

## THE EXPANSION OF FUNDED EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE

### Introduction

1. It is widely acknowledged that the provision of universally accessible and high quality early learning and childcare (ELC) enriches children with skills and confidence to carry into their schooling, and is a cornerstone for closing the poverty-related attainment gap between our most and least advantaged children. The Scottish Government is therefore making an unprecedented investment in ELC that will strengthen outcomes for children by the time they reach school starting age, with sustained impact well into their later learning journey.

2. This paper provides board members with an overview of work to expand funded early learning and childcare in Scotland. It invites the board to consider the potential impact of the early learning and childcare (ELC) expansion on the broader 3-18 learner journey, in particular the remainder of the early level and into first level of Curriculum for Excellence.

### The expansion of funded hours of early learning and childcare

3. From August 2020, the entitlement to funded early learning and childcare will almost double from 600 to 1,140 hours per year for all 3 and 4-year olds and for eligible 2-year olds. This is the equivalent of 30 hours a week taken across term-time.

### Expected benefits of the expansion

#### *Strengthening the quality of the early learning and childcare offer*

4. While evidence shows that all children, and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can benefit from attending early learning and childcare, a key finding from research is that for benefits to be realised, early learning and childcare must be of high quality.

5. For example, longitudinal studies from England have found that high quality pre-school is related to better cognitive and social/behavioural development and that a longer duration of high quality pre-school had the strongest effect on development<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, studies have found that attending higher quality formal ELC settings was associated with increased non-verbal cognitive development<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the Scottish Government's 'Growing Up in Scotland' (GUS) study found that children who attended ELC providers with a high 'care and support' grade (as measured by the Care Inspectorate) were more likely to show improvement in vocabulary skills between the ages of three and five, irrespective of their social background and other characteristics. Later analysis from GUS birth cohort 2 (born in 2010/11) found that children who attended ELC providers with high staffing grades and 'very good' grades overall were less likely to exhibit peer problems at age five.

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<sup>1</sup><https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401193220/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/SSU/FR/2004/01>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.seed.natcen.ac.uk/findings/longitudinal-study/impact-study-on-early-education-use-and-child-outcomes-up-to-age-four-years.aspx>

6. As stated within the Scottish Government's Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland: Quality Action Plan "*high quality early learning and childcare helps to provide children with skills and confidence to carry into school education and is a cornerstone for closing the poverty-related attainment gap between children from the most and least deprived communities.*"<sup>3</sup>

7. The Scottish Government therefore has a strong focus as part of the ELC expansion programme on protecting and strengthening the quality of provision. All 15 actions in the ELC Quality Action Plan (many of which are focused on supporting the professional development of the expanding workforce) will be delivered. In addition, the Scottish Government has also introduced a new National Standard that all funded providers will be required to meet from August 2020 (a 'funded provider' refers to all ELC settings that are registered with the Care Inspectorate, and provide funded ELC, including local authority, private and voluntary settings). A key element of the National Standard is a requirement to achieve 'good' or better in all four Care Inspectorate evaluation themes. For those settings currently not achieving this (currently around 9% of existing funded providers) the Scottish Government is working in partnership with local authorities to put in place targeted quality improvement support.

8. Since the Care Inspectorate data suggests that (with the exception of childminding services and the eligible 2-year olds) there is no social gradient in access to high quality ELC, this investment in quality should improve outcomes by age 5 for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background.

*An enhanced offer for children living in disadvantaged circumstances*

9. We know that many children are already accessing 30 hours a week of ELC using a combination of funded and privately purchased hours. A number of local authorities are already funding their ELC settings for 1,140 hours, so many parents and children are already benefitting from the increased funding support. However, we also know that there is a notable difference between ELC use among children from the least and most deprived SIMD quintiles. The Scottish Government's 2017 parent survey found that while **74%** of parents in the least deprived quintile purchased extra hours of ELC for their child, this was true for only **46%** of parents in the most deprived quintiles.

10. We would therefore expect to see the expansion of funded ELC having the greatest impact, in terms of the number of hours experienced, on children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. This is likely to create more parity in the extent to which children receive formal support with their learning and development in the early years. This is significant as evidence has shown that more hours in ELC between the ages of 2 and 4 is linked to cognitive development, in particular improved non-verbal development (e.g. use of body language to communicate)<sup>4</sup>. There is also evidence that suggests that attending high-quality full day provision has greater benefits for those from the least advantaged backgrounds. This, together with likely increased parity in the number of hours accessed by children from disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds, should mean that the expansion of funded ELC results in a

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<sup>3</sup> Expansion of early learning and childcare in Scotland: Quality Action Plan, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Morris, S. P., Melhuish, E., & Gardiner, J. (2019). Study of early education and development (SEED): Impact study on early education use and child outcomes up to age four. Department for Education.

reduction in the poverty-related gap in cognitive development at the start of primary school. It is important to stress however, the importance of the home learning environment (HLE), with reference to children from the least advantaged backgrounds. We know from research that family characteristics are known to have an impact on children's outcomes, however, the effect of attending a high-quality ELC setting, that works in partnership with parents to enhance and improve the HLE, can be greater than the effect of social disadvantage.

