



**Department of Work and Pensions**  
**Commission on Childcare: Call for Evidence**

**August 2012**

***Introduction***

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy.

This is achieved in a number of different ways - through roadshow, round table, conference and celebratory events. Following each event a report is compiled and issued to women who attend and relevant policy and decision makers.

The SWC uses the views of women to respond to Scottish and UK Government consultation papers.

***SWC Evidence Source***

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events throughout Scotland, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. During these events concerns have been raised regarding a number of issues relevant to childcare provision and funding. This submission paper provides the views of women throughout Scotland and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to this consultation document.

### Purpose of the Call for Evidence

Sarah Teather, Minister for Children and Families, and Maria Miller, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Work and Pensions are leading a commission on childcare announced by the Prime Minister on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2012. The commission is looking at how to reduce the costs of childcare for working families, and burdens on childcare providers, without compromising the safety or quality of provision. This call for evidence will inform the work of the commission which will report in the autumn. It particularly seeks views from parents and carers, those working in the sector, owners and managers of settings, schools, employers, and organisations with an interest in child development, safety, labour market and employment matters.

### ***Theme 3: How childcare supports families to move into sustained employment and out of poverty.***

*“We know that there are many factors which influence the decisions that parents make about their working lives. **Theme 3** of the commission will look at how childcare supports families to move into sustained employment and out of poverty. It will consider: the influence that childcare costs have on employment decisions; whether this is different at key transition points (for example when children start their free early education entitlement and when they start school); and the implementation of existing government support to help parents with childcare costs.”*

### **Q9. What are the main issues parents face when making decisions about work, either entering work, or increasing their hours, in relation to childcare? Do some families face particular challenges, such as low or middle-income families, or families with disabled children?**

It is important to note that childcare and early years education is devolved in Scotland. Local Authorities are responsible for the provision of such services and are funded by the Scottish Government to do this. However responsibility for Working and Child Tax credits remain reserved to Westminster, meaning families in Scotland receive money from central Government to pay for childcare services. This leads to an overlap between Westminster and Holyrood in terms of provision of and payment for childcare.

The availability of affordable, accessible, wrap-round childcare is undoubtedly the main issue for parents looking to return to work or to increase working hours. In Scotland,

Local Authorities are obliged to provide 475 hours of early learning for every child aged three to five over a school year. This equates to roughly 2.5 hours per day. The Children and Young People Bill, currently under consultation in the Scottish Parliament, proposes to increase this provision to 600 hours and to make such provision available to looked-after two year olds.

This is undoubtedly a positive step. It does not, however, equate to wrap around childcare, which means many parents are forced to rely on private nurseries and childminders to 'top up' their childcare requirements. This is also the case for parents of under threes or those who require after-school care.

As a result, the cost of childcare is a huge barrier for parents attempting to return to work or increase their working hours. Reliance on private nursery provision is expensive for all families but especially for those with a disabled child, more than one child and lone parents.

Families who qualify for assistance towards childcare costs through the childcare element of working tax credits rely upon the money they receive. It is a vital source of income and without it, many parents would be forced to stay at home rather than return to work or increase their hours. Recent changes to entitlement to tax credit through the Welfare Reform Act 2012 will have a significant impact on this.

Working hours thresholds for tax credit entitlement are increasing. Single people with children must work at least 16 hours per week. For couples, joint working hours need to be at least 24 a week, with one person working at least 16 hours a week. In a couple where only one person is working, that person must be working at least 24 hours a week.

This will have an impact on women for a number of reasons. Cuts to the public sector, in which women predominate as employees, mean there are fewer jobs available. As a result of the cuts, employers may not be able to increase working hours in order for women to qualify for assistance from tax credit. For those who are fortunate enough to be given extra hours, further childcare costs will be incurred. Families affected by these changes simply will not be able to afford to return to work as it would be financially more detrimental for them to do so.

*“Women are losing out either way with these changes.”*

Middle income families do not qualify for assistance with childcare costs through tax credits, therefore sending a child to a private nursery takes *“a huge chunk”* out of their salaries. This is particularly the case for those with more than one child. Parents – more often than not the mother – will delay returning to work until one or both children are at school as it is the only financially viable option.

Women in Scotland face additional barriers with regards to childcare. Rural Scotland registers 18% of the total population of Scotland and accounts for 94% of its land mass. Those living rurally often have to travel long distances in order to access education and employment, which in turn means they have to travel to access childcare. Parents who rely on public transport in these areas are faced with infrequent timetables and high

fares. In rural Scotland a car *“is a necessity, not a luxury”* and families pay more for fuel and damage to their vehicles as a result of poor road conditions than those in urban areas do. This, coupled with the fact that there is little available childcare in rural areas, has a strong influence on whether parents return to work or increase working hours.

Parents are often forced to rely on friends and family to undertake informal childcare roles. In many cases grandparents are called upon. As the population ages, more and more women are in the ‘middle stages’ of caring, looking after both young grandchildren and elderly parents. This places additional burdens on their physical and mental health.

### **Q11. What do employers do well and what further role could employers play in supporting parents with their childcare needs?**

While there are undoubtedly employers who demonstrate positive working practices, much more could be done to support parents with their childcare needs. Improved flexible working opportunities would allow for a better work/life balance and would greatly assist parents with childcare.

While the right to request flexible working is enshrined in legislation, many employers choose not to grant such requests. Making flexible working more available would improve the working environment as parents would be less stressed about making it to work on time and leaving in time to pick up their children, which would lead to more productivity.

*“Only positive feedback will come from these practices. They are all common sense factors.”*

Options for home working greatly supports parents with childcare needs. Also effective communication between employer and employee, for example where the employer asks how practices could be improved, would also be welcomed by parents.

### **Q13. How effectively is existing Government support to help parents participate in work being delivered?**

Changes brought about by the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 are set out with the intention of encouraging parents to return to work, or seek more hours. In reality, this will be difficult for many families.

The requirement for lone parents to begin seeking work when their oldest child reaches five years old, or face losing up to 40% of their benefits, is described as *“draconian”*. There is a real worry that women will be expected to undertake *“any old job”* which may not suit their skills and qualifications or childcare arrangements and could mean travelling a great distance from their home. There is no guarantee that any employment undertaken will pay a living wage, meaning women could be worse off once childcare costs etc are taken into account.

The current economic climate means that jobs are very difficult to come by. In rural Scotland, many of the employment opportunities for women are part-time and seasonal, offering very little job security. Any part-time employment under 16 hours, which may be all that is available in certain areas, will take away entitlement to tax credits.

Parents who are in receipt of benefits may face sanctions if they fail to attend work focused interviews etc “*without good reason.*” There is no indication as to what will constitute a good reason, which leads to anxiety as to whether e.g. lack of childcare on the day of the interview or public transport issues will be taken into account.

Overall, policies and practices currently in place which aim to assist parents to participate in work could be a lot more flexible. While support available aims to be supportive, this is often not the case. It is important to realise that every family is different and a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not always the best one to take.

[www.scottishwomensconvention.org](http://www.scottishwomensconvention.org)