

Increasing the Hours of free early learning and child care provision

Qualitative Findings

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Executive summary

Background overview

In recognition of the important role played by early learning and childcare for many families, the First Minister has recently committed to additional provision of early learning and childcare funding. This will almost double the current number of available hours to 30 hours per week / 1,140 hours per year by the end of the next Parliament.

The Scottish Government has been undertaking an online quantitative survey around parents' views and decisions towards using the proposed 30 hours per week / 1,140 hours per year of free formal childcare provision. They also wished to gather more in-depth information by commissioning qualitative research to provide detailed contextual information and analysis as well as an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence choice for parents of 3 and 4 year olds. The qualitative research also looked at how increased childcare provision might impact on their choice of early learning and childcare.

A total of eight focus groups and two individual in-depth discussions were held. Across the sample as a whole, respondents were split into users (high and low) and non-users of early learning and childcare. A total of 46 parents took part in the discussions.

Summary of findings

Current usage of early learning and childcare

Regardless of location, most respondents felt they were offered a relatively limited choice in early learning and childcare services. A priority for most parents is for their children to attend a nursery that sits within the catchment area of their local primary school.

Not surprisingly, cost is a key factor in choice and usage of early learning and childcare services. Some users with limited funds only access the funded childcare hours. Some parents have opted to reduce or change their working hours in order to alleviate the need to pay for childcare that is more expensive than their take home earnings.

The key requirements of parents are for early learning and childcare provision to offer cover during school holidays, full days at nursery and / or wrap around care. Where this is not offered, some parents are unable to take up funded early learning and childcare provision.

Many users were keen for their child to attend nursery from the age of three as this is considered to provide a wider range of activities and stimulation than would be offered by a childminder. It was also felt that children learn more at nursery and this becomes increasingly important as a child gets older.

That said, regardless of the type of early learning and childcare being accessed, many parents felt that a child aged three is too young to participate in early learning, and that this is more relevant to a four year old in the year prior to starting at primary school.

There were some concerns over the quality of management and staff in early learning and childcare services.

Many non-users, while recognising there are benefits from using early learning and childcare provision, felt that they were able to offer the same benefits to their child at home.

Initial reaction to The Scottish Government commitment to increased provision

Some parents felt the current offering of 16 hours per week of early learning and childcare during term time is not sufficient to encourage parents back into work. Furthermore, there was also a perception that the current funded childcare hours do not appear to encourage non-working parents into the workplace.

There was little awareness of the Scottish Government (SG) commitment to increasing the number of funded early learning and childcare hours. Where there was any awareness, this was mostly only at a superficial level.

Initial reactions to the SG commitment were very positive, although few respondents felt it would benefit them directly. Those individuals it was felt would benefit most were those currently working full or part time or those wanting to return to work.

There were requests for more detailed information as to when this would be introduced and how it would impact on parents currently receiving any benefits.

Parental intentions for use of increased hours of childcare

Overall, it was felt that those most likely to take up any increased hours of childcare were those who are already making use of some of the 16 hours of existing childcare. Non-users were unlikely to start to use early learning and childcare services because most of these households had one non-working parent. For these respondents, it was difficult to justify take-up of additional hours of childcare and they were largely unenthusiastic about the Scottish Government commitment for themselves personally, although they felt it could benefit other parents who are working or who wish to return to work.

Although a number of respondents were unlikely to change their patterns of childcare usage, there was a perception that the increased hours would benefit those who are currently working or those who wish to return to work.

There were some suggestions that the Scottish Government needs to outline strict criteria for entitlement rather than simply offer this to all parents of three and four

year olds. For example, to require users to demonstrate a commitment to return to work or study.

Barriers to uptake

While initial reactions to the provision of additional hours of funded early learning and childcare were positive, on further consideration many respondents identified a number of barriers to uptake of this. Almost all respondents had concerns over logistical issues, namely, how this would be funded, what buildings would be used to increase available space and how staffing levels would be increased. There were allied concerns that this could mean a decline in the quality of early learning and childcare.

Another key issue for many respondents was that, even with almost double the number of hours of funded early learning and childcare, this would still be inflexible i.e. that particularly within local authority provision, it would still only offer cover during term time, it would not offer cover early or late enough to help out working parents.

It was felt that many private nurseries – which offer a more flexible service – would not be authorised by local authorities to provide funded hours.

There was also a perception that 30 hours a week / 1,140 hours per year is too long for a three year old to attend early learning and childcare.

Overall, there was a perception that these additional hours were not likely to encourage non-users to take up use of early learning and childcare provision, and while it would benefit working parents as it would enable cost savings, it might be of limited value to some working parents because of a lack of flexibility.

Overcoming barriers to uptake

Overall, parents want early learning and childcare to offer high quality continuous and flexible care for their children and the model that is closest to this is that offered by private nurseries. Key ways to overcome barriers to take-up of funded early learning and childcare focused on increased flexibility of offering and coverage all year round.

There was a great deal of cynicism from respondents as to how additional hours of funded early learning and childcare could, in reality, be introduced, given this would mean a need for increased funding, space and staff.

Respondents would like to see nurseries managed by qualified teaching professionals, with nursery staff who hold qualifications in childcare and / or early learning.

There were some suggestions that childcare vouchers that could be redeemed at every nursery across Scotland (local authority and private provision) would encourage higher take up.

Respondents would like to see removal of the requirement for a private nursery to be registered with a local authority for a year prior to being accepted as a provider of funded early learning and childcare. Respondents would also like to see more encouragement for childminders and voluntary childcare such as playgroups.

There were some suggestions of a need for some form of government-led information campaign to ensure parents are aware of their entitlement and how to make use of this.

In conclusion

While spontaneous reactions to the concept of 30 hours of funded early learning and childcare a week / 1,140 hours per year were positive, when respondents gave more consideration to this, they raised a number of issues. For most, the barriers that currently exist – predominantly relating to the inflexible nature of local authority offering – will continue to exist, albeit at a lesser level. So, for example, there is still a perception that some full time working parents will not be able to access this and that some parents who would like to work full time will not be able to do so because early learning and childcare will not cover full time working hours or holiday periods.

Non-users who currently do not make use of available funded hours are unlikely to take up any of the extended offering for their three year olds and may still only take up a relatively limited number of hours of early learning and childcare for their four year olds.

Who will this appeal to demographically?

By and large, respondents in rural and more remote communities assumed that those in cities had much more available choice in early learning and childcare services. However, the reality is that those in more urban areas and cities feel that because of their preference to send their child to nursery with other children with whom they will then attend primary school, this places limitations on their choice. So, a priority for all parents is attendance at early learning and childcare within the catchment area of the local primary school.

There is a perception that those who are most likely to benefit from these increased funded hours are single parents, those who wish to return to work and those on low incomes and / or living in more deprived areas. There was no view expressed that this would impact any differently on other types of families such as those within equality groupings.

Introduction

Background

Since August 2014 and the introduction of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act, the Scottish Government has had a commitment to provide early learning and childcare of 600 hours per year for all 3 and 4 year olds and vulnerable 2 year olds; this equates to around 16 hours per week during term time.

