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Decisions influencing Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) use in Scotland: understanding social policies and social contexts



CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS



Decisions influencing Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) use in Scotland: understanding social policies and social contexts

Final report

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Executive summary

Background to the research

Funded early learning and childcare (ELC) is available to all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds in Scotland. In August 2021, the entitlement increased from 600 to 1,140 hours a year (30 hours a week if taken in term time).

The Scottish Government commissioned Wellside Research to undertake qualitative research to explore the lived experience of parents as they decide whether, how and when to take up funded ELC, and whether and when to take up work, study or training, in the context of the ELC expansion. In total, 39 in-depth interviews were conducted by telephone between October 2021 and February 2022, with parents who had children that were eligible (or nearly eligible) for the funded ELC provision, whether or not they used it. Interviews sought to understand families' choices around childcare and the use of expanded funded ELC provision, as well as to explore challenges and barriers.

Participant typologies were sought to reflect key “priority family types” identified by Scottish Government as being at higher risk of child poverty. This included families from ethnic minority backgrounds (n=15); lone/single parents (n=15); those who had, lived with, or cared for someone with, a health problem or long-term physical or mental health condition or disability (n=18); young parents (n=5); and large families (n=5)¹. While the interviews focused on those with lower incomes, a small number of middle/higher income families were also included. Participants were recruited with assistance from a range of third sector organisations.

Profile of funded ELC use

In total, 27 participants were using funded ELC. This included local authority (n=13) and private nurseries (n=5), family/early years centres (n=6), and childminders (n=2). One participant used a blended model with funded hours split between a childminder and a nursery operated by the third sector. Some families also ‘topped-up’ with additional privately funded hours in a formal ELC setting and a few had additional support from family.

Of the 12 who did not use funded ELC provision at the time of the interview, this was largely due to their child not being eligible on age grounds and not meeting the criteria for eligible two-year-olds. Only two participants were eligible for funded ELC provision but were not using it. The first had an eligible two-year-old and the parents had chosen not to make use of the funded provision as they preferred to prioritise family bonding time and did not feel that the child needed additional support from ELC services. The other had a three-year-old, and although the parent was keen to make use of their funded provision they were having difficulty finding a

¹ The sixth priority group at higher risk of child poverty is those with children under the age of one. While this research did not recruit for this specifically, six participants did have babies in addition to those eligible for funded ELC.

provider with availability as they had moved to a new area after the main application process had closed and places had been assigned.

Those privately funding their use of formal ELC settings had similarly broad childcare patterns to those using the funded ELC provision.

Key findings

Awareness of funded ELC

General awareness of, what was regarded as, “free” ELC provision for three- and four-years-olds (largely at a local authority nursery) was high for those parents born in Scotland because **attending nursery at those ages was seen as a social norm**. Such **awareness was lower for those who had recently moved to Scotland** and/or where English was not their first language.

Awareness of the details and different options available via funded ELC was more mixed. Participants often had a good understanding of the particular arrangements they were using/planning to use, but were less aware of what other settings offered/arrangements may be available. Several had simply applied to their local provider and accepted what had been offered, so were unaware of alternative options. Others were better informed about the policy and available options, either because they had some link to the sector, e.g. via work, had recently or currently used ELC (funded or privately paid for) and so had received information from their provider, or because they had researched this themselves.

Awareness of funded ELC provision for two-year-olds, and the eligibility criteria, was lower or less well understood compared to the universal provision for three- and four-year-olds. In addition to families being on low incomes or having care experience, several also thought that single parent families and those with disabilities qualified for provision at age two (which they may have done as local authorities can extend eligibility to suit local needs). **Those who were already in regular contact with support services (health visitors, social workers or third sector agencies) tended to be more aware of, and using, their entitlement** in this respect, while others felt there was a lack of clarity in relation to this provision.

Use of the funded hours

Where funded ELC provision was being used, some families used term-time only while others opted for full-year provision. **Use of full-year provision was often preferred by working parents**. However, those using term-time only patterns included a mix of working parents and those not in work, education or training.

Most of those using funded hours were using the full allocation, although a few were not. Those not using the full allocation generally felt that either the long hours provided per day, or a five-day-a-week provision was too much for their child. Others noted that, although they had been allocated the full hours, they were not able to use these as the times did not fit with the family’s routine (e.g. school pick-ups) - this meant that **some of the hours were considered to be ‘unusable’**.

Only one family used a blended model. However, they noted that the application form for their local authority did not make this process easy. Another, who was keen to use a blended model, also suggested that the logistics of matching up providers was difficult - particularly where the division of time was required within a day rather than between days. Others were unclear how to achieve a blended model, while several were unaware of this option.

Reasons for use and benefits

The main reasons for using funded ELC (as well as privately funded ELC) were:

- **socialisation and development for their child;** and
- **to allow parents to work or attend college/training** courses.

These were also considered to be the main benefits of the funded ELC provision. Attending funded ELC was considered to support the child's development, while supporting parents into work or relieving some of the financial burden of childcare costs for those already in work. Other benefits included:

- **respite for some parents** - particularly important for lone parents and those with/who supported those with disabilities/health issues;
- **supporting family wellbeing;**
- **peer support and developing community links** - particularly important for first time parents and those new to an area;
- providing **support to the family** both in relation to the child's needs/development, and for wider issues;
- allowing parents to spend dedicated **time with other children;** and
- **relieving some of the childcare burden from grandparents.**

Choosing a funded ELC provider

Issues that were important to parents when choosing a funded ELC provider included:

- **Location/Convenience of the provider** – This was the case either in terms of its distance from home, parents' work, and/or siblings' schools, or suitability of the childcare hours to fit with work and/or school hours;
- **The size of the setting** - This was particularly important when deciding between nursery and childminder settings;
- **Continuity and stability** - This was a recurring issue, with parents using the same provider they had used for older children as this was familiar and trusted (both for the parents and the child); those using nurseries based in schools felt it was important to assist transition to school; and there was evidence that some parents who utilised privately funded childcare before they were eligible for funded ELC hours were opting for funded providers so that they did not need to move their child upon becoming eligible; and

- **Perceived quality of the setting and staff** - This was based on either previous experience of the setting with older children, visiting the setting before applying, knowing others who had children attend the setting (either currently or previously), or from general perceptions/word of mouth.

Funded ELC and work, education and training

The main driver for parents wanting to work was **financial**. Other, secondary, factors included:

- Perceived links between being in work/education/training and the parent's **self-esteem, self-identity or personal development**; and
- To provide a **positive role model** for their child(ren).

Those parents who were already in work noted significant financial benefits of the funded ELC provision. **Several participants had also got a job or started a college course as a direct result of the funded ELC provision.** Both the time that parents had available and not having to pay for childcare had driven their decisions to seek employment/education. A few did, however, suggest they were 'lucky' to have found a job/course which fitted around their child's funded ELC hours.

Several participants felt that it was **difficult to find work/study that matched the funded ELC hours offered/being used**, and a few suggested it was **not compatible with certain jobs**, e.g. shift work. Different patterns were also noted in the timing of parents attempts to find work/study, some found work before securing funded ELC then sought funded ELC to fit their working hours, while others waited until funded ELC was in place then sought work to suit the funded ELC hours.

A few participants (typically those working full-time) suggested that an increase in the number of available funded ELC hours would be helpful, although not all thought this would be beneficial for their children. Indeed, **several wanted work, education and training to be more flexible** to support a better work/life balance for families rather than necessarily any changes to the funded ELC policy.

Working parents used their funded ELC provision almost exclusively to **maximise their working hours**. For those not in work, education or training, however, funded ELC use allowed them to:

- Do **household chores**;
- Have some **respite/time for themselves**; and
- **Support other caring responsibilities and volunteering activities.**

Restrictions, barriers and challenges to using funded ELC

Challenges to using the funded ELC entitlement were identified, including:

- **A lack of flexibility and the use of fixed session times** - This made it difficult for some families to access the hours they wanted, particularly for those using nurseries. These participants felt that the system was designed

around the commercial needs of the provider rather than offering the intended flexibility for parents. They noted that where fixed sessions were offered and parents opted not to use the full allocation, any unused time was 'lost' (as parents could not use these hours with a different provider);

- **Difficulties (real or perceived) in changing established funded ELC arrangements** - The research included one family struggling to find a placement for an eligible three-year-old after moving to a new area, one family struggling to find a provider to accommodate a blended model between a childminder and nursery for a period before their child started school, and several participants who felt 'trapped' in their current job as they thought they would not find anything else to fit in with their existing funded ELC childcare arrangements, suggesting they perceived that this was fixed;
- **A general lack of providers and a lack of different types of providers** - Those in rural areas generally experienced an overall lack of ELC options (both funded and otherwise), while others identified a lack of different types of providers (again, both funded and otherwise), including childminders, outdoor/forest nurseries and settings with a particular ethos, e.g. Montessori;
- **Covid-19** - This was considered to have limited some parents' ability to make informed choices as (at the time) they could not visit settings or speak in-person with staff. This was particularly concerning for those whose children had additional support needs or health issues and who wanted reassurance that settings would be appropriate;
- **Language barriers to accessing information** - It was suggested that more information was needed in alternative languages, which should be circulated in a wider variety of ways, and that more direct support may be needed to help families complete the application process;
- **Information** about funded ELC, the options available to families, and the eligibility criteria was **not always seen as clear or easy to find**; and
- **Not all professionals (across a range of fields) had provided accurate information** to parents regarding eligibility.

Only one real gap in funded provision was identified - the exemption of 'in-home' care for children with severe/complex needs. However, a few participants also felt that the eligibility criteria for two-year-olds should be expanded to take account of families' individual circumstances. For example, it was felt that those with large families and those with multiples (e.g. twins, triplets, etc.) should be considered for eligibility.

Conclusions

While several challenges to accessing and using the funded ELC provision were identified by the research, these were largely linked to how it is being implemented rather than there being significant issues with the policy itself.

Most participants felt the current number of hours being provided was fair and highly beneficial to families. Further, most had secured provision that suited their needs.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 In 2014, the Scottish Government increased the entitlement of all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds to funded early learning and childcare (hereinafter early learning and childcare will be referred to as ELC) from 475 hours to 600 hours per year. From August 2020, it was proposed to further increase the hours of funded ELC to 1,140 hours per year. However, Covid-19 delayed this increase until August 2021, when all local authorities offered 1,140 hours of funded ELC per year for each eligible child.

1.1.2 The rationale for the increase was three-fold:

1. to improve children's development and to narrow the poverty-related attainment gap;
2. to allow more parents and carers² the opportunity to take up work, training or study as a result; and
3. to improve family wellbeing³.

1.1.3 This policy change sits alongside a number of wider efforts by the Scottish Government to extend and improve the quality of ELC, including introducing a new National Standard for all funded ELC and investing in the early years workforce.

The ELC offering

1.1.4 ELC is a generic term used to cover the full range of early education and childcare available in Scotland. The term is intended to emphasise that the care and education of young children are not separate. ELC settings are all those that offer education and childcare to children up to school age. These include family centres, day nurseries, nursery schools, nursery classes attached to primary schools, and childminders. ELC settings can be operated by local authorities, private businesses, voluntary sector organisations, and in the case of childminders, self-employed individuals. ELC services are 'registered childcare' provided by individuals and organisations registered and inspected as a 'daycare of children' service or childminder by the Care Inspectorate⁴.

