

**POLICY PAPER 152**

# **A Better Start In Life**

Liberal   
Democrats

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## **Summary of policy proposals**

### **Childcare and early years education**

Liberal Democrats would:

- Fix the problems with the Government's expansion of free childcare, starting with a review of the rates paid to providers to ensure they cover the actual costs of delivering high-quality childcare and early years education.
- Invest in high-quality early years education and close the attainment gap by:
  - Giving disadvantaged children aged two to four an extra five free hours a week.
  - Tripling the Early Years Pupil Premium to £1,000 a year.
- Develop a career strategy for nursery staff, including a training programme with the majority of those working with children aged two to four to have a relevant Early Years qualification or be working towards one.
- Restore childminding as a valued part of the early years system by:
  - Replacing the three different current registration processes with a single childcare register.
  - Commissioning a practitioner-led review to simplify regulation, reduce administrative burdens and attract new childminders while maintaining high standards.

### **Parental leave and pay**

Liberal Democrats would:

- Give all families (including self-employed parents, adoptive parents and kinship carers):
  - 6 weeks of use-it-or-lose-it leave for each parent, paid at 90% of earnings.
  - 46 weeks of parental leave to share between themselves as they choose, paid at double the current statutory rate.
- Introduce paid neonatal care leave.

### **'Toddler top-up'**

Liberal Democrats would:

- Pay an enhanced rate of Child Benefit for one-year-olds.

### **Special educational needs and disabilities**

Liberal Democrats would:

- Include a specific emphasis on identifying and supporting children with SEND in the new training programme for early years staff.
- Give local authorities extra funding to halve the amount that schools pay towards the costs of a child's additional SEN support, from £6,000 to £3,000.
- Help to end the postcode lottery in SEND provision by establishing a new National Body for SEND to fund support for children with very high needs.

# 1 Introduction

1.1 Nurseries are struggling. Too many new parents are forced to choose between caring for their child and their careers. At the same time, the achievement gap between richer and poorer families, which can best be tackled in the early years, is rising. Many parents who want to work, especially mothers, can spend several years out of the workplace because they can't afford childcare. This affects their career trajectory, their confidence, and their long-term earning potential.

1.2 According to the OECD, we have one of the most expensive childcare systems in the world. Many people pay as much for childcare as for their mortgages. The TUC say costs have risen £2000 in a decade<sup>1</sup> and estimate that parents – with children under 2 – have to work 9.4 hours a week on average just to be able to cover 25 hours per week of childcare at nursery. 870,000 mothers stay at home because of childcare costs - half of all out-of-work mums. The percentage of women aged 24-35 who are economically inactive has risen by 13%.

1.3 High costs do not necessarily mean provision is readily available however. In a UK-wide survey of 11,507 expectant parents and parents of under-fives undertaken by the Pregnant Then Screwed in September 2022, 92 per cent said their local childcare provider had a waiting list, with a third saying the wait was 10 months or longer, and 23 per cent said there were no childcare places available within 10 miles. They are now advising parents to register for a place before their baby is born.

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<https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/cost-childcare-has-risen-over-ps2000-year-2010>

1.4 A survey published In February 2023 by the Early Years Alliance found that more than a third of pre-schools, nurseries and childminders believe it is likely that rising costs will force them to close within a year. And this was before the government's underfunded proposals on child care in the March budget, which will dramatically increase the stress on the sector.

1.5 There is also a problem with adequate pay, low levels of training and lack of career progression within the workforce, which affects the quality of childcare provision and limits the scope for closing the attainment gap.

1.6 Many parents are not able to take as much leave as they would like when their children are in their first year.

1.7 The UK has the least generous paternity leave entitlement in Europe. For 1 in 5 fathers, no parental leave options were available to them following the birth or adoption of their child. Of those that were entitled to some leave, but returned to work early, 43% cited financial hardship as the reason for not taking their full entitlement.