Early learning and childcare is offered by local authorities via nurseries, nursery classes in schools, playgroups, some childminders and through partners in the private and third sectors. A range of hours can be offered per day, from 2 and ½ hours minimum to 8 hours maximum, up to around 16 hours per week. While the Children and Young People Act includes a requirement for local authorities to consult with parents and offer a degree of choice and flexibility over the pattern of hours they can access, there is much recent debate around this issue, with a number of commentators and parents noting that some parents fail to take up their entitlement because current offerings are inflexible.

In recognition of the important role played by early learning and childcare for many families and for all children, the First Minister has recently committed to additional provision of early learning and childcare funding to almost double the current number of available hours to 30 hours per week / 1,140 hours per year by the end of the next Parliament.

The Scottish Government has been undertaking an online quantitative survey¹ which has been issued to a range of individuals via the Children and Families Analytical Unit and distributed via a number of parent organisations and networks.

In order to gather more in-depth information, they also commissioned qualitative research to provide detailed contextual information and analysis as well as an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence choice for parents of 3 and 4 year olds. The qualitative research also looked at how increased childcare provision might impact on their choice of early learning and childcare.

The key objectives of this qualitative research were defined as:

- Exploration of parental intentions for usage of the increased hours of free childcare.
- Examination of the impact of various demographic factors in influencing the decision to use increased hours of free childcare.
- Assessment of the extent to which the take up of increased hours of free childcare will be determined by the current usage of childcare options.
- Identification of any barriers to using the increased hours of free childcare.

¹ <https://response.questback.com/scottishgovernment/childcaresurvey/>

- Identification of ways in which barriers to using increased hours of free childcare can be overcome.

The following chapter provides details of the approach to this qualitative research.

Approach

The Respondents

In order to obtain a wide range of views in relation to early learning and childcare provision, those recruited to participate in focus groups encompassed differing usage levels, different levels of household income and those living in both deprived and non-deprived areas. In rural areas, we included respondents living close to small towns as well as those living more remotely.

All respondents had to have children aged 3 or 4 who were eligible for funded early learning and childcare places.

Sample Structure

A total of eight focus groups and two individual in-depth discussions were held. Across the sample as a whole, respondents were split into users (high and low) and non-users of early learning and childcare.

High users were defined as those using the current 16 hours of funded childcare and also supplementing these with additional hours.

Low users were defined as those who were only using the current 16 hours of funded childcare.

As it proved problematical to find non-users in Dundee, an additional in-depth discussion was also held with a respondent based in Edinburgh.

A total of 46 parents took part in the discussions.

Quotas were also set on the type of early learning and childcare accessed, so as to include users of council run nurseries as well as users of private childcare services.

Across the groups as a whole, around half the respondents were male and half were female.

In order to explore whether household composition can impact on childcare choices, some single parents were also included in the sample.

Across the groups, some respondents worked full time, some worked part time and some did not work at all. Among those working, some shift workers were also included.

The table overleaf provides details of the overall sample structure by location.

Table 1: Sample structure

Location		
Glasgow i.e., city location	1 group users, including : high and low users users of council run nurseries and users of private childcare services medium-high income	1 group non-users Medium-high income
Dundee i.e. urban location	1 group users, including: high and low users users of council run nurseries low income area of deprivation	1 group non users
Edinburgh i.e. urban location		1 individual interview with non-user
Jedburgh i.e. small town / large village in rural location	1 group users, including: high and low users users of council run nurseries and users of private childcare services medium-high income	1 group users and / or non- users, including: low income or area of deprivation
Insch i.e. remote rural location	1 group users, including: high and low users users of council run nurseries and users of private childcare services medium-high income	1 group users and / or non- users, low income or area of deprivation

The focus groups and individual discussions were held between 22 July and 20 August 2015.

A copy of the topic guide used in the focus groups is included in Appendix 1.

The following chapters present the findings from the qualitative discussions. The first provides contextual information and examines reasons for existing choices of early learning and childcare. The following chapter then examines awareness of the Scottish Government's commitment to the provision of additional hours of early learning and childcare; followed by a chapter on likely parental intentions for the use of increased hours once these are available. The next chapter then identifies barriers to the uptake of increased hours of early learning and childcare, and the final chapter makes suggestions as to how these barriers can be overcome.

Current usage of early learning and childcare

Reasons for choice of current early learning and childcare services

Early on in the discussions, respondents were asked to indicate the reasons behind their current choice of early learning and childcare, or reasons for being a non-user, and a wide range of different reasons emerged. While logistical considerations often formed the basis for decisions on early learning and childcare, there was also a degree of choice based on more emotional considerations. The following paragraphs outline the reasons provided by respondents.

Available services and location

Respondents in the more rural or remote locations felt they had little choice in early learning and childcare, with available services sometimes limited to only one private nursery, one local authority nursery and some childminders. For parents who cannot afford private nursery fees, the choice of childcare services is further reduced.

Allied to this lack of choice in the more rural areas, there was a perception from these respondents that parents in urban areas have a greater range of childcare services from which to select. However, parents in urban locations disagreed with this perception because local authority nurseries sit within specific primary school catchment areas, and parents were keen for their children to start nursery with the same children they will then attend primary school with. For example, one parent in East Renfrewshire wanted her child to go to a nursery that had a better reputation than her local catchment nursery, but felt that was unfair on her daughter who would then lose her friends when she subsequently started at primary school.

“My little girl is starting nursery in January when she’s 4 and I think that will be a good thing as she will be mixing with the kids she’ll be going to school with and she’ll have had 6 months of playing with them at nursery. My wee boy went to a different nursery and when he went to school he didn’t know anybody. My wee one takes a bit of a while to get used to a new environment so we thought it was important to send her to nursery where she’ll meet the kids she’s going to be at school with. It helps get them into a routine, so they start with 3 hours at nursery which is then 6 hours at school but at least they’re used to the idea of it.”

So, all respondents felt the reality was that they had a relatively limited choice of early learning and childcare services, regardless of whether they were in a rural or urban location.

There were also concerns expressed at all the focus groups over a loss of some early learning and childcare services, primarily because of a perception of declining numbers of childminders and playgroups across Scotland. This was primarily because of a perception of increasing levels of red tape and bureaucracy facing

providers wishing to register their service. There was also a perception that childminders in particular have little by way of support networks to help them in their chosen profession. This apparent decline in available services was a real concern to parents because it further limits their choice for early learning and childcare. There were also concerns that this decline could be ongoing.

Cost

It was hypothesised at the start of this project that the key drawback of early learning and childcare for many parents is its expense; and the qualitative research demonstrates this is indeed the case. Most parents noted the cost of early learning and childcare can be very expensive, with some non-users noting that it is prohibitive, and some users claiming this was a key reason why they were not accessing more than the funded 16 hours of childcare a week. Almost all respondents commented that private nurseries were the most expensive form of early learning and childcare, albeit the quality of childcare at private nurseries was perceived to be high by many.

Private versus local authority provision

In the main, respondents using private nursery services tended to be working full time, although a few worked part-time. Their key reason for choosing this form of early learning and childcare was that they needed the flexibility offered by private nurseries. Advantages included early opening, extended hours and year round coverage. As one full time working respondent noted,

“People like us who work full time are more reliant on the private nursery sector because you’ve got to work out your work hours and some of these places aren’t accessible if you work full hours. There are a lot attached to primary schools and you can get breakfast clubs and such, but we have to work around pick up and drop off in the morning and I think we’ve been really lucky with our nursery that they’ve been willing to work with us and be accommodating with the hours.”

