

Proper childcare in infancy

The Government must demonstrate that it is serious about effective and affordable provision for Britain's children, says **Anita Pollack**

A DECADE ago, along with Portugal and Greece, Britain was at the bottom of the European Union childcare league. And despite the Government's flagship national childcare strategy, parents of young children in this country are still at the lower end of European provision. There is still only one registered childcare place for every seven children in England under eight years old.

The Government is beset by a shortage of essential workers, including teachers, nurses and paramedics. It makes noises about encouraging more women to take a more active part in public life, trying to tackle child poverty and bemoans the shortage of women entrepreneurs. But the stark reality is that many families, particularly those with more than one child under five years old, simply cannot afford nursery charges.

Childcare workers, including childminders, remain underpaid and under-valued. At least one-third of the childcare workforce is untrained. And this in a workforce with a high turnover and low rates of pay.

How, then, can 300,000 childcare workers be recruited? This is the number which a recent survey conducted by the think-tank Demos and Genderquake estimates will be needed over the next four years.

The national childcare strategy has helped, and the Government insists that there are now 170,000 new childcare places. But the problems of supply and cost remain and they will not be solved by looking to the

private sector for all the answers.

The Cabinet Office website is notable for its lack of the use of the word "childcare". It does, however, mention women and work. It says: "The proportion of women working full time is much lower among those with dependent children, particularly among those with younger children, and the proportion of those working short hours (0-15) is much higher." What a surprise.

The "work-life balance" campaign focuses on the benefits of "flexible" employment. A work-life balance for parents of young

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children is about whether a mother can afford to go back to work or training.

"Flexible" working hours mean taking one or several part-time jobs. It means doing a cleaning job in the evenings or working weekend shifts when partner can be at home to look after the children. This might be flexible, but it has nothing to do with improving the quality of life.

The participation of lone parents in the labour market has increased significantly. Thirty-nine per cent of them now work more than 16 hours a week. In 1991, this figure was

28 per cent. The official explanation for this is that the proportion of lone parents with a child under five has fallen from 47 per cent to 36 per cent over the past decade, while there are more flexible working hours and better education. In fact, there are fewer incentives to stay at home.

The Working Families Tax Credit is an effort to promote equal opportunities and help those on low incomes, but it does not tackle the problems of high childcare costs and the shortage of people to do the job.

How can parents on an average income afford a mortgage and childcare when costs of the latter are well in excess of £100 a week for every child?

The Demos and Genderquake survey indicates that parents typically bear 93 per cent of childcare costs. The cost of one child of pre-school age and one of school age can be as much as £6,000 a year. Only high earners can afford that.

The European Union took a strong line on childcare early in the 1990s. As a result of pressure from MEPs, it published a *Recommendation on Childcare* and funded a childcare network. Unfortunately, the network was sacrificed to budget cuts in 1996 and the issue seems to have gone cold.

The EU Directorate for Social Affairs says: "This unit deals with equality between women and men. We no longer cover childcare *per se*." Effort now seems concentrated on the European Observatory on the Social Situation,



BRITAIN has one of Europe's lowest le

Demography and the Family, which largely concerns itself with population decline. What a sorry state of affairs.

