

Scottish Women's Convention response to:

A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland A Scottish Government Consultation

January 2016

The Consultation

The Scottish Government's aim is to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up, and to give all of our children the best possible start in life. It is widely acknowledged that the provision of universally accessible and high quality Early Learning and Childcare enriches children with skills and confidence to carry into, and multiply, throughout their schooling, and is a cornerstone for closing attainment and inequality gaps.

Through this consultation, the Scottish Government have set out its high level vision for the expansion in ELC provision in Scotland. A vision underpinned by the principles of Quality, Flexibility, Accessibility and Affordability.

The Scottish Government wants to hear a diverse range of views on these choices – from providers, delivery partners, stakeholders and, importantly, families.

Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Scottish Government's proposals for the expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland. Childcare continues to be one of the most significant barriers for women seeking to enter into education or employment throughout the country. The topic is discussed in some way at every event held by the SWC.

"If employment is the route out of poverty and onto a better life, then childcare is the bridge."

The SWC supports the provision of high quality, accessible, flexible, appropriate childcare, provided free at point of delivery. This would go a substantial way to ensuring women's ability to participate in education, training and employment. Access to decent childcare is good for children, good for women and good for the economy as a whole.

The SWC welcomed the provisions in the Children and Young People's Act, which raised the number of early years funding hours for 3-4 year olds and vulnerable two year olds from 475 hours per year to 600 hours per year. It must be recognised, however, that while this attempt to improve things for families was a step in the right direction, it was not enough to remove any of the barriers to women's labour market participation. It is hoped that the expansion of ELC to 1140 hours per year will go some way to breaking down obstacles and increasing women's ability to enter into education, training or employment, as well as providing the best start in life for Scotland's children. The way in which the funded hours are delivered, where they are provided and by whom will have significant bearings on the achievement of this aim.

QUALITY

How do we ensure children are fully supported at the transition stages throughout their early-learner journey? What support should be provided to ensure that the ELC workforce and teachers have the skills, knowledge and capacity to support transitions?

What support is required to ensure that the ELC workforce have the skills, knowledge and capacity to deliver high quality provision for two year olds? How can the ELC sector best meet the specific learning, developmental and environmental need of two year olds? What approach should be taken on the transition for these children when they turn three?

How can the qualification routes and career paths that are open to early learning and childcare practitioners be developed to ensure that the ELC sector is seen as an attractive long-term career route?

How can we increase the diversity of the ELC workforce, in particular increasing the gender balance in the sector?

How can payment of the Living Wage and wider Fair Work practices be encouraged across the ELC sector?

The Workforce

A well trained, highly skilled, well paid workforce is one of the most important aspects of a quality system of ELC. It is vital that the workers who provide this type of care, the majority of whom are women, are given recognition for the work they do, both in monetary and societal terms.

This is beneficial for children. They are guaranteed to receive a positive, valuable early years experience when they are looked after, nurtured and educated by well paid, well valued workers. It makes a significant difference when these women have enthusiasm and experience for the challenging, demanding work they do. It is also good for parents, who would be safe in the knowledge that the women who are looking after their children are as well equipped as possible to do so.

“Choosing a childcare provider is a big responsibility. I want to make sure I’m leaving my child, the most precious thing in my life, in the capable hands of people who are good at their jobs, who want to be doing their jobs and who are going to give my little girl the best start in life. This is just as important as the accessibility, cost and flexibility of the service. It needs to be recognised as such.”

Fully supporting the ELC workforce so that they have the skills, knowledge and capacity to deliver high quality provision, not just for two year olds, but for all of the children they care for, is extremely beneficial for the workers.

“Working in childcare and early years education is seen as an ‘easy job’. It’s as if women are naturally predisposed to want to do it so it doesn’t matter how much we’re paid or what society thinks we actually do. I would love to see a joiner or a mechanic try and work a shift in a nursery, for the money we get paid, and say at the end of the day ‘that wasn’t a hard day’s work’.”

Unfortunately, many who work in ELC are not given the support they should be to develop and grow within their roles, which can make it more difficult for them to fully carry out the tasks they are expected to.

Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) and further education courses in ELC do not attract the same levels of funding as those traditionally undertaken by young men, such as construction and plumbing. This perpetuates a cycle of low paid, low skilled work, much of which is seen to be 'women's work' and as such is not valued by society.

“Plumbers are paid more than early years practitioners. Why is fixing pipes worth more than looking after our children?”

The Scottish Government's drive to ensure that the childcare workforce is 'degree led' is having a detrimental impact on women who have worked within the sector for a number of years. The focus on obtaining formal qualifications suggests that the years of knowledge and skills gained by experienced, committed staff members have very little worth. Little regard is given to the time and expense incurred by those workers who, despite their extensive understanding of the childcare sector, must obtain qualifications if they are at a certain level.

“I've worked as a nursery nurse for over thirty years. I manage a facility, which means I have had to go to university to obtain a BA in Childcare Practice. I've had to study part-time for three years, all the while working and juggling other family responsibilities. This made me feel as if the work I've done over the course of my career in childcare means nothing, because it's not validated until I have a piece of paper to prove it. You don't see plumbers or mechanics having to do this, so is it just because we do 'women's work' that it's not valued without the qualification?”

It is commendable that the Scottish Government seeks to ensure that childcare is a desirable job which provides workers, the majority of whom are and will continue to be women, with the opportunity to develop and sustain a long-term career. The Scottish Government should ensure that the existing, workers' experience is equally valued as the qualifications of new workers.

Public and Private Provision

It is also important to recognise that there are often significant disparities in the way those employed in the private sector and those employed in the public sector are treated. This is not often acknowledged by policy and decision makers, which results in significant disadvantage, particularly for the workers outwith the public sector.

Workers in private nurseries are open to more exploitation than their Local Authority counterparts. They are often only paid the minimum wage, with younger workers who are in training through a Modern Apprenticeship or college placement paid even less than that. These workplaces are, more often than not, non-unionised. Once the young women are fully qualified, they tend to be let go in favour of a younger, cheaper trainee. They will often either become supply staff, which offers no guarantees of permanent employment or income, or will have to take a job in another industry, meaning that their training and qualifications are not being used in the way they should.

“This is exploitation in its most obvious form, which causes competition between recently qualified early years practitioners.”

Conversely, Local Authority childcare workers are in nurseries and pre-five centres which receive better funding, where they are able to join a trade union, and where the payment of the Living Wage is a real possibility. There are more opportunities for training and progression, which strengthens the workforce overall through skills and qualification improvement. These workers are more likely to be adequately equipped to fully support children at the transition stages through their early-learner journey. The ability to specialise their development to focus on, for example, supporting children with additional support needs, as well as behavioural and nurture issues, is also more widely available within the public sector.

“Not recognising the differences in wages, terms and conditions and opportunities to further a career between the public and private sectors does so many workers a real disservice. They do the same job, but are not always treated the same way. For many, caring for the kids they look after is the only thing that keeps them going, rather than the wages they get paid or the hours they work. There needs to be a balance.”

Childminders

There also needs to be more recognition and value placed on the work of childminders, who provide high quality ELC to many children. Childminders often provide more flexibility, for example they are more likely to offer care before 8am and after 6pm. They are undervalued, however, as they are not considered to provide ‘quality’ ELC. For example, employees cannot use employer’s childcare vouchers for childminders.

“Childminders provide a positive environment for children, because of the home based situation and also the mix of ages that they are likely to look after. They’re seen as a lifeline in many areas, particularly more rural parts of the country, where they are often the only childcare providers in an area. They are high quality providers and should be recognised as such.”

Gender Balance

It is widely accepted that the overwhelming majority of the ELC workforce are women. There are a number of reasons as to why this is the case, most of which are rooted in gender inequality. Perceptions and misconceptions that childcare is “*women’s work*”; the perpetual streaming of young women into this type of employment; and the low wages which are paid within this sector are just some of the key reasons as to why the workforce are dominated by women.

The argument is often made that if more men were to enter into the ELC workforce, then roles would be more highly valued which would, in turn, increase wages overall. The SWC rejects this point of view. Women have frequently told the organisation that while they believe it is important for the ELC workforce to become more gender balanced, it is more fundamental that society overall learns to value the work that women traditionally undertake, such as caring.