1.8 New nationally representative survey data<sup>2</sup> finds that fewer than one in five (18%) prospective parents say they or their partner could afford to take six weeks of paternity leave at the current statutory rate of pay. Almost a third (29%) of parents surveyed said either they or their partner had experienced a new mental health issue in the two years following the birth of their most recent child. 83% of mothers with children under 12

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<sup>2</sup>

[https://www.progressive-policy.net/downloads/files/PPP\\_Paternity-Leave-report\\_June-2023.pdf](https://www.progressive-policy.net/downloads/files/PPP_Paternity-Leave-report_June-2023.pdf)

thought that increasing paid paternity leave would have a positive impact on mothers' mental health.

1.9 Liberal Democrats recognise that families need a fairer deal. This paper sets out our radical, transformative plans to reform childcare and parental leave. Our aim is to help families make the decisions about childcare and parental leave that are best for them - to support them to make their own choices about working and how best to care for their children.

1.10 We believe that delivering on this agenda has the potential to improve mental health, reduce financial hardship, the gender employment gap, the gender pay gap, the attainment gap and give children a better start in life.

1.11 This will mean upfront expenditure to expand childcare and parental leave, but we believe in the long run this is sound investment – it has been estimated that closing the gender pay gap would boost the economy by £23 billion a year.

1.12 Liberal Democrats recognise that families come in many shapes and sizes. We do not value any particular model of family composition above any other. These proposals are aimed at giving everyone more support and more choice.

## **2 Childcare and Early Years Education**

### **2.1 Introduction**

2.1.1 Liberal Democrats believe that flexible, affordable childcare is a critical part of our economic infrastructure. It gives parents more choice over how to organise their lives and helps them return to work if they want to. Lack of access to affordable childcare is a key driver of the gender pay gap.

2.1.2 We also understand the crucial importance of early years education as the best possible investment in the future and the most effective way of narrowing the gap between children from rich and poor families. In 2022, less than half of children in reception eligible for free school meals were hitting all their early learning goals, compared to two-thirds of their peers.<sup>3</sup>

2.1.3 In Government, we increased the number of free childcare hours for three- and four-year-olds, introduced 15 hours a week of free early years education for disadvantaged two-year-olds, and created the Early Years Pupil Premium to give extra support to disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds.<sup>4</sup>

2.1.4 At the 2019 general election, we called for a properly-funded entitlement to free, high-quality childcare for every child aged two to four

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<sup>3</sup> [Department for Education](#)

<sup>4</sup> The [Early Years Pupil Premium](#) gives providers an extra 60p per hour (£342 a year) for disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds, for the 15 hours universal entitlement. It is [expected](#) to cost the Government £40.1m in 2023-24.



and children aged between nine and 24 months where their parents or guardians are in work: 35 hours a week, 48 weeks a year.

## **2.2 The Government's Plans**

2.2.1 Now the Government has pledged to expand the current offer of 30 free hours a week to working parents of children aged nine months to three years. However, the funding promised by the Conservatives falls far short of what it will actually cost to provide these hours – or to address the existing underfunding of early years provision.<sup>5</sup> This raises fears that it will only exacerbate the problems parents already face: a lack of nursery or childminder places<sup>6</sup> and eye-watering fees for full-time childcare.

2.2.2 Many parents have to pay high fees for additional hours in order to access their free entitlement. For example, even those working parents of three- and four-year-olds who are eligible for 30 free hours a week still have to pay £117.60 a week on average for full-time childcare (50 hours a week).<sup>7</sup>

2.2.3 While we remain committed in the long-term to delivering free, full-time childcare for all children from age two and all those with working parents from nine months, our immediate priority is to fix the problems with the Government's expansion of the 30-hour entitlement, starting with

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<sup>5</sup> The [Early Years Alliance](#) and the [Women's Budget Group](#) estimate that the existing entitlements for 2-, 3- and 4-year-olds are underfunded by £1.8bn a year. [Spring Budget 2023](#) only provided an extra £204m in 2023-24 and £288m in 2024-25 to address this shortfall.

<sup>6</sup> 10,256 childcare providers closed in 2021-22, with a net reduction of 4,019. [\[Ofsted\]](#)

<sup>7</sup> Coram, [Childcare Survey 2023](#)

a review of the rates paid to providers to ensure they cover the actual costs of delivering high-quality childcare and early years education.