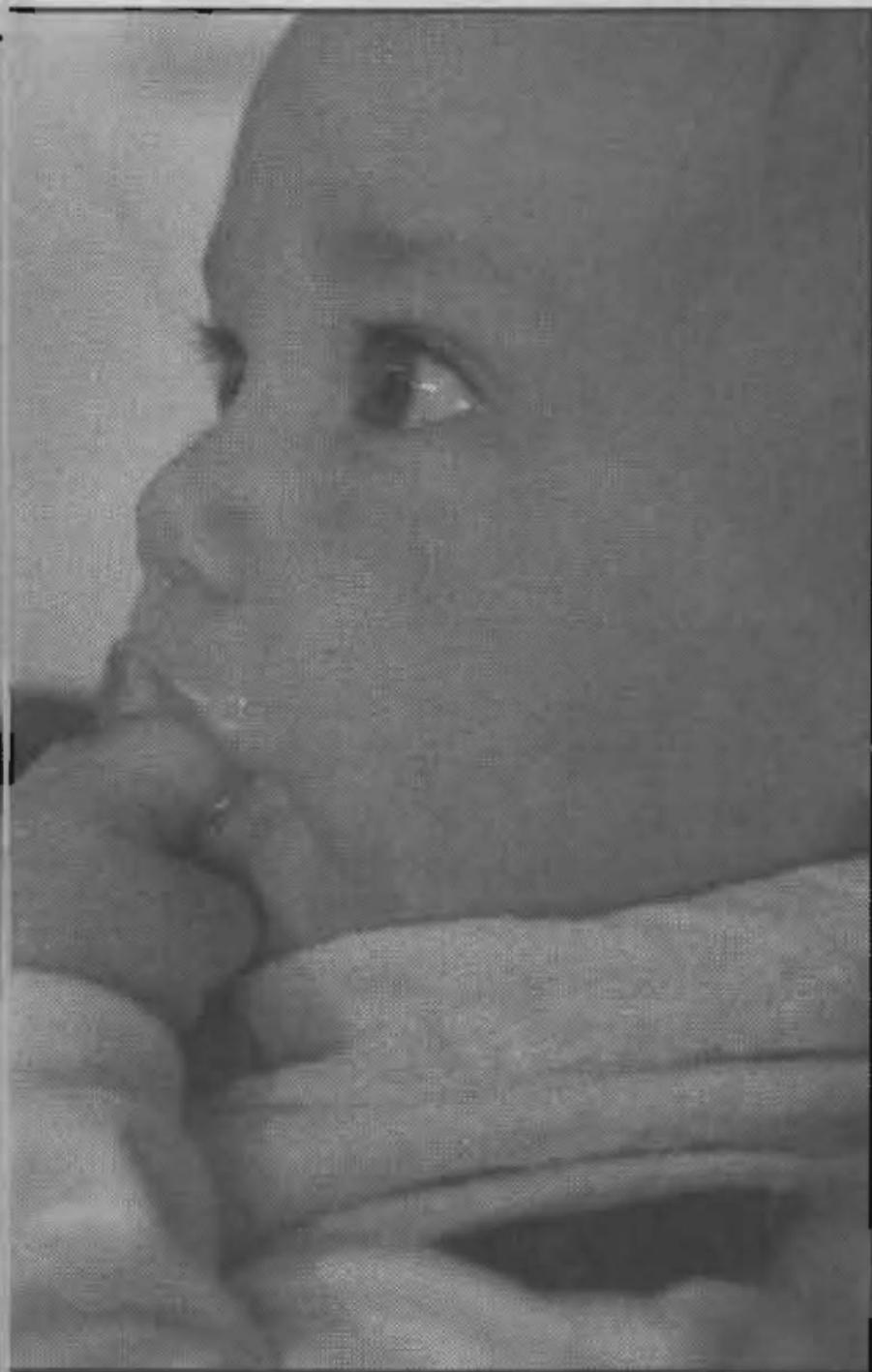
The last information on childcare collated in the EU to refer back to 1993. At that time, more than 90 per cent of children aged three to school age were enrolled in publicly-financed childcare institutions in Belgium, France and Italy. The figure was less than 60 per cent in Finland, Ireland, Portugal and Britain.

Most countries had considerably lower levels of childcare for children under three years old, largely because of generous maternity leave. But Denmark, with a childcare budget around seven times that of Britain and close to its own defence budget in size, managed to enrol half this age group.

Britain still has one of the lowest levels of publicly-funded childcare provision and one of the lowest levels of paid maternity leave in the EU. If the Government is serious about gender equality and wants Britain to have the infrastructure of a modern, competitive society, then a substantial expansion of high-quality, affordable childcare is essential.

Both the Government and employers need to give bigger subsidies to childcare before it can be affordable. The costs may be high but the many benefits are worth it.

Anita Pollack was Labour MEP for South West London from 1989-99 and a spokesperson on childcare in the European Parliament.



Is of publicly-funded childcare provision