“Childcare and early years education is fundamentally undervalued as a career because it is seen as ‘women’s work’. It won’t be seen as something that men will come into until that stigma is broken down and it’s recognised as the difficult, but extremely rewarding, job it is.”

Regardless of the type of childcare provider they use, parents should be assured that the women who are looking after their children are subject to the same working conditions, are well paid, and tend to be given the recognition they deserve for the vital work that they do.

FLEXIBILITY

What factors must be considered in delivering flexible ELC provision, while continuing to ensure a high quality service? To what extent could funded ELC support parents and carers with non-standard working hours, such as working shifts and weekends?

Flexibility in childcare, at present, comes at a price. Private nurseries tend to provide longer opening hours, often taking children in from 7.30am and closing at 6.00pm. Local Authority nurseries, on the other hand, provide childcare in sessions, offering places either in the morning or the afternoon. Working patterns have changed, but the way in which children are looked after have not.

Local Authority provision still works on the notion that a woman will work on a part-time basis, a few mornings or afternoons a week in their local area, and the 16 hours and 20 minutes per week of funded provision will cover their childcare needs. The reality for many women is that they are in low paid, low skilled employment, on zero hours contracts or in uncertain shift patterns.

“If you have to be in work for 8.30am and the nursery doesn’t take kids until 9.00am, what are you supposed to do? Anything before 9.00am is seen as wrap-around care and you have to pay more for it.”

It is, therefore, extremely important that this is acknowledged when the key features of Scotland’s ELC model are being considered. Many parents would not have to pay such high costs for private childcare if the funded hours available to them were provided in a much more flexible way.

“The lack of accessible, affordable childcare is holding so many women back. It’s a complicated jigsaw which can lead to real stress and anxiety. Access to more free childcare, provided with the needs of families in mind, would open up so many opportunities and more choices.”

The type of work being offered to and undertaken by women must also be taken into account when delivering flexible ELC provision. The proposals for the extension of ELC do not take into account the childcare needs of those who work shifts, particularly early mornings, evenings and weekends. The lack of wrap-around, flexible provision can lead to a reliance on assistance from friends and family. Parents working patterns, coupled with the inflexibility of childcare, means that children are often missing out on the funded places they are entitled to.

Informal caring is becoming increasingly relied upon, with many women in the *“middle layer of caring, looking after both young grandchildren and elderly parents.”* This can have a detrimental effect on the physical and mental health of these women, many of whom continue to hold down part-time jobs.

The jobs that many women undertake, such as work in hotels, restaurants, call centres and care homes, are outwith school hours. Shifts are often in the evenings and at weekends and there is hardly any childcare provision for this type of work. Lone parents can find it especially difficult, as they do not have a partner they can rely on to look after their children while they go to work. Women are forced to rely on family and friends to help, which can place a strain on relationships.

“I feel like I rely on my family too much sometimes and I feel bad about that. But there’s nothing I can do. If they didn’t look after my children then I wouldn’t be able to work.”

Women also identified a difference between babysitting and childcare, which again can have an impact on lone parents.

“My mum looks after my children outwith their 16 hours of funded nursery provision per week and I’m so grateful to her for that. It means that I don’t do much at the weekends though, like go to the gym or meet with friends. I don’t want to have to ask her to babysit for me when she’s been providing my childcare during the week. It’s not fair.”

Some working mothers, however, do not have support networks round about them, such as friends and family, so have no choice but to rely on expensive private childcare. Ensuring that the extra hours of funded provision suit women and their families would be welcomed in the design of a new national childcare service.

Little regard is given to those who are employed on zero hours contracts, which are becoming increasingly more common in fields where women predominate. Many choose not to work because of the difficulties they face in securing a place.

“It’s impossible to organise childcare when you’re on a zero hours contract because you don’t know what’s happening with shifts from one week to the next. It’s extremely difficult to access Local Authority childcare, especially if you live outside of main towns and centres and private childcare is so expensive that it’s outwith the reach of those on low incomes.”

Changes to the welfare benefits system implemented by the UK Government means that many women are being forced back into work, or they will lose their benefits completely. Their childcare needs are not taken into consideration.