² Throughout the remainder of this report 'parents' will be used for brevity, but it is intended as reference to 'parents and carers'.

³ [Early learning and childcare expansion - Early education and care - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/topics/early-learning-and-childcare-expansion)

⁴ This includes both ELC services for children aged five and under and school age childcare services. Daycare of children's service applies to services whose primary function is childcare and who operate for 2 hours or more in any one day and for more than 6 days in any one calendar year (as defined in the Public Reform (Scotland) Act 2010). Staff working within these services are

- 1.1.5 Local authorities have a duty to provide access to up to 1,140 hours of funded ELC a year to all eligible children in their area. Eligible children are all children aged three or four (from the relevant start date) and some two-year-olds⁵. Local authorities also have discretion to allow access to funded ELC for other children as best fits local needs.
- 1.1.6 Funded ELC can be provided by a range of local authority, private, voluntary or third sector providers, including childminders. However, not all ELC providers offer funded ELC. In order to deliver funded ELC, non-local authority providers must apply to, and partner with, their local authority and adhere to Scottish Government guidelines and National Standards⁶. National policy has also set out a 'Funding Follows the Child' approach which aims to allow a degree of flexibility and choice for parents while ensuring high quality provision. Full implementation of this has been affected by the pandemic.
- 1.1.7 Parents can utilise a blended model to split funded hours between different providers and settings, for example combining nursery and childminding provision. Providers can offer term-time only (30 hours per week over 38 weeks) hours, or provision that covers the full year (around 22 hours per week, although this can vary depending upon the number of weeks per year the provider operates). Where available, parents may also purchase additional hours of ELC for children who have a funded entitlement, and for those who are not yet entitled to funded hours.
- 1.1.8 Throughout this report the terms 'funded ELC' and 'ELC' are used. For clarity, reference to 'funded ELC' refers to the funded provision for eligible children only, while references to 'ELC' are intended to refer to early learning and childcare more generally, with issues likely to be relevant to both funded ELC and ELC which parents pay for privately. Indeed, many of the issues relevant to the funded ELC provision are also relevant for privately funded or ELC more generally.

Previous research on ELC

- 1.1.9 In 2018, the Scottish Government undertook research to develop understanding of parents' use and experiences of funded ELC, and how these differed between parent groups⁷. While the research was based on the previous entitlement of lower funded hours it sought to inform the expansion of the ELC programme. The research involved a nationally representative

required to register with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and must meet qualifications standards including a degree level qualification for all managers.

⁵ Two-year-olds are also eligible for funded ELC provision where either their parents are in receipt of qualifying benefits, or because either the parents or child has care experience.

⁶ [National Standard for early learning and childcare - Early education and care - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](http://www.gov.scot)

⁷ [Scottish Government \(2018\) Exploring parents' views and use of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland](#)

survey and follow up discussions with parents of children under the age of six.

1.1.10 To evaluate the impact of the expansion of funded ELC hours to 1,140 on children, parents and families, the Scottish Government also commissioned primarily quantitative research to gather data between 2019 and 2024⁸. To date, this has involved surveys with parents, as well as data on children's development collected by ELC keyworkers, and observations of funded ELC settings.

1.1.11 Prior to these studies, the Scottish Government commissioned qualitative research in 2017 which explored the drivers and barriers to the uptake of funded ELC among eligible two-year-olds⁹. It found that the main barriers were a lack of awareness of the entitlement or how to apply, difficulty accessing providers or finding suitably flexible providers, and that parents felt their children were too young for the provision.

Aims of the current research

1.1.12 To complement these largely quantitative studies, in 2021 the Scottish Government commissioned Wellside Research to undertake qualitative research to explore the lived experience of parents as they decide whether, how and when to take up funded ELC, and whether and when to take up work, study or training. This report outlines the findings of that research.

1.1.13 The objectives of the current qualitative research were to:

- understand choices, constraints and priorities of parents in decisions about ELC;
- identify barriers to take-up of ELC, from groups in disadvantaged communities or from minority ethnic backgrounds;
- explore perceptions of parents of the possible impacts of ELC on their child and wider family's wellbeing;
- understand choices, constraints and priorities of parents in decisions about taking up or returning to work, training or study;
- identify barriers to take-up of work, training or study;
- identify specific structural factors constraining or enabling decisions; and

⁸ [Scottish Government \(2019\) Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare: Phase 1 Report \(Updated 2021\)](#)

[Scottish Government \(2020\) Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare: Phase 2 Report \(Updated 2021\)](#)

[Scottish Government \(2021\) Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare: Three-year-olds: Phase 3 Report \(Updated 2021\)](#)

⁹ [Scottish Government \(2017\) Drivers and barriers to uptake of Early Learning and Childcare amongst 2 year olds, Edinburgh: Scottish Government](#)

- understand these issues for different types of families, in terms of poverty, ethnicity, and other indicators of marginalisation.

1.2 Research methodology

- 1.2.1 The research was conducted between October 2021 and February 2022, and involved a series of in-depth interviews with parents who had children that were eligible for the funded ELC provision, whether or not they used it. Interviews sought to understand parents' choices around childcare and the use (or not) of the funded ELC provision, as well as to understand what challenges and barriers might exist. Those whose children were within six months of being eligible for a funded ELC place were also eligible to take part in the research as they could be in the process of making decisions around this.
- 1.2.2 In order to recruit participants, assistance was sought from a range of third sector agencies. These were organisations that typically supported families rather than those providing ELC. Indeed, the research resisted recruiting via ELC providers in order not to bias the results towards particular providers/provider types, and to ensure that the experiences of non-users could be captured.
- 1.2.3 Key participant typologies were sought to be consistent with those identified within the Scottish Government's first Child Poverty Delivery Plan¹⁰. Given the sample size for this research however, it was felt that recruiting against all six typologies would result in limited data per group, and so three key groups were identified, including:
- families from ethnic minority backgrounds;
 - lone/single parents; and
 - those who had, or lived with or cared for someone with, a health problem or long-term physical or mental health condition or disability.
- 1.2.4 The research also sought to include young parents (i.e. where the mother or father was aged under 25), and large families (i.e. four or more children) to maintain consistency with the Child Poverty Delivery Plan¹¹, as well as a mix of participants from urban and rural areas and different local authorities. While the interviews focused on those with lower incomes, a small number of middle/higher income families were also included. A screener questionnaire was developed to support recruitment (included at Appendix A).

¹⁰ [Every child, every chance: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultations-policies/child-poverty/child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-2022/)

¹¹ The sixth priority group at higher risk of child poverty is those with children under the age of one. While this research did not recruit for this specifically, six participants did have babies in addition to those eligible for funded ELC.

- 1.2.5 Interviews were conducted by telephone and video link (face-to-face interviews were not possible due to the Covid-19 security measures in place at the time¹²), and lasted between 30 minutes and an hour.
- 1.2.6 The interview topic guide was structured around the following topics:
- a typical day;
 - awareness of funded ELC provision;
 - use of ELC (funded or otherwise) or other informal childcare, and how it fits with the family's needs;
 - work, training or employment;
 - unpaid activities;
 - other considerations of using ELC (funded or otherwise); and
 - benefits and/or issues with using ELC (funded or otherwise).
- 1.2.7 Different sets of questions were asked depending upon whether participants were using funded ELC or not at the time of the interview. Those paying privately for ELC were also asked about their use of this in order to provide comparisons with the use of funded ELC. The full topic guide is included at Appendix B.
- 1.2.8 Participants were provided with a £30 Love2Shop voucher to thank them for their time.

1.3 Profile of participants

Demographic profile

- 1.3.1 Although the research set out to achieve 30 interviews, a total of 39 interviews were conducted (this extension was required partly due to levels of interest and in order to ensure inclusion of a range of different situations). One parent per family took part, and the final sample included:
- 15 parents from ethnic minority backgrounds (including three asylum seekers/refugees);
 - 15 single/lone parents;
 - 18 parents who had, lived with, or had caring responsibilities for someone with a health problem or long-term physical or mental health condition or

¹² While legal requirements for physical distancing and limits on gatherings had recently been removed (August 2021), some protective measures remained such as the use of face coverings indoors and the collection of contact details as part of Test and Protect. Additional mitigations for ELC services included 1m physical distancing, limiting contacts for children and staff, staggering pick up and drop off times, and limiting in person visits to settings. The guidance for researchers was also to avoid face-to-face approaches.

disability (this included the participant themselves, their child, or another family member);

- 5 young parents (age 25 or younger); and
- 5 large families (with four or more children).

1.3.2 It should be noted that the above demographic characteristics were not exclusive, with some participants identifying more than one characteristic as being relevant to them.

1.3.3 The sample also involved participants with a mix of other characteristics relevant to the research questions, including different working/education/training status (shown below), income levels, geographic area and urban/rural coverage.

Work, training and education status

Status	Number of participants
Full-time in work, training or education	10
Part-time in work, training or education	17
Not in work, training or education	12
Total	39

1.3.4 The Scottish Child Payment was used as a proxy to determine if a family was living on a low income, with 19 participants indicating that they received this. Two others did not know (they confirmed they received social security payments but could not recall the names of them all). It should also be noted that other participants could have been eligible for the Scottish Child Payment but had either not known about it or not applied for it.

1.3.5 Participants lived across 15 different local authorities, and although most were based in more urban environments, eight participants lived in more rural locations (shown in the table below).

Urban/Rural location

Residential location:	Number of participants
Live in a city	22
Live in a large town	9
Live in a small town or village	5
Live in a rural area	3
Total	39

1.3.6 The sample also included a mix in terms of the number and age profile (shown below) of children who the participants had caring responsibilities for:

- 15 participants had one child;
- 12 participants had two children;
- 7 participants had three children; and
- 5 participants had four or more children.

Age of participants' children

Age group	Number of children
Age 0-1	6
Age 2	14
Age 3	16
Age 4	13
Age 5 (in nursery)	3
Age 5+ (in school or older)	33*
Total	85

* Note: No participant had only school aged children and all participants had at least one child who was eligible (or nearly eligible) for the funded ELC provision.

1.3.7 It should also be noted that, whilst most participants were mothers, three participants were fathers. There were, however, no distinctly different views or experiences of ELC that were reported between the mothers and fathers.

Use of funded ELC

1.3.8 Overall, 27 participants were using funded ELC provision, with the types of providers outlined below:

- 13 used a local authority nursery;
- 6 used a family or early years centre (participants gave mixed descriptions of who operated these - local authorities, private providers and charities were all noted);
- 5 used a private nursery;
- 2 used a childminder; and
- 1 used a blended model with funded hours split between a childminder and a nursery operated by the third sector.

1.3.9 It should also be noted that a number of participants who used funded ELC provision also 'topped-up' with other forms of childcare, including paying for

additional hours at private nursery settings, paying for a childminder (either additional hours or in addition to using their funded ELC hours at a nursery), and support from family members (typically the child's grandparents but also secondary aged or older siblings). One also paid for additional in-home care (childminder/nanny) for their child.

Childcare needs of those not using funded ELC

1.3.10 Of the 12 who did not use funded ELC provision, this was largely due to their child not being eligible at the time of the interview. Only two participants were eligible for funded ELC provision but were not currently using it (the reasons for this are discussed at paragraph 3.6.4 and Section 3.8 below).