2.2.4 Rapid expansion of early years provision presents risks of following the pattern seen in Scotland, where growth is ‘managed’ by local authorities through increases in pupil to teacher ratios and the removal of higher qualified (higher paid) staff to stretch resources to meet the increased places.

2.2.5 Historically the UK has very low levels of training and education expectations/norms of early years practitioners; this is likely to be a main missed opportunity to prevent the opening up of large gaps in education outcomes between socio-economic groups.

2.2.6 An overwhelming body of evidence indicates early years’ largest impact on learning occurs where play is structured around the components and prerequisite skills of language/literacy, social cognition and numeracy.

2.2.7 A number of studies have suggested that staff with higher levels of early childhood qualifications benefit the quality of provision. Through their greater familiarity with child development theory and with educational policy and curricula, these staff are better positioned to facilitate high quality play, scaffold children’s learning and engage in more responsive interactions with young children.

2.2.8 Expansion of early years provision without proportional resourcing or mandating of expanded quality or qualifications of staff seems likely to improve children’s development by improving home conditions. However, in policy focused mainly on home conditions the early years provision itself seems unlikely to be the agent of improved life chances as its effectiveness

is likely to be diluted to meet the needs of more places. Increasing effective early years provision would involve not only resourcing for more places but compound costs of proportionally increased resources for higher qualified staff.

2.2.9 A key issue that needs to be addressed urgently for the workforce is pay and career progression. Policy to expand early years provision should involve provisions for higher qualified practitioners to routinely and frequently monitor and influence the learning/ developmental environments of all early years settings for 3-year-olds and above.

2.2.10 It is also a worrying feature of the childcare and early education workforces that it is overwhelmingly female. This helps to perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes that looking after children is a female responsibility. Improving pay and prospects is not only the right thing to do for the sake of the existing workforce, it is also the only viable way to attract more men into this type of work. At the same time, men are disproportionately overrepresented in senior positions in early years education relative to their low numbers in the workforce as a whole. Greater diversity in the workforce at all levels is therefore a priority.

2.2.11 In 2012, Professor Cathy Nutbrown completed an independent review of early education and childcare qualifications for the Government.<sup>8</sup> Her report made a number of recommendations on how best to strengthen qualifications and career pathways in the early years and childcare sector, many of which have not yet been implemented.

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<sup>8</sup> [\*Foundations for Quality: The independent review of early years education and childcare qualifications\*](#)

## **2.3 Our Approach**

2.3.1 We will invest in high-quality early years education from age two, when the evidence suggests it is beneficial.<sup>9</sup> We will:

- Give children from disadvantaged families aged two to four an extra five free hours a week, as the first step towards a universal, full-time entitlement for all two- to four-year-olds.
- Triple the Early Years Pupil Premium to £1,000 a year to give extra help to disadvantaged children.
- Develop a career strategy for nursery staff, including a training programme with the majority of those working with children aged two to four to have a relevant Early Years qualification or be working towards one. In the long run, each nursery should have at least one graduate.

2.3.2 We will also tackle the shortage of childcare places by restoring childminding as a valued part of the early years system, including:

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<sup>9</sup> "Data suggests that high-quality ECEC [early childhood education and care] has a positive impact on children's outcomes when accessed from 3 and above. For children aged 3 and under, international evidence is more mixed. EPPSE [a research study in England] found that use of high-quality ECEC between the ages of 2 and 3 is beneficial for cognitive outcomes, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds... EPPSE did not find any cognitive benefits from ECEC use under age 2 for children overall." [\[Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology\]](#)

- Replacing the three different current registration processes with a single childcare register.
- Commissioning a practitioner-led review to simplify regulation, reduce administrative burdens and attract new childminders to the sector, while maintaining high standards.

## **3 Parental Leave and Pay**

### **3.1 Introduction**

3.1.1 Affordable childcare is only part of the picture. Liberal Democrats believe that parents should also have greater flexibility and choice over how to juggle work with parenting in the first months of their child's life.

