

Baby steps won't solve childcare crisis

A speech by the Children's Minister Liz Truss and the publication of [More Great Childcare](#) represents the first step in a government shake-up of early years' childcare regulation and quality. The proposals include relaxing the children to adult ratios for childcare workers; encouraging a better qualified workforce; abolishing local authority inspections; removing schools' requirement to register with Ofsted for under 3 provision, and setting up childminder agencies. But as [Imogen Parker](#) explains the details are sketchy and the plans don't promise improvements, either in quality or in cost.



Let's start with the positives. [More Great Childcare](#), the title of Liz Truss's report – is something we all want. And some of the ideas in her paper have real merit. Abolishing the need for schools to register separately with Ofsted (as currently) to provide care for under 3s will cut bureaucracy and encourage school-based provision in local areas. And more good news is the renewed focus of quality in the early years' sector, and the desire to deliver childcare that is more affordable for parents.

Improving quality, availability and affordability are the right goals, but the more closely we examine some of the suggestions in the report, the more it becomes clear that we can't be sure whether the proposed suggestions will really help us achieve them.

Loosening ratios could mean more places for children which would lower the (unit) cost of provision (though the implication of this could be job losses as the numbers of employees needed per child decreases). These savings could be passed onto parents as Liz Truss suggests, or they could simply be retained by the providers. That's a serious possibility given how much nurseries complain that government funding for free places doesn't cover costs, and the [low profitability](#) of the sector.

The government wants to use the costs savings of loosening ratios to lower costs for parents while also raising quality. If the savings are retained by providers to pay for better qualified staff, this could raise quality, but this would reduce any cost reductions. There's a real trade-off here between affordability and wages which is glossed over in the announcement.

Liz Truss made clear that the relaxation of ratios would come into force if a provider offered high-quality provision. There may well be scope to relax ratios in a deal of this kind but we need to see more detail about what 'high-quality' means. There is strong evidence that high quality provision (made up of a number of factors, including space and furnishings, personal care routines, supporting children's language and reasoning, activities, interaction, programme structure as well as provision for parents and staff) in early year settings has a positive impact on child development. While all children benefit from high quality early years education, those from poorer households gain most, which helps to narrow the gap for school readiness.

But the consultation document uses a fairly narrow definition of high quality provision – one example would see it only apply to providers where all staff are qualified to at least level three (the equivalent of two or more A levels), while another suggested definition of high quality is simply a requirement for all staff to have GCSEs in English and Maths. Alone this type of measure might not be enough to promote child development and school readiness, particularly as the government has [cut the Graduate Leader Fund](#) which significantly [improved](#) provision quality.

And a practical point that needs more consideration is that ratio changes are for the very youngest children. Regardless of qualifications, child-minders will still only have [one pair of hands](#) for feeding and nappy changing. Critics point out that the quality of interactions, important for cognitive development and language development, could be compromised as child-minders are overstretched.

More fundamentally, the government's plans approach the issue of childcare from the wrong end. Instead

of tinkering with ratios to solve cost and quality problems, it should be extending a publicly funded system. [IPPR's research](#) shows that public funded systems – such as the ones in Nordic countries – are better at delivering sustainable early years education of high quality. While many Nordic countries don't insist on national ratios, ratios are often still set at a local level, and there is a high proportion of graduates in the workforce. As Liz Truss points out, staff are better paid in these systems, but they are also mostly funded out of the public purse, with caps on charges to parents.

To make childcare lower cost for parents and better quality for children the government should invest in [subsidised early years provision](#). Moving towards a Nordic system would help deliver affordable, sustainable and high quality childcare. The result? Higher rates of employment for mothers and better outcomes for children.

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