1.3.11 Most of those not using any funded ELC provision were, nonetheless, utilising some form of childcare. This included a mix of formal and informal settings, with several outlining a combination of childcare sources across the week. Childcare solutions for those not using any funded ELC included:

- 6 participants who had family or friends providing childcare (including 2 who had established an informal childcare sharing arrangement with friends);
- 4 participants who paid for private nurseries;
- 3 participants who indicated that they juggled childcare between the parents;
- 3 participants were stay-at-home parents;
- 1 participant paid for hours in a family/early years centre operated by a charity; and
- 1 participant's College paid for a childminder (plus 1 other had paid for a childminder previously).

Patterns of childcare

1.3.12 A wide mix of weekly routines and childcare patterns were outlined by participants, with these tailored to suit the needs of individual families. There were no consistent patterns between participants, regardless of whether they used funded ELC hours, paid for childcare, had support from family/friends, or used a combination of these. Daily/weekly routines were also impacted by whether parents worked and their pattern of employment, as well as having other children (older or younger) in the household.

1.3.13 For example, one lone parent (of one child) who worked part time, utilised their full funded ELC provision with a private nursery. They worked Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday each week, while the nursery hours were split over four days - the child attended full days on Monday and Tuesday, as well as a Wednesday and Thursday morning. The child's grandparents picked the child up after nursery on a Wednesday, and the parent planned to have time to themselves or catch up on housework on the Thursday morning, but they

noted that they typically ended up working for most of this instead. The parent and child spent time together on Fridays.

1.3.14 For one of the participants who combined childminder and private nursery provision, again they only had one child and the father worked full-time, while the mother worked Tuesday-Friday. The mother and child spent the day together on Mondays, while on Tuesday-Thursday the child used their funded ELC hours with a childminder, and attended a private nursery for a morning session on the Friday. The child's grandparents did the Friday drop-off and pick-up from the nursery, and provided childcare on the Friday afternoon.

1.3.15 One participant, who had a large family (six children ranging from high school age through to a baby) and was caring for someone in the household with a health issue/disability, used a local authority nursery for their three-year-old. Monday to Friday the family routine was described as the same - getting the older children to school and then dropping the three-year-old at nursery between 10am and 11am. They picked the three-year-old up again between 2pm and 3pm. Although the allocated hours available to the family were said to be longer, they opted not to use them as the child was not settling well and they often had to accommodate the baby's needs, meaning the nursery drop-offs were delayed. While the other children were out the mother cared for the baby, studied part-time, and helped her husband in his work.

1.3.16 The routines of those who were not utilising funded ELC (largely as they were not yet eligible for this due to the child's age) varied in similar ways. Some combined paid for private ELC hours with either the child's parents and/or grandparents providing additional care throughout the week. Some working parents adopted flexible patterns to allow them to split ELC/school drop-offs/pick-ups and childcare responsibilities between them, again, sometimes with/without the support of other family members or friends. Others were stay-at-home parents and so managed all their current childcare needs with no formal ELC input and only occasional informal support from family/friends.

1.4 Research caveats

1.4.1 As the research was qualitative in nature, the sample size and structure cannot be considered as representative, either of the population as a whole, or within the sampled groups. Rather, the research provides insight into the views and experiences of those who participated in the research.

1.4.2 Although several participants took part who did not use the funded ELC provision currently, this was largely due to their child not being old enough yet. Most of these participants intended to use the funded ELC provision in the near future. Only two participants had a child who was eligible for a funded ELC place but did not use this. Those who were eligible but had actively chosen not to use the funded ELC provision were very hard to identify and include in the research, and this was particularly the case for

those with children aged three or four where there is almost universal uptake nationally. More bespoke and targeted research may be required to fully understand the experiences and choices of such families.

- 1.4.3 The need to use telephone and online only interviews may also have impacted on participation, and presented a barrier to participation for some. While those who took part in the research were happy to utilise such methods (with some expressing a preference for remote methods), and there appeared to be no impact on the quality of data obtained, those without easy access to the required technology, or those who would have preferred the support of the recruiting service to participate, may have been less likely to volunteer to take part.
- 1.4.4 While the research largely recruited participants via neutral third sector support organisations who work with families, this resulted in very low participation from those who used childminders. As a result, a short booster exercise was conducted, which sought the support of childminders and a representative body to recruit their clients for the research.
- 1.4.5 Differences in the views and experiences between participant demographic groups have been highlighted throughout, and any issues unique to particular participant/family circumstances have also been highlighted. However, it should be noted that decisions about the use of funded ELC and families experiences appeared to be largely driven by participants' personal situations (e.g. whether they were in work, education or training or not, whether there were other children in the household and the needs of wider family routines, the range of funded ELC options available locally, etc.) rather than being driven by personal demographic profiles.

2 Awareness of funded ELC

2.1 General awareness

2.1.1 All participants were asked if they had heard of the funded ELC provision before volunteering for the research. Most (n=32) had heard of it; just seven had not. It should be noted, however, that of those who had not heard of it, all but one were actually using it at the time of the interview. These participants all used (or were planning to use) a local authority nursery or a Family/Early Years Centre which they noted were paid for by the local authority or a charity. They were generally unfamiliar with the terminology of funded ELC, but they knew they could use these services without needing to pay for it themselves.

2.2 Sources of information used

2.2.1 Participants who were aware of funded ELC knew of it through various sources. The most impactful (although not necessarily the most common) sources appeared to be health visitors or other services (such as social workers or third sector support services) working with the family. The ability to discuss the provision, have questions answered, and help to complete the required applications were all highly welcomed.

2.2.2 Other sources which participants could remember, and which had raised their awareness, included:

- letters received from the local authority and/or attending public meetings (ahead of the extended hours being rolled out);
- information that had been circulated by private nurseries or childminders to existing service users or those enquiring about places;
- parents pro-actively looking on local authority and Scottish Government websites;
- word of mouth and social media chat groups and forums;
- previous experience with older children, other family members' experiences; and
- local adverts, for example on post-boxes, phone boxes, and on the side of refuse collection vehicles.

2.2.3 There was also strong general awareness or expectation that children attend a local authority nursery (commonly referred to as a 'school nursery') from the age of three. This was particularly the case among participants who had been born/raised in Scotland, or who had lived in Scotland for a long period of time. These participants were often unable to articulate how they first heard about this provision, however, as attending nursery from the age of three was considered to be a social norm and something that participants had learned through watching others, discussions with peers, etc. rather than having seen or received any information about it.

- 2.2.4 For those that had not lived in Scotland for long, there was less awareness of the general entitlement from age three onwards, with these participants often relying on health visitors or other services informing them.
- 2.2.5 Information provision by health visitors and other services was noted to be variable across all participant groups, however. Some parents had good support from informative staff, while other parents indicated that such contacts had not informed them of the funded ELC provision. This was particularly stark for one participant (who was relatively new to Scotland) who had moved house and had a new health visitor as a result. They noted that their first health visitor had never suggested that their child could/should be in nursery. They were therefore not aware of their entitlement to funded ELC until they moved and their new health visitor advised them of this and supported them to make an application. The child was four before they started nursery but could/should have been going much earlier. Another participant (who was not new to Scotland), noted that the services they had been in contact with had been unable to provide information on any support available or to outline funded ELC eligibility:

“I remember talking to the midwife and she was like ‘I’ve got no idea if you can get any help’. So it felt like people that you would think would know these things, didn’t actually know either... As a first time parent, I was learning how to be a parent and trying to figure out how to navigate everything, and I think once you reach a couple of things where people are like ‘no, I’ve got no idea’, you just think ‘right OK, there is no help, there’s nothing’.” (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC, not using childcare, lone parent)

- 2.2.6 There were mixed views around the usefulness of websites. A few participants felt that their local authority website was informative:

“I think [the] council website was quite informative, so I think they’re doing a great job with all the information provided there. I don’t know if they can do anything better than that. When anyone wants to find out, they always go to the website.” (Mother of three, one at primary school, a four-year-old using funded ELC hours with a childminder, and a two-year-old using a (non-funded ELC) childminder)

- 2.2.7 However, others felt that both local authority and Scottish Government websites¹³ were difficult to navigate, disjointed and confusing. It was noted that the information was spread across several different pages making it hard for parents to get a clear picture of what they were entitled to and how the funded ELC provision operated locally. One participant felt there was “a lot of digging about required”. A few participants also noted that, where lists of funded ELC providers were offered, there was little detail about availability

¹³ Respondents did not specify whether this was the main Scottish Government website or the Parent Club website.

and the hours offered, meaning that parents had to phone each provider in turn to discuss:

“I actually think it’s really difficult to understand what was being offered at first. There didn’t seem to be a central source for information and I understand now that that’s because it kind of varies on a local authority basis... So finding the [local authority] council website was quite hard and also understanding how you could use the hours, whether it be a private nursery or a school nursery and when you had to apply for that, the information was spread across a few different websites. It was very unclear what the deadlines were... I really couldn’t find the information in a clear central place.”
(Mother of two, a baby and a three-year-old nearly eligible for funded ELC, using a private nursery)

2.3 Awareness of how funded ELC operated locally

2.3.1 Awareness varied in relation to how the funded ELC provision operated and the different options that were available. Differences were based on whether parents had any existing link to the school or general ELC environments, for example through work, family connections, or having children already attending a setting, rather than being driven by the type of settings being used. Even where respondents had such a link, however, there were mixed experiences, with some parents having a fuller understanding of funded ELC provision generally, and others simply understanding how this related to their own setting/provider. Some parents (generally those from higher income families) had also researched local and national policy and gained a fuller understanding of how the funded ELC should operate and what options should be available.

Use of hours

2.3.2 Most participants had only a basic understanding of how funded ELC worked, generally and locally. Most parents correctly identified that the provision of the funded 1,140 hours started at age three (with less awareness of the possibility of places for eligible two-year-olds - discussed in more detail at Section 2.5 below), and parents generally felt that they could use the funded ELC hours at any ‘local’ provider (with most identifying the nursery attached to the primary school within their local catchment as where the funded hours could be used). There was an understanding that 1,140 hours were free and that anything further would need to be privately funded:

“So, my understanding is that it kicks in when they’re three and it pays for a certain number of hours of nursery per week to the providers that accept it, which I think is most places and childminders... my understanding is that the vast majority of nurseries do accept it. Like it doesn’t have to be a council nursery. And I think there’s some provision for some kids under three but I think it’s for families who are on a lower income than us.” (Mother of

one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a private nursery)

2.3.3 However, there was less understanding of the flexibility that should be possible with the funded hours, for example, being able to vary start/end times, select specific days of the week, and choose between term-time or all year round provision. Where participants were currently using the funded ELC provision, they typically understood the service they were using, e.g. the hours and patterns they utilised, but they could rarely explain how other providers/settings worked. Several participants who used (or were planning to use) a local authority nursery had also been unaware that they had the choice of private nurseries or childminder settings, and assumed the funded provision only applied at local authority nurseries. Others simply accepted the model/hours that their chosen nursery (either private or local authority run) had offered without being given any information about, or attempting to find out, what alternative providers or patterns of hours might be available, while those in need of particular hours of childcare had sought out providers who could accommodate this:

“I just know that you get 1,140 hours of free childcare and then I just accept whatever the nursery tells me about that.” (Mother of two, a three-year-old using funded ELC at a local authority Early Years Centre, and an eligible two-year-old not using ELC)

2.3.4 One parent also suggested that more could be done to make parents aware that they did not have to use the full allocation if they did not want to (without judgement):