Another part time worker noted “I need to work two or three full days each week and so I need my childcare to be able to fit with my office hours. The shorter sessions offered by our local nursery just don’t fit with my working hours”.

A key drawback for many parents is that some private nurseries are not registered with the local authority and therefore do not offer funded childcare places. So some of the respondents, who are entitled to 16 hours of funded early learning and childcare each week, do not take this up because their chosen private nursery does not offer funded places. Furthermore, there were too many logistical barriers in relation to using two different services, one which offers funded places and one which does not. One respondent noted there is a very good choice of private nurseries in Glasgow but that not all offer funded placements.

There were some mixed views on private nurseries. In general, those using private nurseries were very happy with the childcare provided but in Dundee, non-users

had a strong fear and mistrust of private nurseries. While there was an acknowledgement that some are very good (although very expensive), the prevailing perception was that children are not completely safe there, with some respondents commenting on a perceived low quality of care and staff expertise. In addition to this, Dundee respondents considered private nurseries as too expensive, typically costing parents more than their salary to have more than one child there.

However, while non-users in Dundee were mistrustful of private nurseries, respondents in Inch generally felt that the service offered by private nurseries was better than that offered by local authority pre-school nurseries because the former provides a more relaxed ethos for children, with more emphasis on learning life skills.

There was a perception from respondents in Inch that local authority nurseries are better staffed but offer a more institutionalised ethos. Conversely, respondents in Dundee viewed local authority nurseries more positively and felt they were better staffed and provided a more overtly educational ethos, which they preferred.

Whether the emphasis should be on early learning or childcare

This latter point over the educational ethos within nurseries, was raised spontaneously at focus groups by almost all respondents. Regardless of the type of childcare accessed, many respondents felt that a child aged three is too young to participate in early learning and that nurseries should focus on early learning activities only in the year prior to children starting school when they are aged four. This seems to be an issue of interpretation, with most parents equating early learning to academic learning. Some parents felt that following any form of curriculum places too much pressure on a three year old child. So, while parents were keen for their three year old children to gain some basic learning at nursery, for example, about shapes or colours, learning skills such as toileting or tying shoelaces; they tended to feel the key emphasis for three year olds should be on learning to socialise with other children and development of social skills.

While a number of respondents had used childminders in the past, many had a preference to send their child to a nursery at the age of three due to a perception that nurseries provide a wider range of activities and greater opportunities for socialisation with other children. While not all parents felt that early learning is appropriate for a three year old, there was a prevailing view that children learn more at nursery and this becomes important as a child gets older. So, those parents who had made use of a childminder then moved their child to a nursery at the age of three. As one respondent commented,

“I had 2 childminders in the space of a year and a half and where I work the nursery is right beside me and the little one was with a childminder but I felt the older one needed a bit more socialising so I decided to take her out and put her into nursery because the nursery had loads of stuff for her to do. The childminder would take her for walks but they wouldn't do as much with her as the nursery would. I

think my 4 year old was fine when she was there for about a year and a half with the childminder but I felt the older she was getting, she would do a lot more at the nursery – different activities and lots more children to socialise with, which I felt she needed.”

Sessions offered

A key issue for many parents in using local authority services was that the sessions offered often do not fit with other commitments. At present, local authorities offer either three hours or three hours and ten minute sessions, either in the morning or afternoon. However, some parents noted they were not offered a choice of session. In general, and particularly for three year olds, morning sessions were preferred by parents as their child is more alert and receptive to childcare at this time of the day. Some parents commented that by the afternoon their child can be extremely tired and unlikely to benefit much from a nursery session.

Because of a lack of choice in sessions, some of the non-user parents in Glasgow had opted not to take up the funded early learning and childcare because they could not get their child into their preferred session. This lack of choice also impacted on some users in that they had to make use of an alternative source of childcare. One respondent who was disappointed with the session offered to her commented,

“We actually tried to get her into the local nursery at the school – we preferred mornings for her as she’s hopeless in the afternoons and gets really tired, but they couldn’t offer us a place in the mornings so we went back to the private nursery who had some spaces. We really wanted to get her into pre-school so she could be spending time with kids she would go up to school with but they could only offer us afternoons.”

In line with concerns over the sessions offered to them, many parents noted logistical difficulties if they have another child at primary school. Generally speaking, the hours offered by early learning and childcare services are often different to the school day and as such, often do not fit with core primary school hours. Some non-users noted that this was such an issue for them that they had not taken up the available funded childcare hours; others noted the difficulties in organising themselves and their children for different starting or finishing times in the day. This was particularly an issue for parents who did not drive and / or who were reliant on public transport, or for those parents working full time.

Activities offered

Many parents felt that nurseries offer a wide range of activities for children to participate in. These include learning to socialise and interact with other children, learning discipline and also some basic learning and activities, which some children might not be able to access at home. As one respondent noted,

“Nurseries help to discipline children. ‘I just need to start counting and she’ll go and sit on the step, whereas my 15 year old never

behaved that well when she was young. So if you stick to what they do at nursery, it helps with discipline with the children.”

Respondents also felt that children had access to a wider range of toys or books, especially those from homes with low incomes where parents may not be able to afford many of these items.

Parental working patterns

Many of the respondents attending these focus groups had changed their working patterns to accommodate the restrictions placed upon them by the early learning and childcare services they were using. This was particularly the case with those using local authority nurseries as these generally only offer one three hour or three hour and ten minute session per day, and no coverage during school holidays. Changes to working patterns made by parents included working a reduced number of hours, shift working or working at weekends, so as to ensure that one parent is always available to provide childcare when the child is not at nursery.

“My wife simply cut her hours. She cut her hours by quite a few hours, from 36 to 20, and I work shift work, so we kind of work around that. It suits us at the moment although she would like to be working more full time.”

One parent who did not work during the summer and whose daughter attended a local private nursery, had taken her child out of nursery for the summer because of the financial savings – estimated to be in the region of £600 – that could be made over a six week period. As this respondent noted,

“I’ve had to take one out for the holidays as I couldn’t afford to have two in private nursery. For one, mine’s is £60 for 11 hours. You still have to pay if the kids are off ill, if you are off on holiday or if I’m off my work, I still have to pay. So I’ve taken my older one out for the holidays.”

Another parent had changed his core working hours to be primarily at the weekend, so that he could be available on weekdays when his partner was working – he and his partner had taken this decision on the grounds that the local private nursery was the only service offering enough flexibility to be able to fit with their existing working patterns, but it was not cost effective for them to pay for private nursery throughout the week. Even though he has changed his working hours to help out with childcare, there was still a reliance on grandparents to help out.

“Grandfather offered to take the kids so I didn’t have to take more time off work during the school holidays. I have set contract hours but I am offered extra hours as well and I don’t have to do those so long as I do my set contract hours, so I just do set contract hours through the holidays and then extra through term time. My contract hours are primarily at weekends and I do the extra through the week. But when my dad goes back to work, I can’t do through the week until the kids go back to school.”