3.1.2 Mothers unarguably have a unique and vital role, and that must never be undervalued. But in two-parent families it is usually better for both parents and children when fathers are more involved in their baby's first weeks and months too. (We refer here to paternity leave and fathers, as that applies to most families and matches the wording in legislation, but paternity leave applies to fathers and any parent of any gender who is the partner of the child's mother).

3.1.3 Greater equality in parenting will also lead to greater equality in the workplace.<sup>10</sup> On average, a woman's earnings take a roughly 40% hit when she has her first child, and do not recover. A man's earnings take barely any hit.

### **3.2 Current Entitlements**

3.2.1 Under the current system, mothers can take up to 52 weeks of maternity leave, but statutory pay only lasts a maximum of 39 weeks (six weeks paid at 90% of their average weekly earnings, and up to 33 weeks at

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<sup>10</sup> [NBER](#)

£172.48 a week). This is a day-one right for all employees.<sup>11</sup> Self-employed mothers are entitled to Maternity Allowance of £172.48 a week or 90% of their average earnings (whichever is lower) for up to 39 weeks.

3.2.2 The current entitlement to paternity leave is for two weeks, which must be taken in one block within 56 days of birth and are paid at £172.48 a week.<sup>12</sup> This is not a day-one right, however. It is only a statutory entitlement for employees who have been with their employer for at least 26 weeks by the 15th week before the baby is due.

3.2.3 In addition parents are entitled to 18 weeks of unpaid leave per child, up to four weeks of which can be taken in any year until the child turns 18.

3.2.4 At less than half of full-time pay at the minimum wage,<sup>13</sup> the current statutory rates of maternity and paternity pay simply are not high enough to give parents a real choice. The current rules also deny too many parents the option of taking paid parental leave. For example, around a quarter of fathers are not eligible for paternity pay, either because they are self-employed or because they have not been with their employer continuously for six months.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Day-one rights are available to all employees from their first day with an employer, as well as to agency workers from their first day of assignment.

<sup>12</sup> The Government has recently announced plans to allow paternity leave to be taken in two separate one-week blocks, at any time in the first year.

<sup>13</sup> Statutory Maternity Pay and Paternity Pay are currently £172.48 a week. 35 hours at the National Living Wage (£10.42 an hour) is £364.70.

<sup>14</sup> [O'Brien et al. 2017](#)

3.2.5 Jo Swinson, as Minister for Employment Relations, introduced Shared Parental Leave in 2015. This was a major step forward, giving parents choice over how to share up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay between them. However, take-up of Shared Parental Leave remains low,<sup>15</sup> so a major overhaul is needed to give parents a genuine choice.

3.2.6 Evidence from around the world shows that a longer period of well-paid leave reserved specifically for fathers is crucial.<sup>16</sup> For example, Québec introduced 3 or 5 weeks of non-transferable paternity leave (the “daddy quota”) in 2006, and has seen take-up of parental leave by fathers rise from around 20% to 80% as a result.<sup>17</sup>

3.2.7 The UK’s two weeks of paternity leave is well below the 2022 average of 10.4 weeks across advanced economies.<sup>18</sup> Recent polling shows that 66% of adults and 81% of parents of children under 12 support increasing the length of statutory paternity leave.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 13,000 people received Shared Parental Pay in 2021-22, 9,800 of them men [\[DBT\]](#). In 2013, the Government [estimated](#) that around 285,000 fathers would be eligible and expected take-up to be between 2% and 8% of fathers. According to the 2019 Parental Rights Survey, 4% of fathers and 1% of mothers of children born between May and September 2017 took Shared Parental Leave. [\[DBT\]](#)

<sup>16</sup> For example, Québec introduced 3 or 5 weeks of non-transferable paternity leave (the “daddy quota”) in 2006, and [has seen](#) take-up of parental leave by fathers rise from around 20% to 80% as a result.

<sup>17</sup> Professor Diane-Gabrielle Tremblay, ‘How one province got 80 per cent of fathers to take paternity leave’, [The Conversation, 13 June 2019](#)

<sup>18</sup> [OECD](#)

<sup>19</sup> [YouGov poll](#) of 2,136 UK adults for Pregnant Then Screwed and the Centre for Progressive Policy, 22-23 May 2023.



