

**Online  
Spring  
Conference  
March 2022**

**Early Years Education  
and Childcare**

**Consultation Paper 151**

## Background

This consultation paper is presented as the first stage in the development of new Party policy in relation to Early Years Education (up to age seven) and Childcare. It does not represent agreed Party policy. It is designed to stimulate debate and discussion within the Party and outside; based on the response generated and on the deliberations of the working group a full policy paper will be drawn up and presented to Conference for debate.

The paper has been drawn up by a working group appointed by the Federal Policy Committee and chaired by Cllr Dine Romero. Members of the group are prepared to speak on the paper to outside bodies and to discussion meetings organised within the Party.

Comments on the paper, and requests for speakers, should be addressed to: Christian Moon, Policy Unit, Liberal Democrats, 1 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PN. Email: [policy.consultations@libdems.org.uk](mailto:policy.consultations@libdems.org.uk) Comments should reach us as soon as possible and no later than 31 March. Further copies of this paper can be found online at [www.libdems.org.uk/policy\\_papers](http://www.libdems.org.uk/policy_papers)

1 Introduction	3
2 Childcare	4
3 Strengthening Early Years Education	6
4 Ensuring there is not a “lost generation” due to education’s being disrupted by Covid-19	6
5 Closing the ‘Digital Divide’ so that all between the less well off children’s education harnesses the benefits of technology	9
6 SEND in the Early Years	10
7 Supporting and nurturing children’s mental health and wellbeing	13
Early Years and Childcare Working Group	14
Remit	15

# **1 Introduction**

1.1 Liberal Democrats have always placed a top priority on education. It opens the mind, fosters understanding and tolerance, and empowers our children and our communities to be the best they can be. We passionately believe every child deserves a great start in life so they are equipped to shape their own future.

1.2 The Early Years up to age seven are particularly crucial in the overall development of a young person. Sadly many children fall behind their peers at a very young age and it becomes increasingly difficult to catch up. We are determined to work for a system in which none of our children are left behind. We also recognise that for many parents who want or need to go out to work, the high cost of childcare can be a tremendous barrier.

1.3 This group is therefore tasked with reviewing and updating our policy with regard to all aspects of education and childcare up to the age of seven. The detailed remit of the group is set out on pages 18 and 19. We welcome input from all those with an interest in these issues both within and outside the party. In addition to the specific questions asked in the course of the paper, we would be happy to receive submissions on anything within the scope of our remit. Please don't think that if you respond you have to answer all of the questions! We understand many people will have a more specific interest. We are also interested in considering examples of good practice in other countries.

1.4 Thanks for your interest in this vital topic.

## **2 Childcare**

2.1 Nurseries are struggling. With no government support for most families between the end of parental leave and age three, and the average price for 25 hours a week of nursery childcare for a child under two now at £6,600 a year, 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, which can best be tackled in the early years, is rising.

2.2 The Conservatives have promised to help, but their childcare policy only covers three- and four-year-olds in working families, only amounts to 30 hours a week – less time than children spend in school – and doesn't cover school holidays. Even the hours they do offer are underfunded and this means that many providers struggle to deliver a quality Early Years education. 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.

2.3 In our last general election manifesto we proposed to address these problems by ;

- Offering free, high-quality childcare for every child aged two to four and children aged between nine and 24 months where their parents or guardians are in work: 35 hours a week, 48 weeks a year.
- Increasing the funding for these free hours to cover the actual cost of nursery provision.

2.4 These proposals were among the most expensive in our Manifesto; they would have been phased in over a number of years, but eventually cost around £14 billion a year when fully implemented.

