OFSTED registration fees rise: what could it mean for SEN childcare?

The UK’s Department of Education announced on 18th July 2019 a new proposal to raise the OFSTED registration fees, an essential step for all childminders and early years childcare providers to become registered in the UK. This change can only contribute to the declining number of registered childcare, with further hits on specialised services delivering SEN childcare.

OFSTED fees to increase by up to 23%

Currently, the application and annual renewal fees for part time childminders come up to £35, whereas full time childcare facilities, including nurseries and daycare groups, are charged £225. These have remained the same since 2010, and the DfE argues that it is necessary to raise the costs in line with inflation increases. This would not bring with it any changes to the registration process, which has been criticised by many childcare professionals as being lengthy, administration-heavy and complicated. These price changes could come into effect in as little as nine months in April of next year, with a proposed increase to £43 for childminders (22.8% increase) and £269 full daycare settings (19.5% increase).1

Insufficient childcare in England leading to price hike

This news brings with it numerous concerns for many childcare professionals and parents. Alongside the registration fees, there are many other unavoidable costs including (but not limited to) a DBS disclosure, training course and first aid course, which can altogether add up to over £300. The childcare sector is already under considerable pressure; many traditional childcare businesses are finding it difficult to stay afloat amidst the rising costs and reduced funding allocations, leading to closures, a reduced number of places or compromises on the quality of care being given to children at these facilities.

According to Government statistics, half of local authorities in England have reported that there is insufficient child care for all full-time working parents2 and unfortunately, the number of child carers becoming registered to fulfill the increased demand is not increasing.

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1 Source: UK Department of Education
2 Source: CORAM Family & Childcare Survey 2019
at the same rate. For SEN childcare, the figures are even more alarming with only 23% of local authorities reporting that there is sufficient childcare for all disabled children\(^3\).

Figures suggest that two thirds of registered childminders have already left the profession since 2012 and at the current rate of decline there could be no childminders left by 2023\(^3\), whereas the demand for childcare has grown from 47% in 2005 to 69% in 2012\(^4\). Ultimately, this creates a price hike which negatively impacts parents who are forced to pay increased fees for the same level of care they were previously receiving, and the UK’s childcare has become the second most expensive in Europe.

A massive contradiction: fees rise while funding is insufficient

London councils suggest that up to £185m of additional funding is needed to properly address the shortfall of SEND support services\(^5\), whereas representatives of other local authorities in the UK are taking the Government to the High Court to urge them to prioritise an increase in SEND funding in order to avoid a future crisis\(^6\).

This lack of funding has clear visible effects on families; the number of SEND children without a school place has reportedly doubled over the past two years\(^6\) and for the first time in recent years, there has been no improvement on closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers\(^7\). Good quality early years childcare and education play a crucial role in setting solid foundations for educational achievement in later years and can make a big difference to a child’s future prospects. Hence, the Government’s failure to invest now in such crucial services reveal a disappointing lack of long-term vision from their part.

A new strategy needed to address childcare shortage

Instead of putting up prices, I would call for OFSTED to consider scrapping the registration fee altogether and subsidise the cost of registration fully. Increasing fees is not the right direction that OFSTED should be going towards and it is clear that new measures must be put in place to avoid a deeper crisis, particularly for SEN childcare which is already bearing the effects of a lack of policy attention and funding. DfE could consider digitalisation as a long-term solution; by streamlining and facilitating the registration process from start to finish, time and resources would be saved by both local authorities and childcare providers. HMRC is already successfully taking steps to become one of the most digitalised tax services in the world, why not extend this to other departments in government such as DfE?

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3 Source: PACEY  
4 Source: Huffington Post  
5 Source: London Councils  
6 Source: Nursery World  
7 Source: Education Policy Institute