3.2.8 In Norway, which reserves 15 weeks of paid leave for each parent, men account for 31% of days for which parental leave benefits are paid, while in Sweden, which offers 10 days of paternity leave and 90 days of non-transferable parental leave for each parent, men account for 30%.<sup>20</sup> Both countries also have significantly higher rates of pay for parental leave than the UK.

### **3.3 Our Approach**

3.3.1 We will:

- Make all parental pay and leave day-one rights, and extend them to self-employed parents.
- Extend paid maternity leave to a full year and double the level of pay (after the first six weeks) to £350 a week.
- Reserve the first six weeks of maternity leave specifically for mothers.
- Increase pay for paternity leave to 90% of earnings, with a cap for high-earners.
- Introduce an extra use-it-or-lose-it month of leave specifically for fathers and partners, paid at 90% of earnings (with a cap for high-earners), in addition to the two weeks of paternity leave.<sup>21</sup>

3.3.2 This will expand on the introduction of Shared Parental Leave by:

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<sup>20</sup> [OECD](#)

<sup>21</sup> We refer here to paternity leave and fathers, as that applies to most families and matches the wording in [legislation](#), but paternity leave applies to fathers and any parent of any gender who is the partner of the child's mother.

- Making it a day-one right.
- Extending it to self-employed parents.
- Enabling parents to share up to 46 weeks of leave and pay between them as they choose.
- Doubling Shared Parental Pay to £350 a week.
- Increasing take-up by fathers through an extra month of use-it-or-lose-it leave.

3.3.3 We will give single parents the full entitlement of parental leave: 58 weeks, 12 paid at 90% of earnings and the rest at £350 a week.

3.3.4 By extending paid parental leave beyond nine months – the age at which free childcare hours will be available from September 2024 – our policy will give parents a new choice: whether to continue with paid parental leave or both work and take up free childcare during those months.

3.3.5 Adoptive parents have equivalent entitlements to leave and pay as other parents,<sup>22</sup> and our reforms would apply to them as well. Liberal Democrats would also give kinship carers (for example where grandparents have taken over responsibility for the care of the child) the right to leave and pay on equivalent terms.

3.3.6 So, under our plan, all families (including self-employed parents, adoptive parents and kinship carers) will be entitled to:

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<sup>22</sup> 52 weeks of Statutory Adoption Leave and 39 weeks of Statutory Adoption Pay for one parent, paternity leave and pay for the other.

- 6 weeks of use-it-or-lose-it leave for each parent, paid at 90% of earnings.
- 46 weeks of parental leave to share between themselves as they choose, paid at double the current statutory rate.

3.3.7 In the longer-term, our aim is to expand this to an entitlement to nine months of paid leave for each parent – three months use-it-or-lose-it and six months transferable to the other parent – and to increase statutory pay to at least the real living wage.

3.3.8 We will also complete the introduction of neonatal care leave and pay. This would be a new statutory right to leave for parents whose baby is in neonatal care for at least a week, paid at the same rate as our increased Statutory Maternity Pay. The Conservatives promised to introduce this in 2019, but failed to do so. Instead, a Private Members' Bill has been passed with cross-party support,<sup>23</sup> requiring the Government to make regulations introducing this entitlement.

3.3.9 We reiterate our existing policy of changing the law so that flexible working is open to all from day one in the job, with employers required to advertise jobs accordingly, unless there are significant business reasons why that is not possible. This will significantly assist parents by normalising flexible working.

3.3.10 These reforms will bring big benefits for employers too. As the Federation of Small Businesses said of Shared Parental Leave in 2013, "A more flexible system will, we believe, encourage greater openness and

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<sup>23</sup> The [Neonatal Care \(Leave and Pay\) Act 2023](#)

dialogue between the employer and employee at an early stage and should therefore make it easier for businesses to plan ahead and arrange suitable cover.”