Respondents noted that this inflexibility is exacerbated for single parents if they do not have a partner with whom they can readily share childcare.

Because childminders and private nurseries generally offer longer and more flexible hours than do local authority nurseries, there was less of a need to change working patterns to fit with these services. However, some respondents commented that they still have logistical issues to overcome as not all private nurseries or childminders start early enough or finish late enough to accommodate the childcare needs of someone who is working full time, particularly if they also have other children attending school at different core times. A respondent in Jedburgh commented,

“I am dreading August because I will have to juggle nursery, childminder and out of school club. I work 4 & ½ days a week and I can be flexible because I am a self-employed hairdresser but I have to score out part of my day in my appointments book so I can do pick-ups. My saviour has been out of school club because they do the drop offs and pick ups, whereas private nursery doesn't do that any more. It takes me half an hour to get her dropped off and then pick her up, so I have to allow an extra hour to allow for drop off and collection.”

Overall, many parents noted that the limitations of the early learning and childcare they are using means that there is still a fair degree of reliance upon grandparents, other family members or friends to help out with childcare, particularly at the beginning and end of the working day.

“We couldn't do it without granny and grandad helping. They do school drop off and school pick up and we've only recently got an after school club, so if it wasn't for them, I just wouldn't be able to work the hours I do. It's annoying when you want to work full time but you can't because of the cost or just the inflexibility of it.”

Some respondents noted they used friends to provide childcare and, in return, would offer equivalent hours of childcare for their friends. In Inch, respondents were concerned over any attempts to regulate non registered childcare providers such as friends or family.

Staffing at early learning and childcare services

Some respondents felt there are very different management approaches in nursery services. For example one respondent in Glasgow had opted to send his daughter to a Montessori nursery as he wanted to ensure his child attended a nursery run by a manager with a teaching qualification.

“At Montessori the teachers have degrees in childcare and they have studied the Montessori way of teaching and give a really good quality of childcare. Whereas in nurseries, staff will have studied and they will have some qualifications but they won't be the same. They

should all have the same level of staff qualifications. Some just use wee lassies out of school who aren't used to looking after kids at all.”

Other respondents commented that a lack of suitably trained staff means that early learning and childcare reverts to only being childcare, not necessarily of a high standard, and with little or no learning attached to it.

Parents in Jedburgh noted that their local authority had taken the decision to remove trained teachers from nurseries, and parents had concerns not only over this loss of expertise at management level but also concerns over the qualifications of other nursery staff who would be taking over responsibility for the nursery. Respondents in general had a preference for staff working in any early learning and childcare service to be fully trained and qualified.

Some respondents also raised the issue of other nursery staff, with some commenting that staff turnover in nurseries tends to be relatively high. Not surprisingly, many parents noted a preference for continuity of properly skilled staff. Some felt that continuity of staffing tends to be better in private nurseries, although some other respondents felt that private nurseries do not seem able to match the pay and conditions offered by local authorities.

Word of mouth / recommendation

For some parents, primarily those using private nurseries, word of mouth recommendations are an important consideration. Similarly, parents who had older children who had attended a particular nursery and been happy there, had a desire for any subsequent children to also attend same nursery. Across all the groups, only one or two respondents made any reference to sourcing Care Inspectorate reports; for many who felt there was little choice in available childcare services in their locality, Care Inspectorate reports were felt to be largely irrelevant.

Reasons for non-use

Many of the reasons given by non-users of early learning and childcare services mirrored the issues already outlined in earlier paragraphs.

For many of the non-users, particularly those in Glasgow and Inch, there was a perception that a child does not benefit from attending nursery until they are aged 4 or thereabouts and are in the last year before they attend primary school. This was not to say that parents do not recognise the importance of their child learning to socialise with others, to gain confidence and learn things like sharing, but these parents felt that their child would learn these skills while at home with friends and family.

“Our neighbour's got kids and they all play with friends to get socialisation and to develop socially.”

“My wee girl goes dancing on a Saturday morning and she likes that, so she's involved with other children and interacting and that.”

“My kid plays with lots of other kids and we often meet up so they can all play together, so they get their interaction that way, both with kids their own age and with others as well.”

“Mine have their own wee friends and their dance class and things like that, so they get all the confidence they would need from that.”

“At home we do lots of things like numbers and shapes and colours, whether it’s through a fun programme, or a game we play or the chalkboard and that is part of my time with him, so we can play some games, and to me that is all part of learning, so to me that’s enough. I don’t think he’s going to be any further behind because he’s missing out on anything there [at nursery]. When my wee girl started nursery, I felt it was shy kids who came out of their shell and with her I felt by the second year she was bored and played up a lot. It’s wasn’t major behavioural stuff but she played up and it was boredom, so I didn’t want that with him. I feel he’ll go next year and he’ll be really keen to go and he’ll be learning all the things he needs to know before he starts school but right now I feel he knows enough and he’s bright enough and he gets enough with me. We do learning and things at home with him and he’s got his friends to play with, through games and activities and stuff, so to me that’s enough.”

For most of these parents, it was generally felt that children do not benefit from childcare until they reach the point in time where early learning kicks in the year before school starts, when a child reaches the age of four. So, some parents who were non-users, intended to take up at least some funded early learning and childcare in the next 12 months. This viewpoint was justified by some who had older children who had attended nursery at the age of three but who did not feel their child benefited greatly from the experience. Many of these parents also felt that nursery can be very tiring for children, particularly for those aged under four. One respondent commented,

“Financially we were stable so I didn’t have to be at work. I wanted to be a stay at home mum until my kids went to school. My eldest went to pre-school nursery when she was three and she went there for two years, but for me, it was just too long for her. So I’ve chosen not to send my little boy now he’s three. I might send him next year to the pre-school nursery to help prepare him for school.”

Additionally for some non-users, there was simply a desire to stay at home with their children, rather than return to work. Most felt that if they were not working, their primary role was to care for their child(ren) and not rely on the services of others.

As already noted, the cost of childcare can be prohibitive for some parents, and some of the non-users commented that it was cheaper not to work than to have to pay for childcare, particularly if they had more than one child. For example, one respondent in Dundee had given up work when having their second child as they

did not earn enough to cover childcare costs for both children. Indeed, many respondents with childcare costs referred to 'working for free'. Similarly, a respondent in Inch noted that for some parents having to access private nursery, the cost was too high.

"I couldn't work as much when my daughter was younger because I couldn't afford to put her in nursery. I had her in for two mornings a week and even then I would struggle with the prices. I still have to pay for her out of school club and I'm running at a loss if you know what I mean. What I earn doesn't cover my childcare costs through the summer but it's a short term thing for what I get in the long run and they get to socialise with other kids and that's good for them."

Again, (lack of) flexibility of offering often played a key role in the decision not to take up the 16 hours of funded childcare. For example, a lack of wraparound care, a lack of a drop off or collection service or a lack of services during school holidays. Some parents also cited some logistical issues in terms of co-ordination of work, nursery and school.

Some of the non-users noted they were not offered their preferred nursery session and for those whose preference was for a morning session, some opted not to send their child to an afternoon session because their child would be too tired by the afternoon. A small number of respondents noted they would take up at least some, if not all, of the 16 hours of funded childcare if they were offered their preferred session. Similarly, one or two respondents had been unable to get their child into their preferred nursery and were waiting until they could get their child into pre-school nursery so their child could have a single set of friends from nursery through to primary school.