“It’s a case of getting women back to work as soon as possible, without any regard to their circumstances. The stress they go through places significant strain on their physical and mental health. Taking childcare into consideration is such a simple thing, but it’s not being done. Women are being let down as a result.”

The Scottish Government has an obligation to ensure that funded ELC is provided in a way which supports all families, allowing women in particular the opportunity to actively participate in work.

More also needs to be done to encourage workplaces, particularly public sector and larger employers, to provide on-site childcare facilities. Many women have advised that being able to use a childcare provider within or adjacent to their workplace would make their lives significantly easier. This is particularly the case in rural areas, where public provision is sparse and private facilities are very expensive.

“It’s quite common in other countries so why isn’t it happening here? Those who work in the public sector are paid the Living Wage and they are protected from compulsory redundancies because of positive direction from the Scottish Government to make this happen. They should be leading by example on childcare by taking significant steps towards the provision of childcare within their workplaces.”

It is hoped that this type of policy would also encourage private sector employers to follow suit. More on-site provision would make it much easier for parents to work, which would be an extremely positive step forwards for women.

ACCESSIBILITY

How do we ensure that the voices of children and their families are heard as we plan this expansion?

How can we ensure equality of access for all children? What barriers do children with disabilities and additional support needs currently face in accessing ELC? What further action is required to address these barriers?

How can the governance arrangements support more community-led ELC provision particularly in remote and rural areas?

One of the most important aspects of a workable ELC system which both benefits and befits the people who will use it is ensuring that their voices are heard at every step of development and expansion. Parents and practitioners are, more often than not, best placed to advise as to how ELC should be provided, given they are the ones who have most direct, regular access to the system. Continued and frequent meaningful consultation with children and families from different parts of the country, who use public and private nursery provision, as well as childminders, should be carried out.

“If the Scottish Government are serious about designing a system of childcare that supports families and is beneficial for children’s early learning and development, then they need to take parents voices, issues, ideas and concerns into account. This has to happen throughout a childcare journey – not just when the hours are expanded but as an ongoing improvement commitment.”

Families with disabled children face significant barriers in accessing childcare which is appropriate for their condition. There is very little provision available which meets the needs of disabled children, or those with additional support needs. Many parents are

unable to return to work because of the lack of availability.

“Families with disabled children are being failed because there’s so little childcare available to be able to fully and adequately support our children. It’s hard enough for parents of non disabled children to access publicly funded provision – we’ve got no chance.”

The Scottish Government must do more to ensure that disabled children and those with additional support needs are afforded access to state funded childcare. There are a number of measures which should be put in place in order to achieve this aim. These include further training and development for all staff with regards to the variety and range of conditions children can face, improving physical access to buildings and providing specialist Early Years Practitioners whose sole purpose is to educate and care for disabled children.

“A lot of the things which could improve the situation for disabled children and their families are very simple – there just needs to be more awareness, understanding and specialist provision.”

The Scottish Government must take into account the geography of rural Scotland. In a number of remote, rural and super sparse areas, it is extremely difficult for women to access formal childcare. Where there is a nursery or a childminder available, they often do not offer flexibility. Wrap-around childcare - which often means before 8.30am and after 3.30pm - is limited. Similarly, provision is not always near to a place of work or study. As a result, women can be forced to undertake long journeys by public transport in order to get drop their children off, then to get to work or college, before doing the same again in the evening. Many of the women who have to juggle these responsibilities are in low paid employment.

“By the time you pay for the bus and pay for the childcare, what’s the point in working when wages are so low?”

Many women in rural areas rely on childminders to provide their childcare. They are likely to be able to offer more flexible hours than, for example, nurseries. As a result they are in high demand due to the lack of formal provision across the geographical area.

The lack of childcare in rural areas can put pressure on women to apply for jobs with an increased salary. This can result in more responsibility and longer working hours just so they can pay for childcare. Otherwise they can be forced to choose not return to work at all.

“It’s a catch 22. If you go back into work you have to try to balance that with a family life. If you don’t go back to work you feel as if you’ve wasted your education or are not fulfilling all of your potential. It’s so hard.”

