



Childcare

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Over the next few minutes I am going to try and convince you of the importance of childcare:

Childcare is often seen, and treated, as a peripheral issue. It belongs in the margins – not in the mainstream.

The argument is that it doesn't need to be centrally planned, co-ordinated or funded because, by and large, it looks after itself.

There is an army of grandparents out there who are only too willing to look after their grandchildren – for free.

There are enough nursery places to cater for those who can afford them and anyway if we need more women to return to work we can always introduce a tax credit or a childcare voucher or something.

And really, our childcare systems are not much more organised than that.

Other systems

Before we talk about childcare arrangements in Northern Ireland, it's worth taking a look at how some other countries do it, what their priorities and motivations are, how they fund childcare and what outcomes they achieve:

HUNGARY

The first official kindergarten was established in Hungary in 1828 and was the first kindergarten in Central Europe.

Through the first half of the 19th century kindergartens were operated as pre-school institutions with a strong emphasis on education with only a secondary emphasis on play

By 1938 already, more than a quarter of 3-6 year old children were in kindergarten.

In 1948, kindergartens were nationalized. They were increasingly seen as providing places for children as more women began working in the paid labour force.

In the curriculum, more emphasis was placed on preparing children for school. Substantial expansion of kindergartens followed during the late 1950's through the 1980's.

By 1965 the number of children attending kindergarten had doubled with a total of 3227 kindergartens in operation.

By 1975, two thirds of children were in kindergarten, and this figure increased to 92% for the 5-year olds by 1985.

With the collapse of the socialist Government in Hungary in 1989, kindergarten operation and responsibility shifted to the local governments and most kindergartens operated formerly by industry were closed.

However, in the 1993 Public Education Act, kindergarten was recognized as an official part of the education system and was given the same status as elementary and secondary education in Hungary

Free compulsory education is guaranteed by law

Programs are typically open for a full working day to make accommodations for families in which both parents (or a single parent) work.

Parents are asked to pay for meals, but low-income families are exempted from this requirement.

The Hungarian kindergarten has a long tradition in pedagogical methodology, and its use of music, art, movement/motorial activity and handicrafts has placed it among the most successful kindergarten models in Europe.

In over ten per cent of kindergartens foreign language (mostly English or German) teaching is part of the curriculum.

DENMARK

In Denmark, 97% of children aged three to five and 92% aged one to two are in day care. While around 55% attend centres, the rest are looked after by registered child-minders in private homes, which costs parents a similar amount.

Most parents take a year off between them when they have a baby, thanks to progressive parental leave entitlements, so most children start nursery around the time of their first birthday, although they are eligible from six months.

Between three and six, they attend kindergartens. When they start school, there are after-school clubs.

Most nurseries shut at 5pm, but there are some specialised centres which open late or at weekends for postal workers or actors.

No parent pays more than 25% of the cost – which equates to around £380 a month for one child in nursery (there are discounts for siblings), £250 a month for kindergarten and £160 a month for six- to nine-year-olds after school.

The flexible-hours culture in Denmark means that either parent can pick a child between 3pm and 4pm.

Finland

Every child in Finland under the age of seven has the right to childcare and pre-school by law, regardless of family income. Public funding of childcare in Finland makes it almost free at the point of delivery.

Sweden

Sweden spends more money on its pre-school budget than it does on its defence budget.

Each child is guaranteed a place at a public pre-school and no parent is charged more than three per cent of their salary, with fees capped at just over £100 a month.

FRANCE

Nurseries in France are free and children aged from three upwards can attend

Unlike the relatively standardised and supply-led childcare arrangements in most EU countries, in the UK, parents are reimbursed through the tax and benefit system for childcare purchased in the open market, where fees are set by providers to maximise profitability.

Parents can receive financial help directly and other subsidies go directly to childcare providers through the “early years entitlement”.

This provides three- and four-year-olds and disadvantaged two-year-olds with 15 hours of childcare (for 38 weeks of the year).

United Kingdom

The Resolution Foundation, a think tank, calculates that a million women are "missing" from the UK workforce because of a lack of funding for childcare, unbalanced parental

leave and the way in which tax credits and allowances do not sufficiently encourage women to return to work.

Ironically, the UK is one of the biggest investors in families across the OECD countries, spending 3.6% of its GDP on family benefits in 2007. Only Denmark and France spent more, at 3.7% each.

But it is how this money is spent that counts. In terms of better outcomes – such as the ability to lift children out of poverty and to increase female employment – Britain lags behind countries that spend less, such as Sweden and Finland.

The Nordic countries tend to spend more on services to families than cash benefits. The UK does it the other way around.

In the UK, 10% of state spending on family policy goes towards maternity and paternity leave, compared with 17% in Denmark.

Some 26% of the spending in the UK is on day care, compared with 49% in Denmark. The largest proportion of family-related state spending in the UK is on tax credits, at 29%, compared with zero in Denmark.

LAST YEAR THE UK Government announced an extension of the existing free childcare hours to 30 per week – except that doesn't apply to Northern Ireland.

What is the situation in Northern Ireland?

In Northern Ireland, parents of all three and four year-olds can apply to receive 12.5 hours per week of free, also known as funded, preschool education.

This allocation can only be taken over 2.5 hours per day, 5 days a week, during term time. Places are provided by nursery schools, primary schools with nursery units and some voluntary and private providers. The places cannot be provided by child-minders.

These preschool places are provided by the Department of Education whose guidance stipulates that they are not to be regarded as childcare.

Their primary purpose is to provide quality early years education to encourage children's social, physical and mental development, while helping to prepare them for school.

The rigidity of this provision, and the limited hours provided, mean that it does not give the flexibility to parents that the system in England does. Parents in England can use the Government funded places as childcare to enable them to work, unlike parents in Northern Ireland.

The system which currently operates is based on credits and tax allowances. It doesn't take a genius to work out who that benefits.

The privatisation of most of the early year's childcare arrangements is supported, underpinned and funded by public money directed to private day-care and pre-school nurseries.

It is not designed to facilitate parents; it's not even designed to support parents – especially women – back into the work force.

Childcare services and the philosophy which underpins it in this country is yet another example of the private sector – and private profit benefiting from public hand-outs without providing the outcomes which parents need to plan their lives and hold down a job.

As with many areas of public life our position on childcare has to be that the state must assume responsibility from the cradle to the grave for all its citizens.

In the case of young children that means the state planning, provision and funding of childcare facilities from 6 months to school age.

The emphasis must be on education and development, it must be married to a flexible working hours culture and it must be free at the point of delivery.

What it doesn't mean is that the relentless pursuit of profit can be continue to be allowed to benefit from the early and formative years of our youngest and greatest resource.

What it doesn't mean is that vested interest groups can monopolise and shape young lives.

What it does mean is that from the earliest days every child, of every parent, should have guaranteed access to state run, state funded childcare - and education throughout their lives.

That is the challenge we need to put up to the free marketeers, that is the challenge we need to take up on behalf of parents and children. That is the socialist alternative. This is the party to deliver it!