For many non-users, it was a combination of factors, rather than a single overriding factor, that had led to their rejection of the 16 hours of funded childcare services. That said, in Glasgow most respondents had a relatively high household income which allowed for one parent to be able to afford not to work and to provide childcare instead.

Informal networks

Regardless of whether respondents were using their entitlement to 16 hours of funded childcare, there appears to be some informal childcare provision arrangements between parents, particularly during school holidays. For example, in most groups there was reference to helping friends out with childcare; this in turn would be reciprocated.

Summary: Current usage of early learning and childcare

- Regardless of location, there is considered to be relatively limited choice in early learning and childcare services, as a priority for most parents is for their children to attend a nursery that sits within the catchment area of their local primary school. However, parents using a private nursery might not have the option to use a nursery within the catchment area of their relevant primary school.
- There is also a perception that the number of early learning and childcare services, in particular childminders and playgroups, is declining and therefore further reducing parental choice.
- Cost is a key factor in usage of early learning and childcare, with some users only accessing the funded childcare hours. Some parents have opted to reduce working hours in order to alleviate the need to pay for expensive childcare.
- A number of parents had changed their working patterns in order to accommodate early learning and childcare provision. Indeed, local authority early learning and childcare provision is not seen to be flexible enough for many parents, in particular those who work – or who wish to work – full time. Most local authority provision does not offer cover during school holidays, does not offer full days at nursery or wrap around care. Because of this, some full time working parents have been unable to take up funded early learning and childcare. Another issue respondents identified as inflexibility on the part of local authority provision was the timing and length of sessions offered. Some non-users had opted not to take up the funded childcare hours because there was not enough flexibility in the timing of sessions.
- There was a preference from some users to move their child from a childminder to nursery from the age of three as it was considered important that children learnt more from the wider range of activities and stimulation at nursery. That said, regardless of the type of early learning and childcare being accessed, many parents felt that a child aged three was too young to participate in early learning, and that early learning was more relevant to a four year old in the year prior to starting at primary school.
- There were some concerns over the quality of management and staff in early learning and childcare services. Most parents preferred managers of services to hold a teaching qualification and other nursery staff relevant qualifications in childcare and / or teaching and / or early education.
- Many non-users, while recognising there are benefits to using early learning and childcare provision, felt that they were able to offer the same benefits to their child at home, although some non-users were intending sending their child to nursery at the age of four to benefit from the early learning offered and to meet other children with whom they would subsequently attend primary school.

Initial reaction to The Scottish Government commitment to increased provision

Views on current provision

The previous chapter of this report highlighted a number of issues, concerns and barriers in relation to the uptake of childcare, and there was a perception from some respondents that the current offering of 16 hours per week of early learning and childcare during term time is not sufficient to encourage parents back into work. There were comments that this is not sufficient to allow a primary carer to drop their child(ren) at nursery, get to work, do their job and then return to collect their child(ren). Furthermore, this issue was exacerbated in instances where there are other child(ren) who have to be dropped off at a different location. This issue can be especially difficult in rural areas where parents may need to travel some distance to the nearest town for work.

For the small number of respondents who were out of work or single parents who qualified for 16 hours of funded childcare when their child was two, this offering had little effect in encouraging them into the workplace.

Prior to talking about the additional commitment from the Scottish Government, no respondents had plans to make changes to their use of early learning and childcare in the near future.

Views on future provision

When respondents were asked their understanding of any changes to funded childcare in the coming years, there was very little awareness of the Scottish Government commitment to 30 hours of funded early learning and childcare per week / 1,140 hours per year. Only around one respondent in each group was aware of this intention and, where there was any awareness, it tended to be superficial, with little knowledge of what the commitment is in terms of increased number of hours or when this is likely to be introduced.

On prompting, initial reactions to the Scottish Government commitment to increase the number of funded hours of childcare to 30 per week / 1,140 hours per year, were very positive. That said, some respondents noted immediately they would be unlikely to take up any of the additional hours, although they thought that other parents would benefit from it. Those they thought would benefit the greatest included those currently working full or part time or those not currently working but wanting to return to work. Non-users who have not taken up the current 16 hours of childcare were unlikely to change this position when the 30 hours per week / 1,140 hours per year is introduced.

Although initial reactions to the increased commitment were largely positive, some respondents raised questions as to how this would be implemented. For example,

some full time working parents queried which childcare providers would be offering this additional childcare; some parents on tax benefits queried how this would impact on their current benefit entitlement. As the following quotes demonstrate, initial reactions were positive although less so once greater consideration was given to this.

“30 hours per week? That would be amazing. I could go and get a full time job straightaway.”

“I think it would be good but then again, what do you do through the school holidays? That is the one problem I would have. And because I work at weekends, there isn't really any childcare available at weekends. I'd have to continue relying on granny and papa. I could try and get the hours put onto my week so I could work less at weekends and spend more time with the kids which would make it better for me.”

Summary: Initial reaction to The Scottish Government commitment to increased provision

- Some parents felt the current offering of 16 hours per week of early learning and childcare during term time is not sufficient to encourage parents back into work.
- The current funded childcare does not appear to encourage non-working parents into the workplace.
- There was little awareness of the Scottish Government (SG) commitment to increasing the number of funded early learning and childcare hours. Where there was any awareness, this was only at a superficial level.
- Initial reactions to the SG commitment were very positive, although few respondents felt it would benefit them directly. Those individuals it was felt would benefit most were those currently working full or part time or those wanting to return to work.
- There were requests for more detailed information as to when this would be introduced and how it would impact on parents currently receiving any benefits.

Parental intentions for use of increased hours of free childcare

Most respondents were initially very positive about the Scottish Government commitment to the provision of almost double the current number of available early learning and childcare hours to 30 hours per week / 1,140 hours per year by the end of the next Parliament. However, their likelihood of accessing any or all of this additional provision when it becomes available was varied, and was often linked to their current usage. We have already noted that most parents had no plans to change their current usage patterns and the increase in hours was not seen to encourage additional take-up of childcare for many parents.

Those who are currently in full or part time work welcomed the additional hours as in theory, this should reduce the cost of any additional early learning and childcare services that are being accessed. For example, some of those who were currently using 16 hours of funded care and working part time considered they might take up the additional childcare hours to help make their working hours easier, to enable them to extend their current working hours or to change their working hours.

Similarly, those who were currently using the 16 hours of funded care considered they might take up additional hours to enable them to work longer. However, these respondents also commented that many of the logistical issues already highlighted would still exist, albeit to a lesser extent. Parents currently using private nurseries that are not registered with local authorities and therefore do not offer funded childcare, were unlikely to change usage of their existing nursery, and thus would not be taking up the full funded early learning and childcare hours.

Regardless of whether they were working or not, respondents in Dundee who were currently using any of the 16 hours of funded care were likely to take up additional funded hours and their attitude tended to be 'if it's free, why wouldn't you take it'?

