

## **A future where families come first**

- 1. How can the next Labour government best deliver a modern and affordable childcare system that supports families from the end of parental leave to the end of primary school? How should Labour ensure that a new childcare system helps to tackle child poverty?**

### **The early years**

At Community, we believe that the early years are absolutely critical. The evidence is clear that the impact on a child's future life prospects are driven by the support they receive early in life.

We note a study in Finland which showed that paying women to stay at home had negative impacts on children's outcomes. We believe that affordable childcare is a key part of the answer.

We note that workers in the early years sector are typically low paid, and that this is a serious barrier to ensuring adequate staffing levels. Current government funding does not cover the cost of providing the places that are allocated under the free hours offer. This is causing parents to have to subsidise their children's places. This also means that nurseries in deprived areas where more parents are eligible for "funded" places are closing at a faster rate than those in more privileged areas. Parents are, in some cases, having to pay for extras, such as nappies and meals to make up some of the shortfall.

A significant number of early years and nursery workers are leaving the sector due to low pay and working conditions, and with rising energy bills this is only likely to increase when employees can find better paid jobs elsewhere. The rising cost of energy has also had a disastrous impact on provision itself, with a 65% increase in the number of settings closings compared to 2021<sup>1</sup>.

Especially worrying is that more than a third of the closures are in the most deprived areas of the country. Because these settings are almost entirely funded through the government 30-hour scheme, any shortfall in funding and increase in costs risks viability and impacts on those lower income families that are most in need.

We are concerned that whilst the current government's plans to gradually extend free hours to parents from the end of maternity leave by 2025 sound good on paper they could seriously harm early years settings and reduce availability of places. The additional funding that the government has pledged in the 2023 budget to pay for the free hours is not enough to make up the shortfall in costs. This leaves many early years settings cross-subsidising by charging parents more for additional hours, or for hours before the offer kicks in. Offering free hours for all ages could mean that nurseries can no longer afford to offer places, as there would be fewer sources of additional income from parents to make up for the shortfall in state funded places. Furthermore, the current offer for three-year-olds is term time only, and we are concerned that this constraint will apply to the new offer too. This isn't good enough for working parents, as they need high-quality childcare all year round.

Furthermore, we are very concerned that the government has relaxed staff to child ratios, which is likely to exacerbate stresses in the job, and could risk safety. In Scotland, where there are slightly lower ratios, this is offset by the requirement for highly skilled staff, something which doesn't apply in England and Wales.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ndna.org.uk/news/sharp-rise-in-summer-nursery-closures-ring-alarm-bells-for-winter-months/>

Finally, it is deeply concerning that the free hours will disproportionately go to wealthier parents, because of the requirement for parents to be working in order to be eligible for free hours. This means that some of the most disadvantaged children in the country will not receive the benefits of high-quality early years education.

The next Labour government must offer funding that actually covers the cost of provision. It is critical that the UK becomes a country which treats early years professionals as professionals. The next Labour government should improve pay, training, and recognition.

### **Free school meals**

There are nearly four million children living in poverty. Vulnerable children not receiving free school meals face a barrier to learning. Being hungry prevents concentration and increases anxiety and aggression, so by feeding children we can help to improve behaviour, concentration and support development by providing the essential nutrients for healthy lifestyles that they may otherwise not get.

Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has pledged £130m to give every primary school in London a free school meal for the year. The Scottish and Welsh governments are introducing free school meals too.

We wholeheartedly support a wider roll-out of free school meals and agree that free school meals for all primary-age children would allow parents to buy warm clothes, and not have to choose between heating and eating.

There is a significant bureaucracy attached with deciding which pupils are eligible for free school meals. The funding for free school meals is often attached to Pupil Premium Funding which also provides extra money to schools to support pupils' learning. Simply providing free school meals for all pupils without providing budget for it could have a negative impact on staffing levels and other resources. Free school meals should be provided for all children and fully funded.

In addition to free-school meals for all primary pupils, we would like to see reform of the system so that parents do not have to notify schools of their financial situation. Anybody who is in receipt of Universal Credit should automatically find this funding passed to schools. This would provide schools with much needed funding and reduce the stigma of having to 'apply' for free school meals.

## **2. How can the next Labour government ensure all young children enjoy a childhood that enables them to thrive?**

### **Childcare ratios**

Community believes that the childcare ratios which are in place are there to allow staff to closely work with the children, building relationships, developing learning and maintaining safety and wellbeing.

Members are very clear that workload is already very high with 90% reporting feeling stressed some or all of the time. The need for children aged two to be closely supervised for their own safety is a key concern for members who noted that it was impossible to clean and change children safely within the current ratio if there were no other staff available to support.

