

Parents in Manchester could get 30 hours of free childcare from next year

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Families will soon find out whether Manchester is one of the pilot areas to get the funding from September 2016

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The changes could save parents £2,500 a year

Parents could be entitled to 30 hours of free childcare a week from next year the government has announced today.

The plan to double the free entitlement for three and four-year-olds was a major [pledge](#) in the Conservatives' election manifesto and was due to start in 2017.

But now the scheme - which ministers say will save 60,000 working families in the north west an extra £2,500 a year - is being rolled out a year earlier than planned in some pilot areas, from September 2016.

A spokeswoman for the Department for Education said an announcement would be made 'soon' on whether Manchester will be one of the pilot areas.

Parents access the funding by simply filling out a form from their childcare provider, who must be Ofsted registered.

Childcare and education minister Sam Gyimah said: "Childcare costs can be a burden on family finances that prevents parents from working. We want to remove these barriers so that parents who do want to work can."

The news has been welcomed by Home-Start, a charity that supports families with young children across Greater Manchester.

Shelley Byrne, manager of Home-Start Manchester North, said: "Access to free early years provision is vital for both parents and children. Expensive childcare is often the biggest barrier to parents, especially mums, returning to work.

"We support many families for whom this is a lifeline. It gives parents the time to focus on overcoming their own difficulties, to access support and dedicate time to their own progression through training or volunteering.

"For children it provides essential opportunities to socialise, build independence and resilience, and develop their skills and understanding."

However, not everyone has welcomed the scheme, warning the childcare system faces 'meltdown' unless the plans are fully funded.

Educational charity the Pre-School Learning Alliance, which represents 14,000 private, voluntary and independent groups, says the existing 15 hours a week of free childcare is already 'grossly underfunded' by the government.

Alliance chief executive Neil Leitch said: "We are concerned that the government is still significantly underestimating the scale of the existing funding shortfall."

He predicted that if more money is not made available, increasing numbers of providers will withdraw from the free childcare system, adding: "There are many nurseries that can't physically extend their number of hours. They may operate in a church hall or community centre. Nobody has considered whether in fact they will be able to offer the 30 hours."

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