

The Big Debate

Are Labour's plans to fund more nursery places within existing primary schools a good way to achieve the party's vision for universal childcare?

We asked two experts in the sector to share their views



Tom Pollard

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It's clear that the early years education system in this country is broken. Labour's proposal to establish more nurseries within

primary schools will by no means solve everything, but it could play an important role in helping to shift the focus from childcare as simply an aid to working parents, to early years education and care as a fully fledged public service.

'In our recent report, *A Fair Start for All*, we called for a system of early years education and care that ensured high-quality provision for all children, with a particular focus on improving access for low-income households. This would produce significant long-term gains for the wider economy.

'But rebalancing the current system would require a huge shift in the availability and quality of provision in poorer parts of the

country, which are currently much more likely to be "childcare deserts" – areas with at least three children to every available place. It will also require a step-change in expectations and perceptions, so that early years education becomes the norm.

'New nurseries within primary schools could help to boost provision in areas where the current system has failed to do so, but also act as local trailblazers of quality. Primary schools are shared community resources and we would rightly baulk at the idea of children being denied access based on parents' working status. Aligning early and primary education more closely could help us shift from focusing almost exclusively on the functional benefits of childcare for parents.

'However, Labour would have to get to grips with the levels of funding providers receive, to ensure they are able to offer this.

“New nurseries in primary schools could help boost provision”

The expansion of "free hours" the current Government has promised families simply doesn't align with the reality of the funding available to providers.

'In exchange for more adequate funding, providers should be expected to meet clear obligations. This must include better pay and conditions for staff, as part of a wider workforce strategy. But it should also mean playing a more proactive role in addressing inequalities in academic attainment and social and emotional development; ensuring children with special educational needs are properly supported.

'Nonetheless, more nurseries within primary schools would be a welcome move and would seem to indicate a direction of travel consistent with the vision for early years education and care that the New Economics Foundation has been advocating.'



Jo Callaghan

**DIRECTOR, MUNCHKINS NURSERY GROUP IN
ESSEX**



'NO! Early years is mainly run by privately owned businesses and is a very different caveat to schools. Schools do not have

the knowledge or skills to take younger children. It would also leave many schools asking where the Government are to magic the room from?

'Working parents need flexibility, not just 38 weeks per year, as most working parents work all year round. This would mean schools having to remain open, and I wonder how many heads would be willing to do that as the responsibility would lie with them?

'And I ask the question, would schools get more funding for early education than private organisations as they currently do? Having sat on a select committee, I asked this very question. The reply I received was that school nurseries had higher-qualified staff! This is a

myth! They do not pay business rates, utilities themselves and often work on a 1:13 ratio for three-year-olds, pushing their costs down even further. If this is the case, this would potentially put the private sector out of business and thus reduce the number of childcare places overall and potentially have an impact on children's learning.

'Schools are under so much pressure already, and with towns expanding they very often do not have the capacity for school-age children let alone pre-school children and babies. Perhaps that's where Labour should be concentrating their efforts!

'And, of course, last but not least, let us speak about the gross underfunding in our sector! The reason that nurseries, pre-schools and childminders are having to shut their doors, especially in deprived areas, is because the funding falls way short of

“Schools are under so much pressure already”

covering overheads, rising costs in utility bills, food, business rates and living wage to name but a few. Invest more in the private sector and take away the many "consumable charge" obstacles we have to go through, stop making funding rates a postcode lottery, simplify the whole thing to cut down on rising admin costs, and then more nurseries can open and less will close.

'The Labour party turning their attention to school nurseries is just a manifesto exercise that has received no thought whatsoever and can never work in the real world. Turn your attention to building new private nurseries as suitable buildings are few and far between. Make planning permission easier for settings to find new premises. Invest in what you already have, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, Labour!'