“I think one thing that’s important is that parents should know that they have a choice... they assume that the child needs to be in for the full 30 hours. I think there needs to be more awareness around - ‘No, it’s your choice as a parent, you do not need to send them for 30 hours, if you want to send them less than that, you can’. There needs to be more awareness around that, more promotion of that. I feel as though a lot of people just do it because it’s there without really thinking about it.” (Mother of two, a four-year-old using part-time ELC funded hours at a local authority nursery, and a school aged child)

Blended provision

2.3.5 While a few participants combined the use of childminders and a nursery, only one used a blended model of funded ELC hours. They indicated that this had been difficult to arrange locally, with the application forms not tailored to facilitate such requests:

“When we were applying last year [2021] the form didn’t even have the choice to split the placement, you could only apply for one placement. So I contacted them and... I said ‘well can I apply for both because I had heard previous years that you don’t always get

your first place'... and they said 'no, no, no, nothing we can do'. Like that stresses you out because this is when you start to think, well if I can't find childcare, I don't know how we're going to work... So on top of being incredibly restricted to the childcare options in the village, we're also restricted by things like that, being able to apply for two setting, there was no flexibility. So I had to apply for one setting and then about a month later, I was able to fill out a form to say that I also wanted a second setting. And I knew that it was the government's intention that you're able to do that, but it was just trying to get that set up was a little bit more tricky. So I managed to get it in the end but they didn't make it very easy for us." (Mother of one, a three-year-old using funded ELC with a childminder and nursery)

- 2.3.6 Another working parent who used their funded ELC hours with a childminder had also tried to adopt a blended model to incorporate some time in a nursery for their child's pre-school year. However, they found this difficult to accommodate. They noted it was difficult to coordinate nursery times with the childminder's availability for drop-offs/pick-ups, and that the fixed session lengths in private nurseries meant they would have to pay to top-up for more hours than they actually needed/wanted to use:

"I tried to book him into a nursery and I applied for places, but as a working mum, most nurseries they do only sessions, like from half seven till one, but then I still need someone to pick him up at one o'clock and look after him... So I applied to a few nurseries but all the same came up. If I wanted longer than one [o'clock], although I said I can pay the additional hour or two, they said "no, you have to pay the whole session", so I need to pay from one till six which means I have to pay for 10 hours a day, so six are funded and then the rest I need to pay out of my own pocket. It didn't make any sense so that's why he's still with the childminder." (Mother of three, one at primary school, a four-year-old using funded ELC hours with a childminder, and a two-year-old using (non-funded ELC) childminder)

- 2.3.7 Although others knew they could, in theory, split the funded ELC provision between providers, most did not know how to go about this. A few also suggested that they expected the practicality of blending funded provision might be challenging:

"Some nurseries have set pick-up and drop-off times and, because they are quite full, they only give you the hours that they can offer you, so you have to then match it. So that might be a challenge. Although it is possible [to use more than one provider], I don't know how practically that works." (Mother of one child, a three-year-old about to become eligible for funded ELC, was using self-funded hours in a Family Learning Centre)

2.4 Awareness raising suggestions

2.4.1 In order to raise awareness of funded ELC and the latest 1,140 hours provision, suggestions were made for more written information such as leaflets, emails or letters to either be sent directly to eligible families and/or for information to be shared via local authorities, health visitors, at vaccination appointments, via GPs, colleges, and at playgroups, mother and baby/toddler groups, and at community centres/hubs:

“Playgroups, if there were leaflets at playgroups or like other classes. For example... we go to... a local music group and I picked up a leaflet there about this research... so yeah, those sort of groups I suppose are like the main [best] contact point.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old about to become eligible for funded ELC, childcare was managed by parents and help from a friend)

2.4.2 Indeed, several were keen to get information which they could keep and refer to later:

“If it could just be available like, this is what is available, this is like the criteria, you know, even if it was on a big sheet with other things that are available, if it was handed out to you, you know, and you can stick it on your noticeboard and then you’ve got it. And it’s like, OK, right, this might be my category that I’m entitled to - even if it’s something as simple as, here’s the information where you can go and find out more.” (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC, not using any childcare, lone parent)

2.4.3 The terminology and necessary timescales were also flagged as an issue for some parents, particularly first-time parents who had no previous experience of the childcare or school landscape. In particular, terminology like ‘term-time’ was confusing for first-time parents, and there was less awareness around the timings for applications and nursery intake windows.

2.4.4 Parents for whom English was not their native language noted a preference for written information. It would give them time to read and consider their options carefully (some also reported having better fluency in reading compared to speaking English). It would also allow them to get support with translation and interpretation if required. One parent who struggled with spoken and written English also explained that they had received information via email regarding their child’s eligibility for a nursery place, but indicated that they were not sufficiently computer literate to respond. This resulted in their child missing five months of their funded ELC provision, and the child’s placement was only arranged after their parent attended the local school nursery to enquire about eligibility and the relevant start dates. This parent stressed that digital/email communications were not suitable for all, and that some parents needed face-to-face or more personalised contact if important information was being imparted. Others also stressed the need for additional support for those where English was not their first language to both understand the information being provided and to complete the application:

“There were some parents I’d spoken to where English wasn’t their first language, there wasn’t a lot of information for them. I think maybe having more information in another languages [is needed]. I think there is a reliance on having everything online now... but maybe some of them don’t actually know how to use a computer and they are the type that maybe would rely on actually having to go in, maybe taking an interpreter with them to try and find out information, it may be a little bit harder for them... Like for example, in Glasgow, there’s the Islamic Centre which is predominantly for women and children, so if they were to give you information, absolutely fantastic, through mosques or local community centres, and the Asian radio station. So there are other opportunities.” (Mother of three, one in school, a four-year-old year old in a private nursery using funded ELC hours, and a one-year-old, from an ethnic minority background)

- 2.4.5 One participant also suggested that information needed to go beyond general awareness raising, and that guidance was needed for parents to help them understand what their options were and how they could best use the funded provision:

“I think as a parent, when you’re researching nurseries, it’s quite an important decision what nursery to choose. I visited so many and it was confusing going from nursery to nursery to nursery and everyone was offering something different and they were all doing things differently... It would be nice to have some sort of clearer guidance on how those hours should actually be used in order to favour the parent.” (Mother of three, one at primary school, a baby, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours at a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 2.4.6 Participants generally felt that awareness raising and the dissemination of information on funded ELC provision to parents needed to allow for sufficient time before the child becomes eligible for funded ELC. This would allow parents to research the options, decide on how they want to use the hours, and to make successful applications:

“[Having a year’s notice would be good] because then that way, it gives you that extra year to say, right well I’ve got this year to either say I can increase my hours or look for a job because you know you’re going to have those guaranteed hours to help you get back into the workplace.” (Mother of three, two adult children and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent)

2.5 Awareness of provision for eligible two-year-olds

- 2.5.1 Awareness of funded ELC provision for children aged two was relatively low, and the eligibility criteria for this age group was seen as particularly confusing. Again, it was suggested information and support from other professionals was often mixed, with some parents being supported with

enquiries about eligibility and submitting applications, while others were erroneously told they would not be eligible. This was an issue, in some cases although not all, where NHS Boards covered more than one local authority area and the eligibility criteria varied between the local authorities:

“My daughter is an eligible two and I heard about it through the grapevine, through some other parents. And it wasn’t until she was actually two-and-a-half that I managed to get to the bottom of whether she was entitled or not and did a self-referral... the health visitor at the time actually said that we weren’t eligible and we were.” (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC in a local authority nursery)

2.5.2 Those using eligible two-year-old provision were generally aware of the basic eligibility criteria, e.g. low incomes and care experience, and often indicated it was also extended to lone parents and those with disabilities. However, most participants felt that the eligibility criteria could be more clearly explained or that there could be some easier way of assessing eligibility. Several had tried to find information about the eligibility criteria for their area and found it difficult to access and understand, while three participants had applied for a place for what they perceived was an eligible two-year-old, but had been refused. A lack of recourse for failed applications was mentioned, as well as the need for an accessible point of contact to check eligibility and to discuss unsuccessful applications:

“...it wasn’t a case of I looked in one place and found the answer. I had to look through quite a few different council websites and various different websites before you work it out... and sometimes you do get different answers. You look on one and it says something and you look on another and it says something else. And again, there isn’t anyone you can really call up to say, is my two-year-old eligible or not. You kind of have to work it out for yourself.” (Mother of three, one in school, a four-year-old in a private nursery using funded ELC hours, and a one-year-old, from an ethnic minority background)

“One thing I’ve been really unclear on is that quite often people say to me, I would qualify for hours when the twins are two. But I found it really hard to find out if I really did qualify and, even when I spoke with my [third sector organisation] person, she made some calls. I think she ended up saying I didn’t qualify and I don’t really know why cos everyone else says I should. But if there was like a web page that gives clear information.” (Mother of twins, two-and-a-half-year-olds, not yet eligible for funded ELC, family provided childcare, lone parent)

2.5.3 Two participants also felt that the financial threshold for eligible two-year-olds needed to be considered in context rather than being one fixed limit. They argued that individual circumstances needed to be taken into account, and

that large families and those with multiples (i.e. twins, triplets, etc.) required additional consideration:

“I have no doubt that my income is above what is specified, but the case for me is that should not be enough reason for me not to be eligible because, looking at the cost [of childcare] and the circumstances [with a large family], it is still draining the resources that I’ve got... It’s just like a generic application. Once you are above this income, ‘Boom!’ you are off the ladder. So at least they should have looked at personal circumstances [because then] you will see that even though this person’s income is above this mark, there are reasons they are still at risk of getting into the poverty trap.” (Father of seven children, a baby, five teenagers, and a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC, using a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

3 Decision making process

3.1.1 As outlined in Section 1.3 above, most participants either used funded ELC currently, or planned to use it in the near future. As such, most participants were able to comment on their decision making experiences.

3.2 Main reasons for using ELC

3.2.1 Parents gave largely similar reasons for using ELC across the different settings, and regardless of whether they were using funded hours or had to pay privately for childcare (due to their child not yet being eligible).

3.2.2 The two main reasons participants cited for using ELC were:

- to support their child's development by giving them more chances to socialise, develop, and have different experiences outside of the home; and
- to allow parents to go back to work/earn money or to go to college.

Children's learning and development

3.2.3 The most common reason participants gave for applying for ELC for their children was to enable the child to meet and interact with other children:

“My main reason is socialising my son. So he gets out to play and he gets to meet new friends, etc.” (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC hours in a local authority nursery, lone parent)

3.2.4 Second, and related to that interaction with others, was the education and skills that their child learnt in an ELC setting, as well as the range of different experiences and exposure to other adult care givers. A few also suggested this was valuable preparation for school, both in terms of learning and social skills. Several also said they thought developmental issues were more successfully addressed/supported at nursery, such as speech difficulties, potential autism, shyness or separation anxiety.