11. In the publication (2015) 'An Independent Review of the Scottish Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Workforce and Out of School Care (OSC) Workforce', Professor Iram Siraj states:

*"The early Home Learning Environment (HLE) has been recognised as a powerful predictor of future educational and career success (Sylva et al., 2004; Siraj and Mayo, 2014). An ECEC setting could offer children from disadvantaged backgrounds added advantages, both while they are in the setting, and through partnership work with parents to enhance the early HLE. Finally, although family characteristics are known to have a greater impact on children's outcomes than pre-school factors; the effect of attending pre-school on developmental progress can be greater than the effect of social disadvantage.*

12. It is significant that a targeted earlier ELC offer is available to around a quarter of 2-year olds. This offer applies to: children in care (looked after, kinship, guardianship); those in families receiving certain, no or very low income benefits; and children in families receiving support through an asylum claim. The 2019 Programme for Government confirmed that eligibility would also be extended to children whose parents are care-experienced from August 2020. The Scottish Government's expectation is that this earlier offer for eligible twos, together with the funding of an extra graduate level practitioner (an Equity and Excellence Lead) for settings serving our most disadvantaged communities, will make a key contribution to closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

13. However, it should be noted that the uptake of the 2-year old targeted offer has been consistently lower than the universal offer to 3 and 4-year olds. The last published statistics (December 2018) indicate around 10% of the total 2-year old population are accessing funded ELC, while the Scottish Government estimates around 25% are eligible. Two-year-olds living in poverty in Scotland have been entitled to a funded ELC place since 2015, yet, nearly four years on, only a third of eligible families have taken up this place. The Scottish Government is therefore working across national and local government, the wider public sector, private and third sector services to increase awareness and uptake of the 2-year old offer.

#### *Greater choice of providers*

14. Another of the principles underpinning expansion is that there should be more flexibility of provision so that parents and children have a greater choice of ELC provider. The model for delivering funded ELC is provider-neutral. The expectation is that parents should be able to access their child's funded hour with any provider that:

- meets the criteria in the new national standard for funded providers;
- has a place available; and
- is willing to enter into a contract with the local authority.

This includes childminders. This could mean that children are transitioning to school from a wider range of ELC providers.

15. Although the Scottish Government does not expect a significant increase in the number of nurseries and playgroups offering funded hours, the introduction of the National Standard will support more ELC settings to offer the funded hours, if they meet the criteria. The Care Inspectorate data shows that around 80% of private nurseries and 90% of third sector nurseries were delivering funded hours to some extent in 2017. Those settings that are not currently in partnership, either because they have chosen not to, or not been selected to offer 600 hours, may in time decide to offer funded provision if the increase to 1,140 results in a decrease to their other business. There will be some settings that for example prefer to operate a higher-cost model and have sufficient interest from parents willing to pay.

16. There is, however, potential for a more significant increase in the number of childminders offering funded hours. This year's Scottish Childminding Association Audit found that 3.8% of childminders are currently delivering funded hours, up from 2.3% in 2018. Anecdotally, the Scottish Government is aware that local authorities are increasingly seeing the benefits of placing eligible 2-year olds in a nurturing, home-based childminding environment. With the increase to 1,140 hours, local authorities are also looking at 'blended models' where funded hours are split between a nursery or playgroup and a childminder. The Scottish Government is keen to evaluate this approach through the new childminding study but also anecdotally understand that it can support children who find it more challenging to transition into a busier ELC environment and offer flexibility for families.

17. Early Years Scotland's own *2 Stay Play and Learn* service, funded by Glasgow City Council, supports eligible 2-year olds and their parents/carers, to stay, play and learn with their child, rather than drop their child off at the ELC setting. This model is staffed by fully early years-qualified practitioners. Additionally, EYS 2 Stay Play and Learn provides the opportunity for children and families to benefit from a form of early years provision that is not predicated upon the assumption that you should be separated from your child if your child is to benefit from funded provision. The importance of supporting parent/child attachment and bonding cannot be overstated, and this is especially true for eligible 2-year olds where parents are often not employed, and welcome the support and many benefits that this model brings.

18. Overall it is felt that the introduction of the National Standard (which sets higher quality expectations than currently required in some parts of Scotland) is the key issue to consider in relation to transitions, rather than the potential for a sudden, large increase in the number of providers delivering funded hours. We should however be mindful of the increasing role of childminders and how they are supported as contributors to the CfE Early Phase.

