

CHAPTER 7

A PLACE TO LEARN: EDUCATION

Imagine free universal early education and childcare, with compulsory education starting at 7. Smaller classes and free nutritious lunches. More opportunity for outdoor education. More trust in teachers. Less teaching to the test and the abolition of SATS and league tables. Accountability at local level. Apprenticeships for 16–25 year olds who want them. The restoration of the Education Maintenance Allowance for 16–17 year olds and the abolition of university tuition fees. Imagine schools and colleges fit for children and young adults. Education is good for each of us, but it is also good for all of us – it's a common good. That's why the Green Party will make education free for everyone up to and including university or equivalent.

EARLY YEARS EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE

Although the single most important factor for a child's development is the learning environment at home, high-quality pre-school education can make a big difference. The government has focused on lower-quality childcare, which has little or no effect. Moreover, disadvantaged children who attend settings with children from mixed social backgrounds make more progress than those in settings serving mainly disadvantaged children. These findings are why we want to create a universal high-quality early years education system used by everyone, to give every child the best possible start.

Great credit is due to the previous Labour government for its Sure Start children's centres. But too many of these have closed as a result of austerity. Although support for childcare has grown under the Coalition, the government provides scant support to parents in the first two years of a child's life, and too much of the emphasis for the next three years is on expanding free and subsidised childcare so that parents, especially women, can work. Too little attention is paid to the child and to the value of early education.

The Green Party proposes to extend the education system to provide a free, universal and flexible system of good-quality early education and support for parents from birth until the age of compulsory education.

We would:

- Build a free but voluntary universal *early education and childcare service* for all children from birth until compulsory education age, which we would raise to 7 years.
- Integrate this into the local education service, run by *local education authorities*, and build on existing infant schools. Local authorities would be given freedom as to how to do so in the light of their local circumstances.