Since COVID-19 settings have seen an exponential increase in the number of children with particular learning needs and SEND. Some settings already require external support to meet the individual

needs of their children, and there are significant fears that children with SEND will not have their needs effectively met if the ratio is reduced.

Members noted that *“even at current levels, education often takes a back seat so that we can prioritise safety.”*

*“This is such an important time developmentally and I really do not think that we can subject these children to a lower level of care and education. Early years is too important for that - the children deserve and need better.”*

A qualified workforce accompanied by staff to child ratios that allow for quality care and education are critical to supporting child development. It is the funding model that is the key problem, not the ratio. The government funding already does not cover the actual cost of the childcare and with increased costs to the setting such as energy, the problem is only likely to worsen. We need a secure and stable funding model that is not entirely based on pupil numbers to allow settings to properly budget for the medium to long term.

### **Exams and testing**

Our primary school pupils are some of the most tested in the world. They are tested in reception within weeks of starting school and in five out of seven years at primary school. These tests have very little meaning for the children but are used to hold staff and schools to account. Because of this the pressure that children are put under to achieve is huge, with coaching, tutoring and revision common place. These tests impact children by narrowing the curriculum to focus only on what is tested, this means that children who have other interests and giftings are considered failures from an early age which is contributing to the mental health catastrophe.

We need to allow schools to be places of safety and learning, where children are free to explore the world they live in without having to spend so much of their time preparing for tests. This reduction in formal assessment would also reduce the workload for teaching and support staff and contribute to improving working conditions.

### **School buildings**

The latest Annual Report published by the Department for Education (DfE) stated that *‘there is a risk of collapse of one or more blocks in some schools which are at or approaching the end of their designed life-expectancy and structural integrity is impaired’* and that *‘the risk predominantly exists in those buildings built in the years 1930 to 1990 which used ‘system build’ light frame techniques.’* It is alarming that the report stated the risk level has been escalated from ‘critical – likely to critical – very likely’, as long ago as July 2021, and that the direction of travel for this risk is assessed by the DfE as “worsening”<sup>2</sup>.

This situation has come about as a consequence of a failure to invest in the maintenance and renewal of the education estate. The House of Commons Library Report - School Buildings and Capital Funding (England)<sup>3</sup> calculates that between 2009-10 and 2021-22, overall capital spending declined by around 37 per cent in cash terms and 50 per cent in real terms.

The DfE Condition of School Buildings Survey in May 2021 (based on data from 2017 – 2019) found that it would cost £11.4 billion to repair or replace all defective elements in the school estate. Given

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/dec/19/risk-of-england-school-buildings-collapse-very-likely-says-dfe>

<sup>3</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7375/>

inflationary pressures it seems reasonable to assume that this amount will now be much higher. The current school rebuilding project is only scratching the surface of the need, and at current funding rates it will take over 400 years to fully remove dangerous asbestos from the schools estate.

There have already been two minor school collapses in England, and it will take significant investment to ensure that the danger is eliminated and all pupils and staff are able to attend safe and fit-for-purpose school buildings.

### **3. How can the next Labour government defeat the scandal of rising poverty and end the soaring demand for food banks?**

#### **Poverty**

The next Labour government must support our key workers, including carers, to ensure that these workers earn a living wage. Low pay in work is one of the great scandals of this decade of conservative government.

Community represents care workers across the UK. Care workers are predominantly women and are on low wages. The important work they do must be valued appropriately. We must end the scandal of workers in the sector not being paid as they travel between shifts, but fundamentally this is about pay. Low pay is fuelling staffing shortages in the sector and means that workers who love their jobs and the difference that they can make to client's lives are forced out of the jobs they love for financial reasons.

As care work is particularly poorly organised sector, with many small providers, we believe this is a case where a sectoral pay agreement may be appropriate for ensuring that conditions are driven up and providers of care are enabled to be competitive whilst also paying staff a fair wage. Initially, the next Labour government should ensure that local councils use their procurement powers to specify fair pay for staff as a condition of the contracts they grant for social care.

This is likely to need to be accompanied by reforms to the care funding settlement, to end the scandal of people running out of money due to the costs of their care.

### **4. How can Labour's reforms to social security and employment support ensure people of working-age and pensioners have security throughout their working lives and in retirement?**

#### **Social security and employment support**

The government must ensure that disabled workers are provided with greater security and dignity. In particular, the work capability assessment is not fit for purpose. Reforms must ensure that people with chronic conditions do not have to repeatedly reapply, that the process recognises that many conditions fluctuate, with capacity for work varying depending on the severity of the impacts of that condition. The revised process should remove humiliating and undignified assessment criteria, and place greater respect on the assessment of both the affected person and qualified medical professionals who are better placed to determine a person's work capability.