Non-users

We have already noted that respondents who were non-users of early learning and childcare services in Glasgow were unlikely to take up any early learning and childcare until their child reaches the age of four, at which time they felt their child would benefit from the early learning element of childcare provision. This also allows them to meet other children with whom they would be starting primary school and to get used to a school environment. However, they were unlikely to take up any additional hours over and above the current 16, when their child reaches the age of four, as most of these households had one non-working parent. For these respondents, it was difficult to justify take-up of additional hours of childcare and they were largely unenthusiastic about the Scottish Government commitment for themselves personally, although they felt it could benefit other parents who are working or who wish to return to work.

“I’ve chosen to be at home with my wee one and I’m not going to change my mind on that although this would help parents who want to work or who need to work.”

A need for means testing?

There were concerns noted by some respondents in Glasgow and Jedburgh that anyone taking up the additional early learning and childcare hours should be means tested or show some commitment to returning to work. These respondents considered that the additional hours should not be offered to non-working parents or that the Scottish Government should develop strict criteria for entitlement to this additional benefit. A respondent in Glasgow commented,

“I think it should coincide with a reduction in benefits so that it pays to go and work. For an element of society it doesn’t pay to go to work, they just sit at home and that just creates another generation of children growing up seeing their mother and father not working and they think that’s what life is and the cycle continues, so I think definitely it should not be abused. Maybe there should be a means test on it so it is going to be used for the correct intentions.”

This chapter shows that take-up of any additional funded hours of early learning and childcare is likely to be relatively restricted, and respondents cited a number of barriers to take-up. These are covered in the following chapter.

Summary: Parental intentions for use of increased hours of childcare

- Overall, those most likely to take up any increased hours of childcare were those who are already making use of some of the 16 hours of existing childcare.
- Non-users were unlikely to change their usage patterns.
- Although a number of respondents were unlikely to change their patterns of childcare usage, there was a perception that this would benefit those who are currently working or those who wish to return to work.
- There were some suggestions that the Scottish Government needs to outline strict criteria for entitlement rather than simply offer this to all parents of three and four year olds. For example, a commitment to return to work or study.

Barriers to uptake

The previous chapter noted that most respondents were initially very positive about the Scottish Government commitment to the provision of almost double the current number of available early learning and childcare hours to 30 hours per week / 1,140 hours per year by the end of the next Parliament. However, on further consideration most felt that while this is an improvement on the current offering, it still will not meet the needs of many parents, particularly those who are working full time or who would like to return to full time working.

These respondents identified a number of barriers which they felt would need to be considered. These are outlined below.

Logistical issues

Almost all respondents commented that such a scheme would require a significant amount of additional funding, more staff and additional nursery space. All queried where these would come from. Many acknowledged the current financial situation for local authorities where budgets are declining and there is increased pressure on existing budgets. While for many, early learning is perceived to be a priority, there were also concerns that if money has to be found by local authorities to fund this additional early learning and childcare, that this would mean a shortfall elsewhere in council services.

Similarly, there were concerns over a lack of available building space in existing local authority pre-school and nursery facilities. Respondents noted that effectively building space for nurseries would almost have to double on current offerings to be able to offer this increased number of hours. Many queried what additional buildings would be used, or whether local authorities would commit to increasing building sizes or building some new nurseries.

One respondent also noted that because nursery sessions are currently either morning or afternoon, there is no need for a child to be provided with food by the nursery. However, they felt that if there were increased hours of early learning and childcare, there could be an issue over food provision; they cited the potential for health and safety issues, for example, will nurseries be able to provide food for children or would the nursery buildings have facilities to be able to carry out any food preparation?

There were also comments that nurseries would have to increase staffing levels significantly to be able to cope with the increased hours. In line with this, there were also concerns about the qualifications of staff, with many parents noting their reluctance to leave a three or four year old child with a 16 year old who has only just finished school and has no experience of dealing with young children.

As well as concerns over staffing in general, there were some comments about the need for a qualified teacher to manage a nursery, particularly when there is an element of early learning to be provided. Respondents in Jedburgh noted the pre-

school nursery has until this year been managed by a qualified teacher, however their local authority has now removed this post so no local authority nurseries will be managed by qualified teachers. Respondents had real concerns over how this would impact on the early learning element of childcare, as those left to manage or work in nurseries will not have a teaching qualification. It was also felt that the label 'early learning' would be a misnomer if nurseries are not managed by teachers; some respondents expressed a perception that pre-school is not the same as nursery because it is more learning-based and not simply about offering childcare.

Overall, there were many concerns that the quality of early learning and childcare would suffer because of a lack of funding, space and properly qualified staff. As noted by two respondents,

"I think it would be really good but I'd like to see how it would be accommodated because it would obviously have to be split. Our nursery has 60 children but it's split between morning and afternoon. If kids were staying all day you'd need a building twice the size or would kids be expected to travel from here to here to there to get the 30 hours. It couldn't just be term time. It would need to be all year round."

"They can't even afford to replace broken windows in the schools, so how are they going to be able to afford to get new classrooms to extend nursery places? If they don't have places for all children at the moment, how will they suddenly find even more? There's not enough spaces to accommodate 16 hours a week right now, so how will they be able to accommodate 30 hours a week? I just don't think it's doable right now."

Lacking in flexibility

Another key issue for many respondents was that early learning and childcare does not provide year round service, with provision restricted to term time, so that there would still be issues over accessing early learning and childcare during school holiday periods.

Because of this lack of flexibility, it was felt that many parents who are currently using a private nursery would continue to choose to pay to use privately run nurseries because they offer more flexibility in childcare hours. As such, it was felt that some parents would continue forgo their funded hours of early learning and childcare. Because a desire for continuity in nursery provision and nursery staff is a priority for most parents, there was a reluctance to access funded childcare via one nursery and then use a second nursery to obtain any necessary hours over and above the 30 funded hours per week / 1,140 hours per year. Two respondents in Glasgow commented,

"I have friends who haven't taken up their funded childcare because they don't have family who can pick up the kids and get them while their parents are at work, so they have to pay for their kids to go into full time private nursery and they lose out on the funded childcare. So,

to me they are in full time private childcare because their parents are working and they can't get away from work, and I think they will still have a problem. So, they could say 'here is 30 hours of childcare' but it doesn't work like that and they might still not be able to take it up."

"If someone is working a 40 hour week, it will help but they will still have at least one day when they can't have their child at free nursery; if the nursery doesn't do free care, then the parents will still have to pay for it."

A single parent in Inch noted that because childcare cover is not available for night shifts, shift work is also not available to parents. There were some concerns from respondents in Inch that public sector workers, especially emergency service workers and those in the NHS need particular care and attention to ensure they have adequate childcare provision to cover any shifts they may have to work.

Hours coverage

Linked to the previous point, while respondents appreciated the increase from 16 to 30 hours per week / 1,140 hours per year of early learning and childcare, this number of hours does still not equate to the number of hours needed for full time working hours. So, for example, some full time working parents noted they need coverage from 8am until 6pm, so 30 funded hours per week / 1,140 per year is not enough time to provide cover for a full time working parent without having to purchase or find additional childcare hours. As noted, this barrier can be further exacerbated in instances where a child is at private nursery that does not offer any funded childcare places, so parents may be faced with the choice of having to find a second nursery one day a week or to forgo their funded nursery hours.