3.2.5 This exposure to other children and new settings, both to socialise and to learn from, was considered particularly important for some children with additional support needs:

“To... meet with other children, to learn from other children, for example, how to sit and eat and all that information because he is a special needs child and he needs to actually be around more children. And also staying at home a lot, it also affects his emotional and mental health, so it's always good to actually go out and meet new people and have new friends.” (Mother (via an interpreter) of four, two teenagers, one in primary school, and a five-year-old using ELC funded hours in a local authority nursery)

3.2.6 Another important factor for families where English was not their first language and where it was not the main language spoken in the home, was for their child to learn English and develop their language skills:

“They preferred their daughter to go to the nursery to mingle with other children because, next year, she’ll go to school, so she’ll be prepared for that. And to also learn new words and learn English as well because when she is in nursery, she learns more.” (Mother (via an interpreter) of three, a teenager, one in primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours at a local authority nursery)

3.2.7 The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children was also discussed as a reason for using ELC. Parents noted that the Covid-19 mitigation measures had meant their children had had no, or very limited, exposure to settings and experiences outwith their own home, or to other adults and children outwith their immediate family. It was felt that attending ELC would help their child to build confidence in this respect, and would help tackle separation anxiety which, it was noted, some toddlers had developed - indeed, some were described as ‘Covid’/‘lockdown babies’ or ‘clingy’:

“Their clingy-ness just became exaggerated and they don’t even go to my mother by themselves without major tantrums if I’m in the room or if I’m anywhere nearby. It has to be me for everything, even people that they’re really familiar with... So it then became really important for me to find somewhere - an environment that they were really happy in... I thought that’s going to be the best transition for them to being not with me.” (Mother of twins, two-and-a-half-year-olds, not yet eligible for funded ELC, family provided childcare, lone parent)

“He stopped eating, he wouldn’t talk, he was going back a step. He stopped walking at one point... and that’s when my health visitor said she thinks he was suffering quite badly with social anxiety... She said it would be really beneficial if we managed to get into a nursery setting just to help try and bring him on cos obviously he was born at the start of the pandemic.” (Mother of one, an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a Family/Early Years Centre, young lone parent with a disability in the household).

Parents’ professional life and wellbeing

3.2.8 For the parents themselves, many indicated that using funded ELC had either allowed them to begin working, re-enter the workplace after a break, or increase the number of hours they worked, thereby boosting the family’s financial position:

“So previously, when I had my children, I was a stay at home mum and my husband worked. But using the funded hours, it meant that I could then go out to work, which was fantastic and it meant that it wasn’t impacting our finances in that we were no longer having to

spend money on additional childcare, we had the funded hours, it was fantastic. So when he's at nursery, I'm at work, and it works perfectly." (Mother of three, one in primary school, a baby, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours in a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

"...the main reason is work. I would love not to work but needs must. So yeah, absolutely, the main driver is work, so that [the child] is looked after while I'm working." (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC at a private nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

3.2.9 Others said it had allowed them to go to college or undertake training courses.

3.2.10 Some participants were also appreciative of having more time to themselves (either as respite or to allow them to catch up on household chores), and more opportunities to meet other people (notably other mothers in similar circumstances):

"When I had my daughter... all my friends used to say to me, we'll come round and see you, and when I had her, I've never seen any of them since... I felt like she was the only one that I was with every day and I did the same thing every day... so I was like, I need to get out and meet new people and meet new mums. And going [to the nursery], I've actually met loads of new people." (Mother of two, a four-year-old using funded ELC hours in a local authority nursery, and a two-year-old using (non-ELC funded) childcare in an Family/Early Years Centre)

3.3 Those involved in the decision

3.3.1 Participants generally reported that childcare decisions were made mainly alone or with partners, and only very rarely involved wider family or friends. Some health visitors or other service/support providers had suggested parents should/could use funded ELC to help their children's development, confidence, social skills and language skills, and this had prompted some to pursue a funded ELC place.

3.3.2 Several parents did indicate, however, that being aware of the experiences of other parents had influenced their decisions around ELC use. This was largely in terms of which providers they wished to use or avoid. A few had also received offers of childcare support from family members (or had discussed the possibility of this) and so this factored in their decisions. Other participants noted that they had talked over the options with extended family members. Ultimately, though, the decisions had been made by members of their immediate household.

3.4 Choice of provider

Accessibility and convenience

- 3.4.1 People's choice of provider was largely determined by accessibility, i.e. closeness to home or work:

"...it was halfway between my place of work and my husband's place of work, so either of us could drop-off or pick-up, either way."
(Mother of two, a baby, and a three-year-old nearly eligible for funded ELC, was using a private nursery)

"It's our choice because our oldest child goes to the same school [attached to the nursery] and it's just close to our work and close to our house." (Mother of three, a teenager, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background)

- 3.4.2 Where parents had older children, they often chose to use the local authority nursery attached to the sibling's school. This was mainly for ease of drop-off/pick-up, but also to help with transitions and because they perceived this may provide consistency and continuity in the learning experience (if the child then went on to attend the attached school):

"Well, when [my older child] started school, what we found was that the children who had been to the nursery attached to the school already, they knew each other and they were sort of comfortable with going to the school building and some of the staff and things as well. So, it's partly that, but also what we realised was there was more of an emphasis on numeracy and literacy and I know they're still young but we felt that that's what was lacking in the private nursery." (Mother of two, one at primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours at a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

Characteristics of staff

- 3.4.3 The individual personalities and perceived professionalism, friendliness and approachability of staff (including childminders) was also very important to parents. Some noted this had been assessed through visits to providers in advance, while others cited knowing staff or having previous experience through older children:

"The staff are friendly, [we have] known the staff for many, many years since my oldest was small. So, we all know they are really trustworthy and honest people and really good with children... they all kind of try to look after our children in their best interests." (Mother of three, a teenager, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background)

- 3.4.4 Conversely, one parent (whose child had health issues and additional support needs) was not happy with their provider. The parent indicated a lack of care and attention from the staff as one of the main reasons for this:

“There’s massive trust issues because they failed to recognise my daughter wasn’t coping.” (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC hours in a local authority nursery)

- 3.4.5 Other characteristics that were sought in staff were that they were warm, nurturing and attentive to children’s needs. Although this was perhaps not always the **main** factor driving choice, it was still something that parents looked for in finalising their decisions. It was also one of the main elements that reassured parents that they had made the right choice for their child after taking up a place.

Continuity/Stability/Familiarity

- 3.4.6 Continuity, stability and familiarity with providers was another key factor for several families. Those with multiple children explained that, where older siblings had used a particular provider, they were often the provider of choice again for younger siblings. This was mainly because a rapport had already been established with the childminder/staff, and parents were familiar with the environment and what to expect.

- 3.4.7 Similarly, for those who had used a childminder or private nursery since before the child was eligible for funded ELC, most noted that stability was an important factor when deciding whether to continue with them for the funded ELC provision. Indeed, one participant indicated that ensuring stability had been important when choosing their provider at the outset. They had begun using a private nursery before the child was eligible for funded ELC provision, but noted that they had chosen this because it was a funded provider so they knew they could continue using this and not have to move provider in order to access the funded ELC provision in future:

“Mainly the location was the first thing that attracted me to it and knowing that it worked in partnership with the council... So I knew that it was an option, that I might never need to move him. So to me, I wanted to start off somewhere that I had that option to not move him.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old about to become eligible for funded ELC hours, was using a private nursery)

- 3.4.8 For many of the parents with eligible two-year-olds, being in contact with other support services was often the catalyst to apply for and use the funded ELC provision. These service providers were often the ones who made parents aware of their child’s eligibility, and supported them through the application process. In several cases, families had already been accessing support or attending mother and baby/toddler groups at Family/Early Years Centres, and so they were more confident in sending their child to the nursery/eligible two-year-old provision offered by the same provider:

“The one that she goes to now, we went to a mother and baby group within that centre and they referred her to just one day a week to start with before she turned two. And then when she turned two, they said, right, do you want her placed here, so I filled out the application form and that’s how she got it.” (Mother of three, two adult children, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent)

3.4.9 Again, for these parents, being familiar with the building and the staff was helpful:

“For my daughter anyway and for me, we knew the staff... I did look at other ones but I didn’t go and visit them or anything like that. I knew of them and what they were like and things. But I think just because I was already at this one and already had been doing groups, it was a familiar place.” (Mother of three, two adult children, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent)

Perceived quality and/or reputation of the provider

3.4.10 The perceived quality and/or reputation of providers also helped families make decisions around who they wanted to use. If an establishment was known to be good in local circles, or peers had a positive view of the provider, this was likely to feature in decisions:

“I’ve heard quite a lot of good things about it, like quite a lot of stuff, like the parents obviously that go to my daughter’s school, they had wee ones that had went to that nursery and they said they do recommend it, the teachers are really good. So, it made me feel a bit more confident thinking, ‘Okay at least I know somebody that’s had somebody in there’.” (Mother of two, one at primary school, and a two-year-old using funded ELC hours in a local authority nursery, young parent)

3.4.11 A few families had done more extensive research in order to assure themselves of the quality of each provider, such as phoning and meeting with a large number of different providers, reading inspection reports, reading reviews and forums, etc. before making their choice. Others, however, had not gone to such extents, often applying to those most local to them and accepting what had been offered. Those on low incomes appeared to be less likely to extensively research their options in relation to funded ELC and were more likely to simply accept what was offered by the local/chosen nursery compared to working parents and those with higher and more secure incomes (although it should be noted that not all higher income families indicated that they had done extensive research).

3.5 Deciding between nursery and childminder settings

- 3.5.1 While most participants in the sample were using, or were planning to use, a nursery setting, six participants were using childminding services (although only three were using funded ELC hours with them).

Preferring a nursery setting

- 3.5.2 Those opting for nurseries tended to do so because they perceived that their child would be exposed to greater socialising opportunities, given the larger number of children being cared for within a nursery setting:

“He’s very, very sociable and always has been and I wanted to give him the best opportunities and, yes, he’s got delays and difficulties, but he needs to be in an environment that he can grow and develop the same as other children, has the same opportunities. And the childminding support is no different cos there’s likely to be more children there, but I suppose a nursery is more likely to have more children and more staff and hearing more voices, hearing more things, more activities.” (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC at a private nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

- 3.5.3 A few also felt that nurseries offered greater reliability, i.e. there was a sense that childminders carried greater risk (notwithstanding Covid issues) of being unavailable, either through illness or to accommodate annual leave.

- 3.5.4 Educational issues were also mentioned by a few, with participants being aware that nurseries would have to follow and implement the Curriculum for Excellence and prepare children for school, while it was less well understood that childminders would do this:

“I think it was always a nursery setting we wanted because childminders - they could be going on holidays or they get ill and I was quite keen on somewhere that was [always available]. I think I mentioned earlier about [the nursery following] Curriculum for Excellence and had links to the school so that when they became pre-school age, that it would be setting them up for school. I was keen for that.” (Mother of two, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a private nursery)

- 3.5.5 A minority were also more comfortable with nursery settings on safety grounds (i.e. not using a ‘stranger’s’ home):

“Obviously childminders are very regulated and all that but there was something about my child spending the entire day with one other person and not having quite the same visibility and reporting structures and things, that just made me a little uneasy. And it was also very hard to find reviews and information and actual sources about how good a childminder was. So it just seemed a bit opaque I

guess.” (Mother of two, a baby, and a three-year-old using a private nursery nearly eligible for the funded hours)

- 3.5.6 Others, who were using/planned to use a nursery, had not considered using a childminder, either because they had not realised they could, or because of the perceived social norm of children going to nursery when they turn three.
- 3.5.7 Several parents indicated that they had considered and searched for a childminder in order to use their funded ELC allocation, but could not find any availability in their area. Participants noted a mix of issues including childminders not having enough or any available spaces, as well as there being a general lack of childminders available locally¹⁴.

