

Children First

Liberal Democrat Policy Briefing 24

January 2005



Early childhood is a crucial period in human development. There is compelling evidence that children benefit most from a combination of home care for the first two years of life followed by a fully integrated daycare system where they receive high quality educational and developmental care up until school starting age. Too much of the Government's policy has been about sending parents back to work after the birth of a child. Parents should have a greater range of options available: be it caring for children at home, returning to work or a combination of the two.

Supporting parents, supporting children

We are committed to giving new families a more solid and structured financial start. We would:

- **Offer new mothers the option of receiving a Maternity Income Guarantee**, equivalent to the minimum wage of £170 per week for the 6 months after the birth of their first child, as an alternative to Statutory Maternity Pay. This would guarantee at least £4,420 for working mothers when they are starting a family. New parents, particularly those on a low income, will have a significant boost to their income, helping counter the threat of financial hardship.
- **Encourage home working, part-time working and self-employment**, by raising the status of such work and ensuring they are awarded the same rights and protection as full-time permanent workers.
- **Make workplaces more responsive to the needs of a young family**, by promoting a culture of good work/life balance and allowing employees to have a say in positive changes to their work environment, via measures such as greater workplace consultation.

Childcare: putting children first

To ensure that no child loses out on the benefits of professional childcare and educational/social development, we would:

- **Reduce average maximum class sizes at Key Stage one (aged 5-7) from 30 to 20.** We will fund this by scrapping the Government's Child Trust Fund and spending the money where it makes the most difference. This would:
 - Ensure that all 5-7 year olds receive more individual attention for their educational and social development.
 - Allow Special Educational Needs pupils to receive particular attention without causing disruption to their fellow classmates.
 - Ease the transition into formal schooling, as children would continue to receive close attention.
- **Implement key elements of the 10 Year Childcare Strategy.** We would:
 - Roll out 3500 children's centres by 2010, providing integrated childcare, early education and family services to the under 5's. Children in isolated rural areas would particularly benefit.
 - Extend free part-time early education places for three and four year-olds to four hours a day for 38 weeks of the year and increase the flexibility for parents to use these hours.
 - Offer wraparound care to all school-age children by opening schools from 8.00am to 6.00pm. We would make sure that responsibility to coordinate this remained with LEAs, without adding to the workload of individual head teachers.
- **Create a 'Children's Profession' of early years workers.** This would establish a new qualification of Qualified Early Years Teacher, at the level of current teaching qualifications. It would also set up a professional body for early years staff with the power to strike off the register staff, which break its code of conduct.

- **Incorporate communication and training networks for nannies and childminders into Children's Centres.** We would encourage greater use of childminders, who can offer more flexibility for meeting parents' needs than other provision at fixed hours of the day.

Protecting the rights of the child

To ensure that the best interests of the child come first when policies are proposed and reviewed where their interests are involved, we would:

- **Strengthen the post of Children's Commissioner in England,** by making its power rights-based. The Commissioner will be obliged to consider the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in safeguarding the rights, interests and welfare of children. It should be wholly independent of the Government and have real power to review existing and proposed legislation and guidance concerning children.
- **Reform the system of child support.** The Child Support Agency often requires parents to pay an unrealistic amount of maintenance, but has also failed to enforce those payments. We would put child maintenance payments in the hands of the Inland Revenue so that each case is effectively dealt with according to the particular needs of the child.
 - The Inland Revenue would calculate initial maintenance guidelines, administer and enforce the collection of maintenance.
 - A family tribunal service, as part of an expanded Appeals Service, would allow for variation in individual cases and move away from the current principle of 'one size fits all'.
 - We would offer incentives to parents who cooperate with their initial settlement.
- **Ensure that child custody decisions are made on an individual basis, with the best interests of the child as paramount.** The focus must be on finding pre-court resolutions. We would:
 - Base our approach on the principle of quality access for both parents, except where the child's safety is at risk.
 - Focus on promoting pre-court early intervention schemes, where both parents can avoid damaging legal disputes by cooperating to provide for the physical, emotional and financial support of the child.
 - Reform the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), firstly by improving its current administrative function and then by looking at ways to involve it in the pre-court phase of custody resolution, providing much needed continuity for all involved. All attempts should be made to avoid a damaging legal dispute.