women may need further support through brokerage. These services are beginning to be offered through local authorities, and also formed part of the LDA's Childcare Affordability Programme, where they were very successful in enabling women to enter work.

There needs to be clearer and more readily available information on tax credits and childcare vouchers. There is a lot of confusion amongst families regarding the financial help available – for example 23 percent of calls to Daycare Trust's

information service in 2008 were on the subject of employer-supported childcare and 33 percent concerned childcare costs.

There is also further confusion at the moment, as following a European Court ruling, changes to the Sex Discrimination Act and Maternity and Parental Leave Regulations mean that for parents of babies born on or after 5 October 2008, contractual benefits, including childcare vouchers, must continue throughout all maternity leave. Prior to these changes contractual benefits had to be paid during ordinary maternity leave (weeks 1-26) but not additional maternity leave (weeks 27-52). We are concerned that the additional cost faced by employers will be a disincentive to run the scheme and employers will withdraw employer-supported childcare.

Section 7: Men

Questions

26. How can we encourage men to take a greater role in their children's lives? What role do educational establishments, the health service and other public organisations have to play in this?

See answer to section 2, question 2 with regard to men working in the childcare and early years sector.

Daycare Trust is just at the beginning of a process of reviewing our policies on parental leave and pay, but our initial thoughts are that more paid parental leave for fathers will play an important role in encouraging men to take a greater role in their children's lives and will therefore help to redress the gender balance. We believe there is a need to fill the gap between the end of maternity leave and the start of the free early education entitlement at age two (this is currently only available in some areas and needs to be extended to all). Therefore a potential model for this, as suggested by Peter Moss, (please contact us if you will be publishing results of the consultation as our proposals may be more worked up by then) would be the following:

- Mat leave – 26 weeks @ 90% earnings
- Pat leave – 2 weeks @ 90% earnings
- Parental leave – 54 weeks at 50% earnings (this need not be taken on a full-time basis, but could be used for mothers to return on a part-time basis if preferred or for fathers to reduce hours over a longer period)
 - Father's leave – 18 weeks
 - Mother's leave – 18 weeks
 - Family leave – shared – 18 weeks

If all paid leave was taken on a full-time basis, this still leaves just under 6 months between the end of full-time paid parental leave and the start of free early education at the age of two. However we believe the gap could be filled by unpaid parental leave alongside extending the baby element of the Child Tax Credit to the beginning of free nursery education so that families can decide whether to use that for childcare or to subsidise one or both parents (on a shift-parenting basis) to stay at home.

29. How can we ensure that equality legislation does not adversely impact on women's chances of employment or promotion? What role could shared parental leave play in the solution?

As mentioned above, the current lack of guidance on the issue of childcare vouchers and the Sex Discrimination Act means that some employers may pull out of, or not register for childcare vouchers. This will have an adverse effect on women as they are more likely to request and take advantage of employer-supported childcare.

We are fully supportive of shared parental leave, but would always want women to have the right to take the first six months of leave. This is extremely important for attachment and child development, and for enabling mothers to breast-feed their young babies.

30. How can we create pathways back into work after a child break? Should parents be 'forced' back into work by the welfare system?

We believe that work remains the best route out of poverty, but any conditionality on benefits must be mirrored by the availability of flexible and affordable childcare. At the moment, there is not sufficient childcare available, especially for older children, to support the welfare to work agenda.

Women returning to work after a child break may need access to training and/or support with finding the best childcare options for them and their child(ren). Daycare Trust believes that there should be more access to childcare whilst training (while the new 50,000 free childcare places for low-income families are welcome, we are concerned that the scheme will be too restrictive) and hands-on support to find work and childcare. As mentioned above under question 5, brokerage services and in-depth support to access work, has shown to be very effective through the Childcare Affordability Programme in London. Simply providing written information on childcare and work options is unlikely to be sufficient for some women, especially those who are from minority groups or have been out of the workforce for a while.

We have also enclosed a copy of our response to the Liberal Democrat's policy consultation on childcare, which gives more indepth analysis of some of our comments above.

If you have any further questions about any of our comments, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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