### Questions

1. *Do you agree with continuing with these policies? Do you think there are other spending priorities in the Early Years field?*
2. *What is the right balance between parental care and non-parental childcare?*
3. *What should be the relationship between local and central government, and the independent sector in delivering childcare ?*
4. *What do we need to do to secure the financial stability of the childcare sector?*
5. *How can we deliver high quality childcare?*
6. *Should we increase the tax-free childcare allowance, which has not been uprated for some time?*

### 3 Strengthening Early Years Education

3.1 Despite the much excellent work that is done in the sector, as set out in the Nutbrown Review of 2012 there is currently lacking a rigorous and properly funded National programme of EY qualifications to equip the workforce with the skills and knowledge needed to provide high quality care, education and experiences for babies and young children. Recent years have seen deep cuts to the network of Children's Centres, and funding is insufficient to deliver quality in nursery schools.

3.2 Our 2019 manifesto included the following proposals to improve Early Years Education:

- Invest £1 billion a year in Children's Centres to support families and tackle inequalities in children's health, development and life chances.
- Triple the Early Years Pupil Premium (to £1,000) to give extra help to disadvantaged children who are at risk of falling behind from the very beginning of their education.
- Require all Early Years settings to have a training programme for staff, with the majority of staff working with children to have a relevant Early Years qualification or be working towards one.
- In the long run, each Early Years setting should have at least one person qualified to graduate level.

#### Questions

6. *Do you agree with these proposals?*

7. *How can we best ensure that the attainment gap is closed as much as possible in the Early Years?*
8. *How can we best empower and engage parents and guardians so they can be more involved in their children's education ?*
9. *What are the realistic funding needs of the sector?*
10. *How can we improve training , professionalism and career paths?*



## **4 Ensuring there is not a 'lost generation' due to education's being disrupted by Covid-19**

4.1 Disruption to education caused by the pandemic could cause children to lose £40,000 in income over their lifetime, leading to a £350 billion hole in the economy.

4.2 Most children in the UK have lost half a year of formal schooling, 5% of their entire time in school, which is likely to increase educational inequalities and effects on mental health. As well as formal learning, this may have a serious effect through lack of socialisation, and where children have not enjoyed access to outside space it may have affected physical development, for example gross and fine motor skills.

4.3 The Government has only committed £4.9 billion of the £15 billion needed for catch-up education as recommended by the Government's former Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins.

4.4 Liberal Democrats believe that parents have worked tirelessly throughout this pandemic and must be empowered to have more involvement in their children's education. As we recover from the pandemic, it is right that closing the disadvantage gap is a top priority for the Liberal Democrats.

4.5 Sir Ed Davey MP has already called on the Government to:

- Immediately commit the full £15 billion to catch-up funding for children, in line with the recommendations from the Government's former Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins.
- Distribute £5 billion of this funding to Catch-Up Vouchers worth £200 a year for 3 years, given directly to parents for all 8.3 million children in state-funded schools.

- Double the worth of these vouchers for disadvantaged children eligible for the Pupil Premium or those with special educational needs.
- Triple the worth of these vouchers for pupils with special educational needs who are also eligible for the Pupil Premium..

### Questions

11. *What else should we be doing to help with catch-up, especially in the early years?*

12. *Should we ring-fence Covid-19 catch-up funding for students with SEND, to avoid an increase in already existing and growing disparities?*

*Note: This topic is being debated at the Spring 2022 Federal Conference in motion F12 *Catching Up On Our Children's Education*.*

## **5 Closing the 'Digital Divide' so that all children's education harnesses the benefits of technology**

5.1 Digital exclusion is an important aspect of deprivation. The likelihood of having access to the internet from home increases along with income, such that only 51% of households earning between £6000-10,000 had home internet access compared with 99% of households with an income of over £40,001. The link between poverty and digital exclusion is clear: if you are poor, you have less chance of being online. This exacerbates the problems of children living in poverty who are already significantly disadvantaged compared to their wealthier peers. Of those who have been eligible for free school meals, or who have been in care or adopted from care, only 25% achieved grades 9-5 in GCSE English and Maths in 2019, compared with 50% of all other pupils.

5.2 During the pandemic, with children being schooled at home often alongside parents working from home, other cleavages in digital access emerged. Many households did not have the capacity for all members to be online simultaneously. Where parents were using home broadband for work, older children's education was seen as the next priority and the youngest may have lost out. Geographical variability in broadband access was also a problem for some families.