There were also comments from many parents who are currently working or who would like to return to work that there could still be difficulties for parents who have to get more than one child to nursery and school and then get themselves to work on time. Some respondents felt that a parent working full time would ideally need to have 50 hours of early learning and childcare a week, all year round, in order to overcome the problems of travel time for all concerned.

Respondents in Inch also noted that there is little public transport in their area at the time needed to get children to nursery or school and the local authority bus is not available for nursery children at all, or primary school children if they live within three miles of the school. One mother commented that if she worked, 'I would be late almost every day'. Another said 'I walk a mile to get a bus, wait for 2 ½ hours, pick up my child then get the bus back, so the current 16 hours of funded childcare is not much use to some parents.' Another respondent commented on the different starting hours:

"My son's nursery opens at 8.30am in the morning but my son's school doesn't start until ten to nine so I've got a big gap there, so it would have been easier to have them both starting at the same time. If they could also finish at the same time, it would be great."

There were also comments from respondents in Inch and Jedburgh that opportunities to work close to home in rural areas can be very limited. So, it is likely that someone living in a more rural area such as Inch might have to travel longer distances, perhaps to Aberdeen for work, and this means that longer hours of childcare are needed.

Respondents in Jedburgh commented that an out of school club that has previously only been available to primary school children had recently extended its remit to include three and four year olds. Parents identified a number of benefits of this facility. First, it offers a drop-off and collection service to help out parents who cannot pick up their children when nursery or school finishes, or to drop the children off in the morning in time to get to their work. Second, its opening hours are from 7.30am until 6pm, thus allowing full time working parents the opportunity to drop their child off in the morning and still get to work on time. Thirdly, they offer breakfast and snacks to children for a small additional charge. Respondents commented that the wrap around care offered by this new facility was ideal for working parents and most closely represents the 'ideal' service that some parents would like to have.

Status of private nurseries

Some respondents commented that many private nurseries are not registered with their local authority and therefore do not offer funded early learning and childcare. In instances where parents have a preference – or a need – to use a specific private nursery, this means they will forgo their funded hours. As already noted, even in instances where a private nursery does offer funded childcare hours, parents may still find there are no places at their preferred nursery.

A small number of respondents held a perception of different practices of private nurseries in offering the current funded hours because of the perceived cost of an hour's care being more than the local authority funding for an hour. For example, one respondent in Jedburgh thought that there was at least £1 hourly differential between private and local authority run nurseries and calculated this could mean that the private nursery would only offer 10 hours of funded care, rather than the current 16. She queried whether this was common across Scotland.

Concern for children

Some parents, particularly non-users of early learning and childcare, although they were supportive of the additional hours for those parents who needed it, commented that 30 hours per week / 1,140 hours per year is too long for a child to be in childcare, particularly at the age of three. They cited examples of children needing to be able to nap through the day or needing quiet time to themselves. In the words of some respondents,

“I think it's fantastic but for a 3 year old to be away for 30 hours a week from their mum is quite a long time. If it was optional, that would be fine but too much time away from mum and dad at that age.”

“I think it depends on the child and the parents. I think that 2 & ½ days a week is enough, particularly for the young ones. My older one might be able to cope with that many hours a week but my younger one couldn’t and I like to spend some time with them myself. Once they go to school, I’ve lost that special me time with the kids, but this is just personal and it’s just my view. I think I’d rather spend time with them.”

“3 years olds need a sleep through the day – would nurseries offer that? I’d want somewhere a bit like home where they could sit and read or just have a nap or just have a cuddle but pre-school nurseries don’t offer that at the moment. You don’t want them stimulated for 8 hours a day when they are only 3 years old, it’s too much for them. Private nursery offers outdoor area, kids are encouraged to do different activities but they aren’t forced to do it, they can have a sleep if they want one.”

Most of those who were non-users were unlikely to take up any of the additional hours. Those working were likely to take up some of these additional hours to enable them to better manage the logistics of childcare and work.

Summary: Barriers to uptake

- While initial reactions to the provision of additional hours of funded early learning and childcare were positive, on further consideration many respondents identified a number of barriers to uptake of this.
- Almost all respondents had concerns over logistical issues, namely, how this would be funded, what buildings would be used to increase available space and staffing levels. There were concerns that this could mean a decline in the quality of early learning and childcare.
- Another key issue for many respondents was that, even with almost double the number of hours of funded early learning and childcare, this would still be inflexible i.e. that particularly within local authority provision, it would still only offer cover during term time, it would not offer cover early or late enough to help out working parents.
- It was felt that many private nurseries – which offer a more flexible service – would not be authorised by local authorities to provide funded hours.
- There is a perception that 30 hours a week / 1,140 hours per year is too long for a three year old to attend early learning and childcare.
- These additional hours were not likely to encourage non-users to take up use of early learning and childcare provision, and while it would benefit working parents as it would enable cost savings, it might be of limited value to working parents because of a lack of flexibility.

Overcoming barriers to uptake

The previous chapter cited a number of barriers to uptake of the additional hours of early learning and childcare; and this chapter examines how these can be overcome.

In essence, parents want high quality continuous care for their 3 and 4 year olds; and the childcare model coming closest to parental wishes is the sort offered by private nurseries. This is because most private nurseries offer:

- All year round early learning and childcare, with coverage through school holidays
- Cover on a daily basis between 8am and 6pm
- The opportunity for children to learn social skills and interact with other children, and provide a range of different activities
- A focus on more educational learning such as outdoor play
- A relatively high staff to child ratio
- Relatively well skilled staff
- Safe and flexible learning to suit different needs

So, the key ways in which barriers to take up of additional early learning and childcare can be overcome, mostly relate to offering greater flexibility in hours and coverage across the full year.

Many parents were cynical about the ability for the Scottish Government or local authorities to build capacity to cope with an increase in hours from 16 to 30 each week. So, there were requests for more nurseries or for bigger nurseries to enable them to cope with what will effectively be almost doubling their capacity. Respondents in Inch suggested that there needs to be prior planning to allow for the training of staff and an examination of available buildings, with funding to allow local authorities to expand their provision of early learning and childcare; when this is in place they felt it would be suitable to offer the increased hours to parents. It was felt by most parents that this is something that needs to be prepared for in a careful and well planned manner.

Given the concerns of some parents over the quality of managers and staff within nurseries, there were some requests for local authorities to ensure that individuals with responsibility for managing a nursery should have a teaching degree or some other form of formally recognised teaching qualification. Parents also wanted to see nursery nurses with qualifications in Childcare or Childcare and Education; particularly as the focus on early learning becomes more important for four year olds.

In instances where private nurseries are not registered with local authorities as providers of funded early learning and childcare, this can limit parental choice.

Parents were reluctant to send their child to one nursery in order to obtain the funded hours, and then to another nursery to provide any other necessary additional childcare cover. So, there were requests for all nurseries to have to be registered with local authorities and to be offering funded early learning and childcare places.

Alongside this, there were also requests to remove the requirement for private nurseries to be registered for a year with a local authority before they can provide funded early learning and childcare for local authorities. There were also some requests for parents to be given the choice as to how they want to spend the funded childcare hours, for example, so as to allow for a combination of nursery, out of school club, childminder and so on.