Preferring a childminder setting

- 3.5.8 Those parents who were using childminder settings indicated that they preferred a smaller setting for their child. Those who had started using their childminder when the child was very young (to allow mothers to return to work after maternity leave), felt that childminders offered the flexibility in hours required, and they noted that they only had to pay for the hours used rather than fixed sessions. They also tended to prefer the smaller and more focussed setting offered by childminders. They then wanted the continuity and stability of the same provider once they were eligible for funded hours:

“Once [my first child] was over a year, I went back to work through an agency and with a childminder, I spoke to the childminder, said about my situation and they’re usually more accommodating and more flexible because of the agency work - some weeks I was working five days, some three days. So we agree on an amount of basic hours and then we could use more, [whereas] with a nursery I would have to probably pay for the whole session or whole month regardless.” (Mother of three, one in primary school, a four-year-old using funded ELC hours with a childminder, and a two-year-old (privately funded) with a childminder)

“We went for a childminder just because he was so young and because I liked the idea of the flexibility. Local to us, in terms of taking him from that age, it would have to have been quite a big nursery and I just wasn’t fussed him for being one of 20 kids or something in a baby room. It just did not appeal to us at all.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old using blended funded ELC hours with a childminder and nursery)

¹⁴ This could be as a result of the relatively small numbers of childminders who have partnered with local authorities to deliver funded ELC - both the Care Inspectorate ([Early Learning and Childcare statistics 2020.pdf \(careinspectorate.com\)](#)) and the Scottish Childminding Association (SCMA) ([Early Learning and Childcare Audit 2021 | SCMA News \(childminding.org\)](#)) noted that low proportions of the childminding workforce were partnered with their local authority, and even fewer were actually delivering funded places.

3.5.9 Similarly, those parents who began using a childminder only when they were eligible for funded ELC also preferred the smaller and more consistent environment provided. One suggested that this had allowed their child to make sustainable friendships:

“We really liked the set up that [the childminder] has with the number of children that are there... So quite small numbers and then the same children seem to be there consistently throughout the week, so [our child’s] made lots of really nice friendships as well. So I guess it’s kind of having an impact beyond the setting [because] we organise play dates, so it has other community aspects I suppose.” (Mother of two, one in primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours with a childminder)

3.5.10 Another parent felt their child was also benefiting more from low numbers of children to care-givers compared to a nursery. They felt that there was more opportunity for the childminder to lead and correct social behaviours, and that this allowed for more personalised attention and child-led activities:

“In order to get a bigger group you have to go to nursery, and then the staff to child ratio is not as big, so I don’t know much they teach them social skills rather than [it happening] just by chance, as opposed to the childminder’s... there’s more teaching opportunity to mix well... [Also] they really just take the things that he enjoys and roll with it... We feel like his interests are getting listened to and explored as opposed to just topics that they would do at a nursery just to tick boxes.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old using blended funded ELC hours with a childminder and nursery)

3.5.11 The ages of the children each childminder had in their care at the time also appeared to be a consideration for parents. One parent felt their child benefited from mixing with older children which the childminder cared for before/after school, as well as having time with their own age group during the day. However, another (who was using a childminder before their child was eligible for funded hours) explained that, while they were content to use a childminder at that time, as soon as their child turned three they intended to move them to a nursery where they could mix with other children of their own age. They noted that their childminder did not have any other children of the same age, only younger, and the parent perceived this as possibly hindering their child’s development and progress:

“A childminder’s good when [they have] got a[nother] two-year-old but I think it’s better for [my daughter] to be mixing with all kids her age... If there was one closer, I definitely would have put her into a private nursery. I definitely think she’d benefit more from being in any sort of nursery.” (Mother of one, a two-year-old not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a childminder, lone parent, young parent)

3.5.12 The results of the current research are consistent with Scottish Government research conducted in 2021, which focused solely on childminder provision/

experiences¹⁵. This also highlighted the importance of flexibility in the hours which childminders can offer, as well as the importance of and perceived benefits such as lower numbers of children in the setting, more one-to-one attention and child-led activities, and a mix of age ranges allowing the children to learn from each other.

3.6 Choice restrictions

3.6.1 While most (although not all) participants were happy with the decisions they had made regarding ELC and the funded ELC setting/provider they were using/planning to use, several had felt constrained by the choices on offer.

3.6.2 For those using (or planning to use) nurseries, the main issue was the hours that were offered. It was noted these were generally fixed at each nursery they explored, either in terms of drop-off/pick-up times or the days of the week that were available. This was often due to nurseries offering fixed sessions per day (either half days or whole days), or capacity issues on certain days across the week.

3.6.3 A lack of different types of providers locally was also identified by a few participants, including a lack of childminder availability (as discussed at paragraph 3.5.7 above), as well as a lack of outdoor/forest school type nurseries, and Montessori nurseries. A general lack of different providers was also noted as an issue for those living in rural areas, meaning parents did not actually have a lot of choice in what was available to use locally:

“So I was just picking from what’s here... So with the nursery, personally I would love to send her to like maybe a forest school or a Montessori nursery. Like a nursery that has a philosophy behind it that I like. But there isn’t that choice.” (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC, using childcare in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background)

3.6.4 A few also noted difficulties in accessing/finding a suitable ELC provider:

- one parent specifically commented that their allocated space for their eligible two-year-old was inaccessible - it was a 20 minute walk from their home which they felt was too far (especially for the child). However, the family had been advised that a place at the local school nursery would become available when the child turned three and they were looking forward to that to “make life easier”;
- one parent (from a rural area) noted they had a nursery just a 5-10 minute walk from their house but they were having to use one a 15-20 minute drive away as the local one did not accept eligible two-year-olds and then could not cater for the child’s additional support needs after they turned three. This was inconvenient for the family and meant that their child

¹⁵ [Scottish Government \(2021\) Perceptions of the impact of childminding services on child, parent and family outcomes: research findings - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultations-petitions/html/2021/Perceptions_of_the_impact_of_childminding_services_on_child,_parent_and_family_outcomes_research_findings.htm)

could not utilise the full entitlement of funded hours. The family felt they had not really had any choice in their provider; and

- one lone parent, who had the support of their health visitor to make funded ELC applications, had been unable to access a place with their first or second choice providers for their three-year-old. The participant had recently moved into the area, but this was after funded places had been allocated. They had been told a place may become available with the first choice provider in January, and had been encouraged to submit new applications for different providers.

3.6.5 Covid-19 safety measures were also impacting on parents' ability to make informed choices, it was felt. Several noted that they had been unable to visit service providers and/or discuss their needs as a result. This was particularly challenging for those with children who had additional support needs as it was increasingly difficult to ensure that providers fully understood their child's needs and could provide a suitable environment and levels of support. This was considered to be adding to parent anxiety in such cases:

"She will be three next year and entitled to a nursery place, but it still gives me the fear because it worries me if she'll get the one-to-one care she needs... Especially with Covid, it's harder. I feel like sometimes when you are going to phone someone and you're trying to explain and they're just like, 'uh huh, uh huh, uh huh'. Or it's like, 'well we can't have you come and talk to us because of the pandemic, you're not allowed in'. And I totally understand that we're still trying to keep safe, but there are parents that have genuine issues and genuine fears for their child and it's a lot easier for them to be able to sit down one-to-one with someone and say, look, this affects my child and I need to feel safe because I'm leaving my child here." (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC, not using any childcare, lone parent)

3.7 Utilising the full entitlement

Opting out of using the full entitlement

3.7.1 While most participants used their full entitlement of funded ELC hours, several did not. This was mainly because the hours offered by their chosen/allocated provider did not fit around other commitments (e.g. the need to pick-up other children at specified times or working hours), due to their child's specific additional support needs, or because they felt the child was too young to be in nursery either for long days or five days a week. One family with a four-year-old in nursery, who had opted to use only three days of the five day funded ELC provision they had been allocated explained that they felt this was too much, not only for the child, but also for the parents who wanted to spend pre-school time together to help with family bonding and giving the child a more 'rounded' pre-school experience:

"It was just a personal choice. I just feel for her age [four-year-old], five days a week, away from the house, away from parents is too

much. I understand if parents have commitments and they don't have any other childcare options, but I just feel, this is your child, we're trying to make family bonds, build relationships, teach some other things like morals and manners and things, that it's not a nursery's responsibility to teach." (Mother of two, one at primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 3.7.2 Only one parent specifically mentioned that they did not use the full entitlement because their child did not enjoy being in an early years setting:

"I'm using at the moment around 20 hours [a week]... personally I want [her] to stay from nine till two or nine till one but... she does not like to go and I [have to] prepare her mind every day... [and] she says 'OK, I only like to go when you pick me [up] early'." (Mother of six, four at school, a baby, and a three-year-old using funded ELC at a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 3.7.3 In this case, the parent said they would only consider increasing the number of funded ELC hours used if they felt their child was happy/content to spend more time in the ELC setting. Others, however, suggested that they would consider sending their child for an increased number of hours as they got older, as they felt they would be able to cope better with more/longer days and in preparation for school.

Flexible use of the full entitlement

- 3.7.4 Regardless of the number of funded ELC hours used, several parents also mentioned that they would sometimes collect children early to allow them to pick-up older siblings from school, or dropped-off late/picked them up early on occasion to accommodate appointments, etc. or simply to spend more time together. One parent who had a large family, including four school age children and a younger child (under two-years old) explained that their three-year-old often did not attend nursery until 11am (despite having a place from 9am) simply due to the need to organise older children and get them ready for school, and then deal with issues related to the baby, before being ready to drop off the nursery aged child.
- 3.7.5 Participants valued flexibility in drop-off and pick-up times and highlighted that nursery staff seemed happy to accommodate such needs. One parent, however, suggested it may be good to know 'formally' that staff were content for children to be dropped off late/picked up early, rather than leaving parents to speculate if this was acceptable.

Desire for increases in the funded entitlement

- 3.7.6 A few families mentioned that an increase in the total number of funded hours that children were entitled to may be desirable to help them meet their work demands (particularly where parents worked full-time). However, there was some uncertainty around whether this would be good for the child. One

parent suggested that it may only be desirable for the child if additional funded hours could be used for something different to the core provision:

“[Ideally] we would need more hours to cover our working. From nine till five, for example, would be great but I don’t know if it would be good for children, not being free all day... Or maybe a different type of activity that would give them that extra boost of excitement, you know, after school club or something like that.” (Mother of three, a teenager, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

3.8 Choosing not to use funded ELC

3.8.1 One participant with a three-year-old was not using funded ELC at the time of the interview, however, this was not through personal choice, but rather, difficulty in finding available places locally (as discussed at paragraph 3.6.4 above).