5.3 Existing Liberal Democrat policies from Policy Paper 140 *Giving Consumers a Fairer Deal* include reducing the 'digital divide' between different areas of the UK and different groups of the population by ensuring that regulation delivers:

- Telecoms services that are accessible to everyone, regardless of where they live or their socio-economic status, and remain available for as long as they are needed.
- Universal coverage and good performance of telecoms services to all consumers – our minimum standard will be access to broadband of at least 30Mbit/s downstream and 5Mbit/s upstream at an affordable price, and this will be reviewed as technology improves.

5.4 Our 2019 Manifesto included a specific pledge to invest £2 billion in innovative solutions to ensure the provision of high-speed broadband across the UK, working with local authorities and providing grants to help areas replicate the success of existing community-led projects.

### Questions

13. *How can we ensure all children benefit from advances in digital technology?*

14. *How can we build on our overall policies on access to broadband with specific reference to educational opportunity?*

## **6 SEND in the Early Years**

6.1 There is a national SEND crisis. The 'postcode lottery' of access to quality SEND support is unacceptable. No child, nor their family, should have to fight to have their basic needs met.

6.2 Every child deserves access to high-quality education. Children and young people with SEND have been consistently failed by this Government.

6.3 In English schools in 2020, approximately 1.4 million students had an identified special educational need and 3% of students had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). The pandemic has disproportionately affected students with SEND, with unequal access to support and the majority of EHCP and SEN support plans likely to have been negatively impacted.

6.4 A 2021 survey by the National Association of Headteachers showed that 97% of the school leader respondents said there was insufficient SEND funding, made worse by the lengthy waits for diagnosis.

6.5 Many parents of children with SEND choose to homeschool their child because their child's needs are not being met at school. Local Authorities often do not meet statutory deadlines for EHCPs. The 2021 National Autistic Society School report found that "it is not uncommon" for autistic children to be refused an assessment for an EHCP against the law as laid out in the SEND Code of Practice.

6.6 Too many children with SEND and their families have to go to a SEND Tribunal, with a 6% increase in legal appeals in 2020, and 95% of cases are decided in favour of the parents.

6.7 Permanent exclusions from school are higher among children with an EHCP plan and those with SEN support in comparison to those without SEN, and more than 1 in 5 parents in the National Autistic Society report said their child had been informally excluded: an illegal practice.

6.8 The National SENCO Workforce Survey 2020 found that only 29% of SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Coordinators) have sufficient time to meet the needs of students with EHCPs. A report by Professor Steve Strand found that Asian students are half as likely to be identified with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, and Black Caribbean and Mixed White & Black Caribbean students are twice as likely to be identified with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs, as White British students.

6.9 Schools are also having to deal with psychological issues which have arisen through lockdown which, although not SEND in the traditional sense, still need additional management and support.

6.9 Liberal Democrats are already committed to:

- Improve education about neurodivergence on the curriculum.
- Allocate additional cash to Local Authorities to halve the amount that schools pay towards the cost of a child's EHCP.

Questions:

15. *How can we provide sufficient, dedicated, long-term SEND funding to both schools and Local Authorities?*

16. *How should the accountability of Local Authorities for SEND provision be improved ?*

17. *How can we better involve children and young people with SEND and their families in decision-making regarding SEND at both a local and national level?*

18. *How can we create more effective and thorough guidance and training for school staff, so that children and young people with SEND are supported better, and lessons can be delivered with consideration of students with SEND?*

19. *How should we tackle the backlog of referrals and EHCP assessments, and ensure that children and young people with SEND get their EHCPs within the 20-week legal requirement?*

20. *Should we develop a strategy to identify and tackle informal exclusions, and set targets to reduce the number of formal exclusions of children and young people with SEND?*

21. *How can we ensure that SENCOs can effectively fulfil their role?*

## **7 Supporting and nurturing children's mental health and wellbeing**

7.1 Government data suggests that 8% of 5 to 10-year-olds may have a clinically diagnosed mental health condition. For many, their problems may have begun in the early years. Young children can show clear signs of emotional issues at a very early age, including signs of anxiety or depression, post-traumatic stress, attention-deficit or hyperactivity disorders and autistic spectrum disorders. Organisations such as the Mental Health Foundation firmly believe that many mental health problems in children are preventable and that there is considerable scope for intervention by early years care givers.