We note with concern the government's recent announcement that the Work Capability Assessment will be scrapped. Whilst on the face of it, this could be positive, it could lead to more people being denied support as they fail to meet the criteria to receive PIP or are subject to discretionary decisions about additional support.

#### **Pensions**

We were pleased that the pensions minister announced in March 2023 that the age for being eligible for auto-enrolment will be reduced from 22 to 18. We also welcome the announcement that the lower earnings limit will be scrapped to ensure that workers receive pension contributions from the first pound they earn. However, there is still more that needs to be done. One issue that remains of concern is the gender pensions gap.

Auto-enrolment employer contributions should be gradually increased to 12%. Furthermore, more needs to be done to protect workers who are taking time out of the labour market for caring responsibilities. Today, workers can claim national insurance credits whilst they are caring for children or adults. The next Labour government should explore how the state (or large employers) could continue to pay the equivalent of employer pension contributions whilst workers are out of the labour market, which could provide them with a private pension (for example through NEST) as well as state pension entitlement. These carers' top ups would go some way to closing the gender pensions gap.

One group has been substantially excluded from the protection of pensions auto-enrolment: the self-employed. The next Labour government should ensure that a detailed inquiry explores how an adequate pension for the self-employed should be delivered. Our response the "better jobs and better work" consultation paper provides more details on this.

**5. How can Labour make home ownership a reality for more families, give private renters the security they need and tackle the scourge of homelessness? How can the next Labour government build more social and council housing and ensure greater investment in genuinely affordable homes?**

**Veteran homelessness**

At Community we have long campaigned on the critical issue of veteran homelessness. The next Labour government must enhance support for veterans leaving the military, including financial support and training to ensure that veterans are able to adjust to civilian life.

**Private renting**

This question rightly identifies the need to give renters security. A recent survey of 170 Community members who are private renters in London and the South-East found that 67% did not know their legal rights relating to renting. 43% told us that their landlord or letting agency did not rectify any maintenance issues they were facing in a timely manner. Nearly one in three (31%) said that they could not contact their landlord or letting agency easily and had to chase them. One in ten told us that their landlord or agent did not give them notice when doing checks on the property. And although 92% had received a contract with terms and conditions that still left nearly one in 12 people without a clear understanding of their contract.

This survey paints a clear picture of an insecure sector where existing obligations are not followed. The next Labour government should crack down on rogue landlords and irresponsible letting agents who don't make timely repairs to their tenants' properties. The scandal of no-faults evictions, a leading cause of homelessness should also be ended.

**6. What are the specific implications of policy proposals in this area for (a) women, (b) Black, Asian and minority ethnic people (c) LGBT+ people, (d) disabled people and (e) all those with other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010?**

Community has a large number of members working in and managing Early Years Settings – including nurseries, pre-schools and schools. The majority of these members are female.

According to the Fawcett Society report (2022):

*‘The evidence shows fixing the childcare system will unlock the potential of families across the UK, support children to build solid foundations for their future and it is a vital step that will increase women’s participation in the labour market. It goes hand-in-hand with employers offering decent parental leave policies that genuinely encourage men to take on caring roles and where flexible working is embedded into our work culture – so that women who’ve had children can thrive at work.’*

This will also work to strengthen and stabilise the childcare workforce which is often subject to contraction and expansion due to the variation in pupil numbers. Stabilising and enhancing the workforce will improve working conditions for the young and female staff but will also allow consideration for other equalities issues affecting both staff and children – including better provision for those with physical and mental disabilities.

The vast majority of those impacted by the lack of affordable childcare are women and those who live in areas of deprivation. Nurseries in the most deprived wards of England are the most likely to close due to the paucity of government funding – just £2.31 per hour per child on average. Almost 30% of closures taking place in the 20% most deprived areas meaning that even if they wanted to women are unable to find affordable childcare to enable them to increase their working hours.

Over 75% of the teaching workforce and 89% of the support staff in schools are female, and yet the proportion in leadership roles is 66%. There is also evidence from the Office for National Statistics showing women in the profession are paid on average 18.4% less than men.

Flexible working in schools is virtually non-existent. The workload in schools is so high that many women work part-time simply so that they can fit all of their work into a standard working week leaving their evenings freer to spend with their families.

This long-hours culture, working in evenings and through weekends and holidays is something we should be ashamed of as it drives stress and mental health conditions, as well as physical symptoms which increases the burden on our NHS.

**March 2023.** Please contact [research@community-tu.org](mailto:research@community-tu.org) for further information.