3.3.11 In a survey of workplace managers conducted in late 2018 and early 2019, 47% said they were satisfied with Shared Parental Leave and Pay, and only 5% were dissatisfied. In workplaces where at least some employees had taken Shared Parental Leave in the two years prior to the survey, 63% of managers were satisfied with the policy.<sup>24</sup>

3.3.12 Many good employers already offer their employees enhanced entitlements to parental leave and pay. Our changes would see those businesses get more of their costs covered by the government, as well as creating a more level playing field across the economy.

3.3.13 However, we will also address the problems that many small businesses currently face. Although parental pay is reimbursed by the government, this can cause cash flow issues for small businesses who have to pay their employees before receiving their money from the Government. We will consult with employers on the implementation of our proposals to ensure they work well for small businesses in particular.

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<sup>24</sup> [NIESR & DBT](#)

## **4 'Toddler top-up'**

4.1 We believe that all parents should get additional support, no matter what arrangements they choose for their child's early years.

4.2 While we aim to make formal childcare an affordable option for all families, we recognise that many parents will still choose either to do full-time childcare themselves or to make informal family arrangements for childcare, such as asking grandparents or other relatives to help out.

4.3 And even without paying for formal childcare, looking after young children is expensive. Parents, grandparents and other carers incur all sorts of costs, from nappies to playgroup fees, and these should be recognised. As with choosing formal childcare, families should not be prevented by cost from making the right informal arrangements for them.

4.4 The simplest mechanism to help all parents – working or not – is Child Benefit. However, the Conservative Government has cut Child Benefit rates by 10% in real-terms since 2015, with inflation eroding the value of support for parents and children.

4.5 We believe that these cuts should ultimately be reversed and Child Benefit increased, but given the state of the public finances after years of Conservative mismanagement, a narrower and more targeted approach is required in the short-term.

4.6 As an immediate measure, we will therefore introduce a 'toddler top-up': an enhanced rate of Child Benefit for parents and carers for 12 months, when their child is one year old.

4.7 This will give extra help to parents, including those who do not benefit from the expansion in free childcare hours or our proposed expansion of paid parental leave.

4.8 We also reiterate our existing commitments to remove the Conservatives' two-child limit and benefits cap. This will give more support to struggling families and disadvantaged children, while helping to tackle child poverty.

## **5 Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities**

### **5.1 Introduction**

5.1.1 We want every child, no matter their background or personal circumstances, to get the help they need at nursery, in school and throughout their lives, to achieve all they can.

5.1.2 However, too many children's special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) go undetected for too long and they are left to struggle because the necessary support isn't in place.

5.1.3 As of January 2023, one in six school pupils in England – just over 1.5 million children – are identified as having SEN.<sup>25</sup> In 2021/22, the average Attainment 8 score for pupils with SEN was 29.4 (the equivalent of eight GCSEs at grade 3), compared to 52.5 for those without SEN (just over the equivalent of eight GCSEs at grade 5).<sup>26</sup> Children with SEN are more than three times as likely to be suspended from school than those without SEN, and more than four times as likely to be permanently excluded.<sup>27</sup>

5.1.4 SEND are significantly more prevalent among children from disadvantaged backgrounds and among certain ethnic groups. Pupils eligible for free school meals are twice as likely to be identified as having

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<sup>25</sup> [Department for Education](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Department for Education](#)

<sup>27</sup> 6.2% of children with SEN were suspended in 2021/22 and 0.074% were excluded, compared to 1.7% and 0.017% of children without SEN.

[\[Department for Education\]](#)

SEN than those who are not eligible. 28% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and 22% of Black Caribbean children are identified as having SEN, compared to 17% of all pupils.<sup>28</sup>

## **5.2 The Current Situation**

5.2.1 In Government, Liberal Democrats comprehensively reformed the law governing provision for children with SEND, by introducing Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans and extending support to age 25. The aim of these reforms was to give young people and their families more control over how their needs are met and getting education, health and social care services working together.

5.2.2 However, the Conservative Government has woefully underfunded local authorities, meaning that the promise of those reforms has not been delivered.<sup>29</sup> Instead, Conservative cuts to school and council budgets mean that many parents and carers simply can't get their children the support they deserve. They are forced to navigate a postcode lottery and wait months to get the support their children are entitled to.