### Questions

22. *How can Early Years provision best promote children's mental health and well being?*

23. *How can we reduce the incidence and impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and help build resilience in children?*



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

The members of the working group who have prepared this consultation paper are listed below.

Cllr Dine Romero (chair)

Helen Cross (vice-chair)

Roy Abraham

Alex Brewer

John Brown

Andrew Burell

Emma Gowers

Dr Judith Hudson

Liz Jarvis

Elizabeth Jewkes

Lucy Rodriguez Leon

Cllr Linda Mascot

Cllr Christine Morrissey

Wendy Scott

Cllr Alan Sherwell

Sarah Shreeve

Cllr Amy Tisi

James Wetz

Bruce Wilson

### **Staff**

Christian Moon

Further copies of this paper can be found online at  
[https://www.libdems.org.uk/early\\_years\\_working\\_group](https://www.libdems.org.uk/early_years_working_group)

## **Remit**

The remit of this group is to review the party's policies on early years education and childcare covering ages 0-7 in England, and make updated proposals which communicate our values of liberty, equality, democracy, community, internationalism and environmentalism in a way which helps secure the election of as many Liberal Democrats as possible, at local, regional and national level, in order to promote our vision of society and remove from power a Conservative government that is failing the country.

The group will be expected to build on existing policy proposals as set out in the 2019 Election Manifesto and Policy Paper 128 Every Child Empowered: Education for a Changing World (2018). The group is expected to consider and address Liberal Democrat principles on diversity and equalities in developing their proposals.

This group will as a top priority:

- Develop up to three headline policies on early years education and childcare 0-7 which the party can communicate widely to win votes.

The working group will develop policies on:

- How we deliver our 2019 manifesto commitment on free childcare, including funding, delivery and ensuring quality
- Ensuring a healthy balance between parental care and non-parental childcare, and taking account of the economic and social value of facilitating participation in the labour market
- Parental leave

- The relationship between local, regional and central government, and the maintained, voluntary and independent sectors in delivering childcare
- Funding of Early Years Education up to age 7 and the financial stability of the childcare sector
- Meeting the needs of SEND to age 7
- Empowering and engaging parents and guardians so they can be more involved in their children's education
- Ensuring there is not a 'lost generation' due to education 0-7 being disrupted by Covid-19
- Closing the 'Digital Divide' between the better and less well off so that all children's education harnesses the benefits of technology
- Supporting and nurturing mental health and wellbeing of children aged 0-7

The group will need to consider the development of more detailed proposals to implement relevant headline policies included in the 2019 Election Manifesto.

The group will also consider the need for institutional change at central, regional and local government levels to embed these approaches firmly in policy.

Although the remit of the group is primarily England-only, the issue of Parental Leave is a Federal issue.

### *Approach and Timetable*

The group will take evidence and consult widely both within and outside the party. This evidence should inform the group's proposals, which will be

presented alongside an analysis of costs and an Equalities Impact Assessment.

A policy paper of no longer than 10,000 words should be produced for debate at Autumn Conference 2022. Prior to that a consultative session should be held at Spring Conference 2022, and a draft policy paper should be presented to the Federal Policy Committee by June 2022.

Published and promoted by Mike Dixon  
on behalf of the Liberal Democrats,  
1 Vincent Square, London, SW1P 2PN.

Printed by Sarum Colourview,  
Unit 8, The Woodford Centre,  
Old Sarum, Salisbury, Wiltshire, SP4 6BU

ISBN: 978-1-915375-00-1