3.8.2 Another participant had decided against using the funded ELC provision for their eligible two-year-old. They were using funded ELC provision for their three-year-old, but had not taken up a place for the younger child. The older child had also been an eligible two-year-old but, again, the family had delayed their start in funded ELC provision as they felt the child was not ready for a nursery setting and had wanted to prioritise bonding with the children. They also felt that their younger child did not have any developmental or emotional issues that needed the input and support of a professional ELC setting, and as the mother was at home full-time, the family felt that the funded ELC provision was unnecessary:

“He hasn’t got the same developmental issues... and I’m still off, not really properly back at work. So I’m kind of like ‘why am I sending him [to childcare] if I can do it myself?’, it just seems a bit strange. He’s three [soon], and I think we will send him then... It’s not because of the nursery we haven’t sent him, it’s just because we didn’t feel that he needed it, even though he’s eligible, we don’t think he’s a particularly vulnerable or needy child in that way.” (Mother of two, a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a Family/Early Learning Centre, and an eligible two-year-old not accessing any childcare)

3.9 Informal care

3.9.1 Several families were using a regular pattern of family support (typically the child’s grandparent(s)) to either provide all childcare or to top-up privately funded formal childcare where children were not yet eligible for ELC, and to top-up the 1,140 funded ELC hours being used. In most circumstances, this was described as being a financial necessity as families could not afford private childcare or the fees for additional hours with their current funded ELC provider. However, many in this situation also considered this to be an

important opportunity for the child and the extended family member(s) to build bonds and relationships:

“I’m keen for [my child] to have those experiences from all kind of generations, just to give him that opportunity to learn from them and for them to learn from him. They can give different things than I can... and I guess I was quite close to my grandparents and I think that’s really important and we’re lucky to have that opportunity for him to do that.” (Mother of one, a four-year-old year old using funded ELC hours at a private nursery, lone parent, disability in the household)

3.9.2 It should be noted, however, that where parents were receiving support from family members to provide regular childcare, they were often reluctant to seek additional informal support to help with other chores/tasks, such as time for shopping or appointments. They described a sense of ‘guilt’ that they were already asking a lot from family members and felt that they could not ask for more. Two others, who used a grandparent for childcare one day each week, explained that this was all they would ask for as they did not want to over-burden them:

“As much as it’s really good to have my parents there to help, I maybe feel that I would need the support of my parents on days that I’m not working. Like, I then feel guilty asking them for more support and I feel that they’re already doing their part... it’s absolutely great that they’re there, it’s great that they can help me, but I feel guilty on a Saturday afternoon being like, ‘could you have [my child] for a few hours so that I can go shopping or do this?’ So I kind of feel like I only have childcare when I’m working. I don’t have childcare at any other times. So I find that quite hard.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old about to be eligible for funded hours, using a private nursery, lone parent)

3.9.3 Others who had family nearby felt that informal care from the grandparents was not an option, often due to their ill-health and/or a perception that it would be too challenging for them to look after a young child. Meanwhile, some families were unable to top-up care with informal help from family and friends as they had no-one nearby to support them. The only alternative in such cases was to pay for additional childcare hours, although for some, the cost of this was prohibitive and so parents were either constrained in the time they had available to work/go to college, or they ‘juggled’ the childcare between them through both parents working more flexible hours.

4 ELC, work, education and training

- 4.1.1 The importance of reliable childcare is well understood as a key factor in supporting parents, and mothers in particular, into work. As outlined in Section 1.3, participants represented a range of situations, including some who were in work full-time or part-time, some who were attending college or other training courses full-time or part-time, some who were looking for work, and some who were not currently in employment, education or training.

4.2 Motivating factors for work/training/education

- 4.2.1 Across all participants, the main driver or motivating factor for being in (or wishing to be in) work, education or training was financial stability and trying to build a better future for their children:

“Just to give us a better future really...I don't think we're financially better off while I'm studying. I'd probably say we're worse off. But in the future, yeah, I think it will benefit us.” (Mother of one, a two-year-old not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a childminder, lone parent, young parent)

- 4.2.2 Self-esteem and something for one's own personal development/sense of self was a secondary, but important, factor for many working mothers and those seeking work:

“So yeah, financially and actually, just as much as I would love to be a full-time mum... you want to have some sort of thing for yourself, have something for myself - you still always put them first and think about them but, yeah, just to have something else myself and not only be a mum.” (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC at a private nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

- 4.2.3 Others felt that continuing to work after having children was important for their sense of self/self-identity and their own mental health:

“I've done it for so long [worked], it's kind of become a part of who I was, and I had left for a while but I found it quite hard to just not have that sort of identity anymore and feel like something's missing kind of thing. It was really just to have that balance of your own thing as well as joint things with your family.” (Mother of two, one at primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

“I think it ties in with of course financially supporting your children, but also mental health. I think going back to what makes you feel good [helps you] to be a better mum, to have my independence, all of those things. I definitely wanted to get back and find a new balance. I can be devoted to them but also have my passions and my career.” (Mother of two, one at primary school, and a four-year-

old using funded ELC at a private nursery and paying to top-up with a childminder)

- 4.2.4 One parent, whose child had additional support needs, also described how time at work provided a much needed break from domestic demands:

“Sometimes [work is] my only sanity, which is terrible to say, but sometimes being at work is the only thing that stops you from breaking... Cos you’ve got a different focus for a very short time.”
(Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC at a local authority nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

- 4.2.5 A few parents also thought it was important to be a positive role-model for their children, while one mother specifically commented that she had returned to work because she felt it was important for women to be visible in the workplace and felt that she needed to make a statement about women feeling able to return to work after childbirth:

“So for me, finances played a huge part and I suppose, deep down, I want to show a good example to my son that that’s what you do in life, you know, you work for money.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old using a private nursery, about to be eligible for funded ELC hours, lone parent)

4.3 Importance of funded ELC in supporting work, education and training

Those who returned to work following maternity leave

- 4.3.1 In families where mothers had returned to work after maternity leave and the family had been using privately funded childcare options, the importance and benefit of the funded ELC provision was largely financial. Once their child became eligible, it meant a large proportion (and sometimes all) of their childcare costs were removed, providing greater financial stability for the family. In most cases, when the child became eligible for funded hours parents had not moved or rearranged their childcare, they typically continued to use the same provider and pattern of hours as this already suited their needs.
- 4.3.2 A few, whose children would be eligible for funded ELC in the coming months, indicated that the funded hours would allow them to increase the hours they currently worked (e.g. from two days to three). Similarly, one parent reflected on their experience of funded ELC with older children compared to their most recent experience and indicated that the increased funded ELC hours made life much easier and allowed both parents to work increased and more reliable hours. There was a clear alignment, for some parents at least, that the funded ELC provision was being used to maximise the time available for the parents to work.
- 4.3.3 A few parents, however, noted that they had not returned to work at the end of their maternity leave due to the cost of childcare before becoming eligible

for funded ELC provision, and because they felt that the hours they needed to work were not conducive to caring for young children. In some cases, employers had failed to grant the reduction in hours they needed/wanted or the nature of the job would involve overnight/night-shift working. In other cases, mothers were keen to maximise their time with their children while they were young. While these issues are separate to funded ELC (as these challenges occur prior to children being eligible), participants felt it was important to note the gap in support between maternity leave ending and the funded ELC provision starting.

Those newly joining work, education or training

- 4.3.4 Several participants indicated that they had been able to find a job or start a course at college specifically because of the funded ELC provision. They noted it freed up their time to pursue something outwith the home, and in the case of those who took up employment, it allowed them to increase the household income and (consistent with those already in work) improve their financial stability. A few had returned to work full-time and noted that the funded ELC had made this a viable option as it meant the level of privately funded or informal top-up hours became manageable, whereas it might not have been considered as such under the previous 600 hour allocation. Others, however, who had started new jobs described themselves as 'lucky' to find something that fitted in with the funded ELC hours they were using:

"I think it definitely made [going to work] more feasible and financially affordable. When we'd looked at it previously [before the increase to 1,140 ELC hours], if I was to go back to work full-time and be paying for full-time childcare, it almost would have not been worth me going back to work. And if you do choose to go back to work, we're still sacrificing time that we would have been spending with the children, so to make it more worthwhile, the funding has definitely been helpful." (Mother of two, one in primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours with a childminder)

- 4.3.5 One mother had also tried to attend a college course before her child was eligible for funded ELC but could not get childcare (she had been unable to access the college nursery and could not afford private childcare). Therefore, funded ELC provided the support needed to allow her to return to this:

"She wanted to learn the language so she can actually use it in her everyday life and that also helps especially with her child going to the nursery. Previously, she had to stay home to take care of her [child], so she wasn't able to go to college, but now she can." (Mother (via an interpreter) of three, two in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 4.3.6 Parents who worked or attended college reported mixed experiences about the order in which they established funded ELC provision and working patterns. Some waited to confirm working/college hours until they knew the

funded ELC hours they could access, while others found a job/course, or agreed hours with existing managers and then sought a funded ELC provider who could accommodate the necessary pattern. One lone parent, whose child was two-and-a-half and nearly eligible for funded ELC, was keen to return to college or apply for jobs but was unsure about when to apply due to the uncertainty around the pattern of funded ELC hours they would be given - it was felt that earlier information about this was needed to allow parents to plan and meet application deadlines for work/study opportunities.

4.4 ELC's fit with needs

- 4.4.1 Most participants indicated that the funded ELC provision they had secured generally fitted their needs well, although Covid-19 was seen to have supported working parents in this respect, with more parents able to work from home and be more flexible. As accessibility was one of the key drivers in choosing a provider, the location of funded ELC providers being used was generally convenient (although again, some noted that it was perhaps less so currently due to Covid-19 and working from home, or that it might not be as convenient in future once parents had to return to the workplace) and that the pattern of days-of-the-week and hours across the day suited them. This was the case for both working and stay-at-home parents, with stay-at-home parents generally managing their time around their funded ELC arrangements. However, for some who had children in primary school there were occasional issues with drop-off and pick-up times not aligning well.
- 4.4.2 Some working parents, however, noted that the fixed hours/patterns of days that some providers offered (typically nurseries) sometimes meant that families were being offered/had to use funded ELC hours and patterns which were less suitable for their needs. For example, being offered three longer days each week when they would prefer five shorter days, or vice versa. This meant that top-up care was needed (either paid for or via support from family), or that children were meant to be attending ELC settings when parents were at home and therefore it was seen as unnecessary. This issue is discussed in more detail at Section 6.2 below.

Term-time vs full year models

- 4.4.3 There was less certainty about term-time only versus full year provision and how well these models fitted with family needs.
- 4.4.4 Some felt that the option of term-time only was acceptable as at least one parent would be available during the holidays, either because they were a stay-at-home parent, or they worked a term-time only pattern. This also provided a higher number of funded hours each week during term-time, which often suited working parents. Conversely, others (typically working parents) highlighted that the school holidays may be problematic for them, and they worried about how they would find and afford clubs and other childcare options over the holidays. One family reported that they purposefully had to fit their work around the school/nursery holidays, i.e. planning time off and splitting childcare between parents to cover non-term-

time childcare demands. In several cases, participants (again, typically those already in work) noted that the pattern of hours across the year had been an important factor for them when choosing a provider, and that they had chosen full year models in order to have consistent ELC provision.

- 4.4.5 One family, where both parents worked, indicated that they had had to swap their model from full-year funded provision to term-time only (with the same provider) as they needed to pay for additional top-up hours each week. This was proving to be unaffordable when using a full year model where lower funded hours were provided each week, and so they swapped to the term-time only model in order to utilise the higher number of funded hours per week. They planned to rely on family support to help them through the holidays.
- 4.4.6 A few parents using (or who had applied to) nurseries were not sure which model their provision fell into because their child had only newly started and they did not know the provider's model in this respect. These were generally stay-at-home parents, those from ethnic minority backgrounds where English was an additional language, or those at college. In such cases, parents had typically applied to the local nursery without undertaking much research or receiving much information about the model used. Although, for stay-at-home parents, they were relaxed about either model being used as they would be available to care for the child in the holidays if necessary.