We have already noted a perception from respondents of a decline in the numbers of childminders and playgroups. Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents noted that they would also like to see more encouragement for childminders and voluntary childcare such as playgroups so as to increase the number of early learning and childcare services.

One or two respondents suggested that parents should be given childcare vouchers that can then be redeemed with any early learning and childcare providers. There were some requests for a scheme to allow parents to save up vouchers that could then be redeemed during the holidays when childcare can be more difficult to arrange.

While all respondents were aware of their child's entitlement to funded early learning and childcare once they reached the age of three, some noted that they had found out about this informally through word of mouth. Some respondents suggested the Scottish Government should provide information packs on what is available, when it will become available and how to access this. As two respondents commented,

“You have to apply in East Ren when your child is two to get them in but at no point in time does the council write to you and say ‘your child is entitled to this and you need to apply now they are two to get them in next year when they are three. It’s all word of mouth now’. You have to apply for it as soon as they turn two on their birthday. I think the Scottish Government should be responsible for letting you know about it. There’s no information pack that fall through your letter box, you get information packs for other stuff but not for childcare. I think because it is something that is free, they don’t want you to know about it and claim for it.”

“I think they need to explain the benefits. There’s some people who both work full time but there are some people who might only be working 2 or 3 days a week and they don’t want to go back to work, so I think they [the Scottish Government] need to advertise what the benefits are. Things like helps with child development, greater confidence and so on.”

There were also one or two comments that the Scottish Government should do more to encourage employers to be more supportive, either in providing childcare facilities at work or in offering parents more flexibility in their working hours.

There were also some suggestions that the Scottish Government should run an information campaign to encourage parents to take up some or all of the available funded hours. It was felt that central to this campaign should be a focus on the learning benefits and improved outcomes of attending pre-school nursery at the age of three. This may go some way to encouraging some non-users to at least consider the potential of early learning and childcare for their child from the age of three, rather than waiting until their child is aged four.

Summary: Overcoming barriers to uptake

- Overall, parents want early learning and childcare to offer high quality continuous care for their children and the model that is closest to this is that offered by private nurseries. Key ways to overcome barriers to take up of funded early learning and childcare focus on increased flexibility of offering and coverage all year round.
- There was a great deal of cynicism from respondents as to how additional hours of funded early learning and childcare could, in reality, be introduced, given this would mean a need for increased funding, space and staff.
- Respondents would like to see nurseries managed by qualified teaching professionals, with nursery staff who hold qualifications in childcare and / or early learning.
- There were some suggestions that childcare vouchers that would be redeemed at every nursery across Scotland would encourage higher take up.
- Respondents would like to see removal of the requirement for a private nursery to be registered with a local authority for a year prior to being accepted as a provider of funded early learning and childcare. Respondents would also like to see more encouragement for childminders and voluntary childcare such as playgroups.
- There were some suggestions of a need for some form of government-led information campaign to ensure parents are aware of their entitlement and how to make use of this.

Conclusions

While spontaneous reactions to the concept of 30 hours of funded early learning and childcare a week / 1,140 hours per year are positive, when respondents give more consideration to this, they raise a number of issues. For most, the barriers that currently exist – predominantly relating to the inflexible nature of local authority offering – will continue to exist, albeit at a lesser level. So, for example, there is still a perception that some full time working parents will not be able to access this and that some parents who would like to work full time will not be able to do so because early learning and childcare will not cover full time working hours or holiday periods.

Non-users who currently do not make use of available funded hours are unlikely to take up any of the extended offering for their three year olds and may still only take up a relatively limited number of hours of early learning and childcare for their 4 year olds.

Who will this appeal to demographically?

By and large, respondents in rural and more remote communities assumed that those in cities had much more available choice in early learning and childcare services. However, the reality is that most of those in urban areas and cities have a preference to send their child to nursery with other children who they will then attend primary school with, so this places limitations on their choice. So, a priority for all parents is attendance at early learning and childcare within the catchment area of the local primary school.

There is a perception that those who are most likely to benefit from these increased funded hours are single parents, those who wish to return to work and those on low incomes and / or living in more deprived areas. There was no view expressed that this would impact any differently on other types of families such as those within equality groups.

Appendix 1 – Topic guide

Early Learning and Childcare Final Topic Guide

Thank respondents for coming along. Reassure them that all views will be confidential and anonymous. Findings will be reported in aggregate form only.

Remember to ask respondents to switch off mobile phones.

The following topic areas should be used as a framework for discussion. All should be discussed at some point during the session.

Background information

- Details of size and composition of household (recap from recruitment questionnaire); number of children in household and ages
- Spontaneous and prompted: Awareness of SG commitment to provision of early learning and childcare, both at present and in the future
- Ease of accessing early learning and childcare in their area (from own perspective and the perspective of others eg friends / family)
- Understanding / knowledge of what early learning and childcare is available, probing on local authority nursery / private nursery / childminder / playgroup etc
- What, if anything, is missing from available early learning and childcare in their area (types of provider / length of early learning and childcare sessions / days of early learning and childcare sessions eg term time only / all year round etc)

Early learning and childcare utilised

- Details of any early learning and childcare **currently** used (what type of provider(s), for how many hours), how many children do they currently use early learning and childcare for; length of using any early learning and childcare provision
- Have there been any changes in their use of early learning and childcare availability and what were the reasons for this
- Details of any early learning and childcare likely to be utilised in the **future** and reasons for any changes to what is currently accessed; what would parents like to see made available that is not currently available
- (non-users) reasons for choosing not to use early learning and childcare and whether this may change in the future

Decision making

- What factors were taken into account when making any decisions about what early learning and childcare to use
 - eg benefits to child(ren), probing on development of social skills, learning how to interact with other children, access to different types of activities and educational toys, developing confidence etc
 - disadvantages to children eg too tiring

- location of provider(s)
- cost
- fit with parental working patterns / any provision by employer / availability of family, friends, neighbours, flexibility of early learning and childcare provision etc)
- Reputation of provider / qualifications of staff etc
- What barriers – if any – were encountered when accessing early learning and childcare provision and how were these overcome

SG Early learning and childcare provision

- Awareness of changes to early learning and childcare provision in the future (ie 30 hours per week)
- Perceptions of the likely impact of this in general on parents; advantages and disadvantages
- Specific impact of this increase in early learning and childcare provision upon a) current childcare usage; b) others using childcare entitlement; how should this increased early learning and childcare provision be structured to encourage take-up (days / times of week etc)
- What factors, if any, would encourage take up of this additional early learning and childcare entitlement, and why (eg socioeconomic / geographic location / single parent v 2 parent families, availability of provision in area, flexibility in early learning and childcare offerings, availability of informal childcare networks etc)
- What factors / barriers, if any, would prevent take up of this additional early learning and childcare entitlement, and why (eg socioeconomic / geographic location / single parent v 2 parent families, availability of nursery provision in area) etc
- What benefits would there be to a) children and b) parents with an increased entitlement to early learning and childcare

The Future

- What further changes, if any, would parents like to see made to early learning and childcare entitlement to encourage further take up
- What key messages need to be sent to the Scottish Government and local authorities about early learning and childcare provision
- Any other comments