As a result of difficulty in accessing services, there is a significant reliance on informal provision from friends and family. In some circumstances older women in local communities have offered to look after other people’s children as they have recognised the need for the assistance.

“Unless you have family in the area, it’s really difficult to get any kind of childcare. Not everyone is lucky enough to have support networks around, which makes it even more difficult for them to find someone to look after their children.”

It is vital that early years expansion trials take place in both urban and rural areas, in order to be able to identify either positive or negative aspects of delivery. Not taking rural issues into consideration would be extremely detrimental to children and their families in these areas.

It is also important to note that Local Authority childcare facilities are only open during school term times. This does not reflect the working patterns of parents, who are then forced to seek alternative provision during school holidays. Again, this often means relying on family and friends to offer help and support.

“I don’t have enough annual leave to take every holiday that the nursery has and I can’t get my kids into private childcare during this time because they won’t take children on a short-term basis. This leads to me being stressed trying to coordinate where they’re going to go, not only during longer breaks, but also on odd in-service days and other mid-term holidays. Sometimes I feel as if my children are being passed from pillar to post but I’ve got no other option.”

AFFORDABILITY

Do parents and carers face any barriers in accessing support with the costs of ELC provision (beyond the funded entitlement)? What more can we do to ensure additional hours are affordable?

How can ELC providers, particularly private and third sector providers, be encouraged to extend capacity?

The cost of childcare is a huge barrier for women seeking to access education, employment or increasing working hours. This is particularly the case for families with more than one child, a disabled child and lone parents.

“We’re paying roughly the same every month for childcare as we do for our mortgage. That’s frightening.”

One of the main difficulties faced by parents is the availability of affordable childcare, either in the area where they live or close by to where they work. For families with children aged between 3 and 5 years old, it is extremely difficult to access places within Local Authority nurseries, which guarantee funded hours. They are forced to rely on expensive private provision as a result.

There is no publicly funded childcare available to cover the shift patterns in which many women are employed, which often involves working in the evenings and at weekends. One of the ways in which these women can access provision is through childminders. This type of care, outwith standard hours, must be paid for and does not come under the remit of the 1140 hours expansion.

“They are few and far between and even then women still have to rely on one person – what happens if they take ill? Employers don’t take too kindly to mums needing time off to look after their kids in these circumstances.”

While there are families who use solely funded hours within Local Authority nurseries as their childcare provision, it must be recognised that many use their entitlement through private provision. This means having to make a financial contribution for their children to be looked after, often because the hours they require are not available from public providers.

It is also important to note that many parents seek childcare in order to accommodate going back to work, which tends to happen long before the child is 3 years old. Depending on their circumstances and their employer, this can mean paying for expensive private childcare (which costs more for babies and younger children) from when their child is very young. There is a real reliance on childminders and nurseries for those whose children are under 3. Many parents – in the main mothers, with whom the majority of childcare responsibility still lies – are forced to make the choice not to return to work because if they did the childcare costs would be outwith their reach.

“If I was to go back to work when my child turns one, even on a part-time basis, I would basically be working for nothing because the cost of childcare would take up most of my wages. I want to go back to work, I want to further my skills and earn my own money, but the prohibitive costs of childcare are taking that choice away from me.”

The expansion of funded hours of childcare and early years provision is positive for the children it will benefit. The provision of ELC for pre-school children is undoubtedly important; however families also rely on after school care, holiday clubs and breakfast clubs.

“Cuts within Local Authorities have led to the reduction and, in too many cases, the complete removal of publicly funded and provided breakfast and after school clubs. Parents are still going to struggle if there’s more flexibility and availability of childcare for younger children, if there’s nothing to support school-age kids.”

It must, therefore, be borne in mind that the need for good quality, accessible, appropriate childcare does not always end when a child goes to school. The Scottish Government must consider childcare as a whole, not only for 3 and 4 year olds, but for children of all ages. Reinstatement of breakfast, after school and holiday clubs within a Local Authority setting would be extremely beneficial to many and must be taken into account as part of a full package of measures. This would not only be positive for children, but also their parents, particularly mothers, who would have more support and therefore more opportunities to undertake or re-enter education, training or employment.

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The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission paper provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to mental health in Scotland.

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