*Less emphasis on access to teachers in ELC*

19. The percentage of registrations for funded early learning and childcare (ELC) with access to a teacher has been steadily decreasing over time. While 67% of settings had access to a teacher in 2017, this had decreased to 59% in 2018. The number of FTE teachers in ELC settings also decreased from 915 to 814 over this period.

20. This reflects the fact that teachers now form only part of the ELC graduate workforce. The reduction in the numbers of teachers in ELC is largely thought to be based upon the cost differential between teachers and early years practitioners, including the different terms and conditions of both roles. The decline was offset by a large increase in the number of early years graduates working in funded ELC from 2,074 to 2,302 FTE over the same period. These are, for example, graduates of the BA and PDA in Childhood Practice with specialist knowledge and understanding of how to support children's development in the early years.

21. While there is no agreement that the reduction in the use of teachers is having a negative impact on quality in ELC, early years-qualified teachers within ELC provide a different range of skills and expertise that complements and works in partnership with the skillset of early years graduates. The reduction of teachers within ELC is likely to mean that many teachers working in primary school could have less experience and understanding of early years pedagogy. This could make it more difficult to offer children a smooth transition from ELC to early primary, as the primary teaching staff may not be as confident to fully appreciate, and know how to build upon, the play-based pedagogies utilised within early learning and childcare settings.

22. Supporting the transitions to primary school by embedding play-based pedagogies was the focus of a paper considered by the Curriculum and Assessment Board in October 2018. Since then Scottish Government and Education Scotland have been working together to help to strengthen understanding of and highlight the impact of play pedagogies in early primary. This includes sharing good practice examples; continuing to fund the Masters in Early Years Pedagogy (which is undertaken by teachers as well as ELC practitioners); introducing a professional learning course for school leadership teams on good quality practice in the early years; ensuring that the relevance of the refreshed national practice guidance 'Realising the Ambition' is clear to teachers in early primary; and developing an online module on curriculum rationale.

*Increasing emphasis on outdoor learning*

23. We know the benefits of outdoor learning, exercise and play for young children in terms of their wellbeing and physical and cognitive development. We know children are more physically active when outside. We also know that play and learning outdoors has a positive impact on learning across all areas of the curriculum by, for example, enhancing children's understanding of the changing seasons, enabling greater levels of physical exploration, and experiences with wildlife and the elements, that all support their understanding of early science skills. There is also some evidence that outdoor learning helps to facilitate different adult/child and peer relationships, allowing some children, otherwise not reaching their potential, to flourish in this different environment.

24. Many ELC settings have already embraced the CfE emphasis on a broader learning experience, including active learning and learning outdoors, and outdoor-based services generally achieve higher inspection grades than the national average for children's daycare.

25. The Scottish Government is working to promote and enhance outdoor learning to ensure it is fully embedded within ELC provision as part of the expansion to 1,140 hours by 2020. This includes the creation of an outdoor play and learning coalition statement to raise the profile of outdoor ELC and encourage collaboration around the support of this aim. Additionally, a criterion has been included in the National Standard requiring settings to offer children daily access to outdoor play and learning. Furthermore, Inspiring Scotland has received £862,000 of Scottish Government funding to support eight local authorities to improve and increase outdoor learning as part of the ELC expansion. In March 2019, the Scottish Government also published 'Out to Play' which provides guidance and practical advice on how to access outdoor spaces to create safe, nurturing and inspiring outdoor learning experiences.

26. There are currently 19 fully outdoor nurseries registered in Scotland, with a further 30 planned as part of the expansion delivery. There are also nine satellite settings currently up-and-running with a further seven planned by August 2020.

27. There is potential for this work to create an appetite and expectation for a more expansive outdoor learning experience in other stages of the curriculum.

### **How curriculum and assessment provision in schools may need to adapt**

28. Based on the above overview of impacts and benefits, it can be concluded that school provision will be required to adapt to some extent to align with changes in the delivery of early learning and childcare. This will likely be relevant in the following areas that are related to coherent and effective curriculum and assessment practice across the 3-18 curriculum journey.

#### *Supporting the transition of children from a greater number of ELC providers*

29. The early level of CfE purposely spans across early learning and childcare and primary schooling. This helps to ensure that learning continues coherently as a child moves into a school setting. However, for this approach to be successful it is important that ELC settings and primary schools build effective working relationships. In this way schools and their staff can understand ways of working within an ELC setting, identify the individual needs of each child and crucially, identify next steps for learning as each child enters school. These steps help to ensure that a school becomes 'child ready' rather than a child having to become 'school ready'. Staff in schools will also require to appreciate that, as the children will have spent longer periods of time within the ELC environment, this will therefore require P1 teachers to consider the range of ways in which the children have been playing and learning. Such as, for example, the free flow outdoor learning environments, with lots of choice and freedom to choose their activities and learning resources based on their own needs, preferences and interests.