5.2.3 With schools being forced to cut back on support staff to manage rising costs, more and more families are having to turn to councils to get the help they need. More than half a million children and young people

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<sup>28</sup> In January 2023, 28% of pupils eligible for free school meals had identified SEN, compared to 14% of pupils not eligible for free school meals.

[Department for Education](#)

<sup>29</sup> The Local Government Association [estimates](#) that councils are facing a £1.9 billion shortfall in SEND funding, and forecasts that it will rise to £3.6 billion by 2025 with no intervention.



now have EHC plans, including 21,000 under-5s, and those numbers have been rising by around 10% each year.<sup>30</sup>

5.2.4 By law, the whole process from a request for an assessment of a child's EHC needs to them being issued with a plan must take no more than 20 weeks, unless one of a limited number of exceptions apply.<sup>31</sup> However, in 2022 only half of children received their EHC plan within the 20-week limit.<sup>32</sup>

5.2.5 Even after their needs have been assessed, children and young people too often do not get the support they are entitled to. Every year, thousands of parents and young people have to go to court over their EHC plan – or lack of one – and almost all of them win. The number of appeals to the SEND Tribunal has more than doubled in the last four years,<sup>33</sup> and 96% of cases are decided in the appellants' favour.<sup>34</sup> Every year, tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money are wasted defending these cases.

5.2.6 That is unacceptable. No child, or their family, should have to fight to have their needs met. Children must not lose out on support they are entitled to simply because their parents do not have the time, money or confidence to navigate the complex system of appeals and tribunals.

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<sup>30</sup> [Department for Education](#)

<sup>31</sup> [The Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Department for Education](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Ministry of Justice](#)

<sup>34</sup> [Ministry of Justice](#)

## **5.3 Our Approach**

5.3.1 To ensure every child gets the support they need, and reduce the financial pressure on schools and local councils, Liberal Democrats will:

- Improve training for early years staff to identify and support children with SEND.
- Give local authorities extra funding to halve the amount that schools pay towards the costs of a child's additional SEN support.
- Establish a new National Body for SEND to fund support for children with the most complex needs.

5.3.2 Identifying a child's SEND as early in their life as possible is critically important. It enables them to get the support they need from a young age, and this can help to prevent some children from developing more complex needs later on – reducing demand for SEND provision in the long-run. Our training programme for early years staff will include a specific emphasis on identifying and supporting children with SEND.

5.3.3 We will tackle the crisis in SEND funding by giving local authorities extra funding to halve the amount that schools pay towards the costs of a child's additional SEN support, from £6,000 to £3,000. This would help to remove the financial disincentive that stops schools from identifying their pupils' SEND as early as possible.

5.3.4 We will also help to end the postcode lottery by establishing a National Body for SEND to fund support for children with the most complex

needs. This new National Body would pay any costs above £25,000, with funding determined by the child's current needs and not by historic council spend. It would also act as a champion for the child, promote inclusive practice and ensure that SEND funding is spent as effectively as possible to support the child.

## **A Better Start in Life**

### **Policy Paper 152**

This paper has been approved for debate by the Federal Conference by the Federal Policy Committee under the terms of Article 7.4 of the Federal Constitution.

Within the policy-making procedure of the Liberal Democrats, the Federal Party determines the policy of the Party in those areas which might reasonably be expected to fall within the remit of the federal institutions in the context of a federal United Kingdom.

The Party in England, the Scottish Liberal Democrats, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and the Northern Ireland Local Party determine the policy of the Party on all other issues, except that any or all of them may confer this power upon the Federal Party in any specified area or areas.

The Party in England has chosen to pass up policy-making to the Federal level. If approved by Conference, this paper will therefore form the policy of the Federal Party on federal issues and the Party in England on English issues. In appropriate policy areas, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland party policy would take precedence.

## **The Early Years and Childcare Working Group**

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Note: Membership of the working group should not be taken to indicate that every member necessarily agrees with every statement or every proposal in this paper.

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Further copies of this paper can be found online at

<https://www.libdems.org.uk/members/make-policy/early-years>



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