Three key sector issues for a general election year

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In all likelihood 2024 will be a general election year, with the outcome at the polls setting the policy agenda for the rest of the decade. For children and families services, three issues could play a key role in the campaign.

Sustainable childcare funding – Thanks to the planned expansion of funded childcare, four out of five early years places will be paid for by the state by 2025. However, there is insufficient capacity to meet existing demand – nearly half of councils report falling numbers of free entitlement places – so where the extra places will come from is unclear (see special report, p27). Current funding levels are insufficient to encourage providers to create more places or enhance staff pay to help recruitment. Labour is rumoured to be looking at a means-tested offer for the most disadvantaged families. A realistic rate for providers is crucial to both policy options.

School inspection reform – The Ofsted inspection regime was heavily criticised at the recent inquest into head teacher Ruth Perry’s suicide. A separate independent review by Lord Jim Knight has called for the scrapping of single-word judgments for schools and for Ofsted to do more to help settings improve (see analysis, p7), measures backed by Labour. Many of the criticisms of Ofsted from the school sector are echoed by those in early years and children’s social care. Ministers must work with Ofsted to ensure it reconnects with the workforce and supports the sector to deliver better outcomes.

Youth work investment – Council youth provision has been decimated in the last decade yet experts highlight the vital role youth workers can play in preventing young people getting dragged into crime and violence. Both main parties have backed greater investment in community youth work – Labour has pledged to open 1,000 school-based youth hubs in disadvantaged areas but as leading parliamentarians highlight, the sector desperately needs to be backed with stable and long-term funding rather than the piecemeal, short-term pots of cash currently on offer (see analysis, p8).

Other issues also deserve to feature – for example, tackling the high cost of children’s care placements, reducing child poverty, and better access to mental health support – but I won’t be holding my breath. However, childcare funding, school standards and tackling violence resonate with the public at large and so will be higher up the agenda this year – and in the minds of the next government, whoever forms it.

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