30. As already noted, there will no doubt be an increase in the number of new ELC providers as a result of the expansion, and with the additional funding and support, the

ability for more ELC settings to achieve the National Standard. Therefore, any level of increase in number of providers will see some schools having to adapt the ways in which they support children into school from a potentially increased number of feeder ELC settings. It is important that staff in schools understand the importance of, and potential ways of interacting with, children from a potentially increased number of ELC providers, in an effort to ensure that learners are well supported and that the early level of CfE is delivered most effectively.

### *Play-based learning*

31. As set out in the CAB October 2018 paper (on play in the early level), the provision of consistently high quality play-based experiences for children remains a work in progress within early primary. The further expansion in expertise and confidence in play-based pedagogy in ELC is already stimulating discussion about the level of confidence in primary. Whilst pupil equity funding and work around the Scottish Attainment Challenge are providing good examples of play-based approaches, inspection evidence in primary has highlighted challenges in ensuring that play experiences support children in making suitable progress in their learning. Alongside this there is a need for further professional learning for primary teachers to develop a shared understanding of what high quality play for learning in primary looks like which engages, motivates and provides sufficient challenge for all children to meet their learning needs. Education Scotland is currently developing a play-based learning resource for P1 and beyond which will provide practitioners with additional support.

### *Outdoor learning*

32. In relation to outdoor learning, the significant investment in practice in ELC may create pressure to deliver a similarly expansive experience in P1 and beyond. Outdoor learning remains a legitimate and effective way to deliver learning within CfE and the Scottish Government's vision is set out in 'Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning'<sup>5</sup>. Outdoor learning is utilised in schools across Scotland but the practice is unlikely to be as widespread and consistent as is currently the case in the ELC sector. The Scottish Government has worked with the Scottish Advisory Panel for Outdoor Education (SAPOE) to develop the 'Going Out There'<sup>6</sup> guidance for the school sector but further work is likely to be required. There is a need to develop a strong culture of outdoor learning in Scotland's schools and to ensure that practitioners are skilled and confident in taking learning outdoors – this includes practitioners understanding what effective outdoor learning looks like and how learning can be assessed in such a setting. It would also be helpful for primary staff if we could consider the ways in which we could ensure appropriate ratios of staff and children are in place to support effective outdoor learning as part of the primary school experience.

## **Conclusion**

33. The existing evidence base suggests that our investment in funded ELC will improve outcomes for children and will also contribute to closing the poverty-related gap ahead of school starting age.

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<sup>5</sup> Learning and Teaching Scotland (2010) – *Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Learning*

<sup>6</sup> Available at <https://www.goingoutthere.co.uk/download-going-out-there/>

34. To help the Scottish Government to measure the extent to which this ambition is realised, the Scottish Government is funding the Scottish Study of ELC (SSEL). The SSEL has been designed to test the impact of the expansion on a range of outcomes for children, parents and families. The outcomes being measured for children include: cognitive and language development; social, emotional and behavioural development; and health and wellbeing.

35. The SSEL is both a longitudinal and cross-sectional study. The cross-sectional component will compare the outcomes of several groups of children (including 4 and 5-year old children just before they leave ELC to begin Primary 1) receiving the existing 600 hours entitlement to those who receive the increased entitlement. In the longitudinal element of the study, data will be collected on a cohort of 2-year olds who are eligible for funded ELC when they begin accessing their funded entitlement, and again after they have received one year of ELC. This will provide evidence about the impact of one year of ELC on those children who need it most. Full findings will be available in 2024, with interim findings published as the study progresses.

36. As findings from this study begin to emerge, we should have a more informed basis from which to assess if and how practice in primary school might need to change to ensure that we build on the progress that children make in ELC. Staff in primary schools and ELC settings require to work in partnership to support this huge, unprecedented change that is being implemented in ELC in Scotland. Therefore, there are some questions worth considering as we enter the final stage of planning for the delivery of the ELC expansion:

- Is there enough continuity in the learning experience during the CfE early level and, if not, what more can we do to promote that continuity?
- Do parents have an adequate understanding that early level spans ELC and primary, and is there more we could be doing to help develop this understanding?
- Should schools be doing more to ensure that they have adequate transition arrangements in place with funded providers, including childminders?
- Is there more we need to do to demonstrate the benefits of outdoor learning and play-based learning in a school setting?
- How can we ensure that primary schools receive accurate and robust evidence of children's individual learning from ELC settings?

**Joint paper drafted by Scottish Government Curriculum Unit, Scottish Government ELC policy, Early Years Scotland and Education Scotland.**