4.5 Barriers to taking up work, education or training

- 4.5.1 Of the participants not currently in work, education or training, time and financial situations were the main barriers to taking these up, along with perceptions that the funded ELC hours may not be conducive to facilitating such activities.

Difficulty aligning work and funded ELC hours

- 4.5.2 Those participants **not currently in work, education or training**, often noted a lack of time and/or difficulty in aligning work opportunities with the funded ELC hours. One suggested that they had no time to work because of the hours of the nursery, and two others specifically stated that they would "love" to work if time allowed. Another felt that funded ELC was not flexible enough for them to work. A few also noted that if they worked, there would be an added burden on other family members who would need to be called on at more regular intervals.
- 4.5.3 Two unemployed mothers who were looking for a new job explained that their choices were constrained by the lack of part-time/flexible posts and the perceived difficulty in finding work which would fit around the funded ELC hours or in finding funded ELC providers that could accommodate their required working hours:

"I probably did [feel my choices were restricted or limited], to be honest, just because obviously there's only a certain amount of jobs

that probably fit around the criteria of them going to nursery and being able to do the pick-up and drop-off as well as going to work.” (Mother of two, one in primary school, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a local authority nursery, young parent from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

“Because it’s the care type of work that I’m looking for, it’s long hours, so obviously it’s early starts which a lot of the childcare don’t start before I need to start. And then the childcare finishes before I would finish as well. So that’s the part I’m finding a bit hard.” (Mother of three, two adult children, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent)

- 4.5.4 For **those in work** currently, there was also a perception that finding work and ELC opportunities that aligned was difficult. One participant (whose child was not yet eligible for funded ELC) highlighted, that whilst their work and privately funded ELC provision worked for their needs, it was easy to see that co-ordinating these (both for funded or privately paid for ELC and work) could be difficult for others:

“So for me it kind of works, but I think it can be really hard for people. It can be really hard to find work and childcare that does match and does suit. I mean, especially for someone in my circumstance where there’s no one to share the responsibility with, you know.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old using a private nursery, not yet using funded ELC hours, lone parent)

- 4.5.5 Another mother suggested that the flexibility she enjoyed in her current work around childcare might not have been as easy to achieve if she was starting with a new employer - she felt that the relationship she had with her existing employer had made the difference between her requests for flexible working being accepted (or not). This was reiterated by another mother who indicated that, while her employer had been very accommodating of her requests for flexible working hours after her child had been born, this maybe meant that she felt “trapped” to a certain extent, as she was unlikely to find another employer who would offer the same flexibility:

“Well, one thing is that I’m actually kind of stuck there now. I would never get my working arrangement anywhere else. I really wouldn’t. So I’m limited to staying there, so I have to weather out any storms that might come within my work place.” (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC at a local authority nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

Cost and impact of funded ELC

- 4.5.6 In relation to cost, it was suggested that the funded ELC provision may alleviate this barrier, at least to some extent. Two participants had received professional advice (prior to being eligible for funded ELC) that the impact on benefits and the need to pay for childcare meant that working (or increasing

their working hours) would not be financially beneficial. However, at least one parent (who was struggling to maintain part-time work prior to being eligible for funded ELC) was planning to increase how much they worked once their child was using the funded ELC provision.

- 4.5.7 Two other parents reported that they would like to be able to look for full-time employment/education instead of part-time. In both cases, this was hindered by the fact that their child was too young for the funded ELC provision and they needed to pay for childcare, and full-time ELC provision was unaffordable for them. Again, the provision of the funded ELC would allow these parents the opportunity to increase their employment/education hours as the top-up childcare needed would be more affordable.
- 4.5.8 Other parents, however, saw the current limit of 1,140 funded ELC hours as a barrier to increasing their number of working hours or their time spent in education/training. One participant explained that they would like to explore new career opportunities but felt that the time and cost commitment of doing so would exceed the funded ELC provision. The need to pay for top-up childcare may present a barrier:

“I’m starting to think I want to do something else maybe. I would absolutely love to train as a joiner or a carpenter, which would mean going back to do like an apprenticeship or something and they’re all full-time, they’re all five days a week. So, it would put me off, the prospect of me doing training and not earning an income whilst also having to pay for an extra two days a week in childcare. That does put me off looking for other opportunities. Having to pay for childcare and not potentially earning as such... And I think it would be quite difficult if I looked for another job. I’m more likely to try and set up my own business or something like that but I know that would take quite a lot of hard work and I don’t know whether I’d have time for that [either]... So I think I’ve got it quite good at the moment, I should probably just stick with this for a little while.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old about to become eligible for funded ELC, childcare managed by parents and a friend, with a disability in the household)

Valuing parenting and time with children

- 4.5.9 While some participants indicated that they would work or study more if the total number of funded ELC hours were increased, others liked their existing work/home life balance and wanted to be available for, and spend at least some quality time with, their children during the week. A few commented that, if they worked more, they would rarely see their child/children, would miss bed-time routines or certain day-time school events, such as sports days, or would not be available if the child was sent home sick at short notice.
- 4.5.10 Interestingly, there was evidence from this research that parents wanted more flexibility in education, training and employment opportunities rather than necessarily any change to funded ELC policy or provision. Some

participants felt that employers and educational establishments should offer a wider range of flexible options that would fit around childcare provision, rather than childcare needing to be more extensive/flexible to fit with current work/study expectations:

“I think it’s more to do with the available jobs maybe, like jobs need to be a lot more flexible I think. Jobs and maybe training as well need to be a lot more flexible, like a lot more different part-time hours and stuff like that available... the courses that I would be interested in, I just don’t think it would be possible because they’re all like five days a week. So I think it would be great if employers and jobs and stuff would be more flexible.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old about to become eligible for funded ELC, childcare managed by parents and a friend, with a disability in the household)

4.5.11 The 1,140 hours were often seen as sufficient to give the children what they needed in terms of social and educational experiences, and so rather than looking to increase the number of ELC hours even further, a few participants felt that the focus should perhaps be on introducing more part-time and flexible options for the workforce. Indeed, one participant (who worked full-time) noted that they were exploring opportunities to reduce their number of work hours to allow a better work/life balance:

“I did mention in the office to my line manager that I would love to drop a few hours from my full-time, either like three or four hours... So like that would be amazing to drop a few hours just to have like a bit of time for myself maybe. Like I haven’t been to a yoga class for like three years now, you know.” (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC, childcare paid for in a Family/Early Years Centre)

4.6 Pressure to work/study vs funded ELC being a motivating factor

4.6.1 Although most participants indicated that they had not felt pressured into working while their child was using funded ELC, others indicated that they had perhaps felt an ‘expectation’ to work/study/volunteer as a result of the introduction of increased funded ELC hours.

4.6.2 A few participants felt that the provision of funded ELC hours generated an expectation that parents would work, be in education or training, or be “productive” in some other way:

“If you’re using it [funded ELC hours] and your children are in nursery, you feel completely obliged to make every single minute of that count. I think lots of mums sometimes, all you want to do is get on top of the laundry, have a cup of coffee without someone sort of pulling at your sleeve... but there’s a tremendous pressure to work and fill those hours to the max.” (Mother of two, one at primary)

school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours in a private nursery and paying for a childminder)

- 4.6.3 One parent described feeling some social pressure to study or work while their child was using funded ELC hours, but said that they dismissed such pressures because they felt it was an unrealistic expectation for a busy mother:

“At the start, I did [feel there was an expectation]. That was just because I’m on Universal Credit and as soon as you say ‘the wee one’s at nursery’, they say ‘start looking for a job’. But the thing is, I don’t think they understand. Fair enough, I can look for a job, I’ll go and work, but do you know the role of a mum on a day-to-day basis, it’s a 24 hour job... You’re knackered by the time you’re dropping them at school and then you’ve got [a few] hours to yourself to do whatever it is you want to do. It might seem like a lot to them but, to us, it’s barely nothing cos you wake up in the morning, you drop them off, you do your stuff and then it’s like ‘Okay, look at the time, it’s time to go back and get them now.’” (Mother of two, one in primary school, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a local authority nursery, young parent from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

- 4.6.4 Similarly, a lone parent whose child had not started using funded ELC yet, was worried that they might experience pressure from the Job Centre and the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) in this respect after their child started nursery. This was based on current perceived punitive practices and an increase in contact from the DWP/Job Centre since the Covid-19 pandemic began:

“I’m really worried that as soon as she turns three, it’s going to be like - cos everyone warned me that it’s going to be like this clampdown of like, well you have to be doing something now. If she’s away for like four hours, you have to be doing something during those four hours or there’s going to be sanctions. I think there’s always this fear of you’re going to be punished... So there’ll be some kind of feedback loop that keeps track on whether you’re doing something productive or not and whether it’s acceptable... it just feels like they’re kind of dangling this thing of like, ‘well she’s two now, we’re keeping an eye on you and we want to see you’ and you feel this kind of pressure from them now.” (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC, not using childcare, lone parent)

- 4.6.5 One parent explained that there was, perhaps, a narrow public view of how parents should spend their time when their children were being looked after, and felt that their plans to work around the house, including completing DIY tasks, may not meet with public expectations around “productive time”:

“I do feel like I need to show... other people that I’m being productive. But I am being productive, it’s just not in the way that society expects I suppose.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old about to become eligible for funded ELC, childcare managed by parents and a friend, with a disability in the household)

- 4.6.6 Two other participants felt that any pressure felt by parents was likely to come from a more widespread societal expectation for parents to work, rather than being a creation or a direct result of the funded ELC provision itself:

“I think it’s society, to be honest... I think society does expect mothers to be [working], it’s probably not as socially acceptable now to be just a housewife and a mother.” (Mother of two, one at primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours in a private nursery and paying for a childminder)

- 4.6.7 A few also felt that they placed an expectation on themselves, rather than feeling any structural or social pressure. Two parents described being motivated by the funded ELC provision, i.e. that it had given them “an opportunity” or “a push” to take on new tasks, but described this in positive terms.

4.7 Unpaid activities/volunteering

- 4.7.1 In addition to supporting work, education and training, the interviews also explored whether the funded ELC provision supported participants to undertake other activities or responsibilities, such as caring responsibilities, any unpaid work, or volunteering. Mixed experiences and perceptions were reported in this respect.

- 4.7.2 Several participants (including those currently using funded ELC and those whose child was nearly eligible) felt that they simply did not have time to do anything other than work/study and look after their children:

“I would love to... I would like to do sort of extra-curricular things for me. But I’m basically using it to survive to work... I literally close a laptop and pick him up and... drop him off and then open a laptop.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old using a private nursery, not yet using funded ELC hours, lone parent)

“...during the week, it’s a bit tight on time because she has to rush with her college and nursery and then go back home and clean the house and prepare food for the children to come back home. And then she has to do her own homework or study for college and all that.” (Mother (via an interpreter) of four, two teenagers, one in primary school, and a five-year-old using ELC funded hours in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

4.7.3 Others, however, outlined some unpaid activities, volunteering or caring roles they had. One parent explained that, alongside working part-time, they were a 'social entrepreneur', they used some (but very little) of their free time when their child was in childcare to pursue this for their own wellbeing:

"I'm always volunteering and always trying to create things to do...[it is] good for me to do something, you know, feel like a sense of achievement, able to meet with friends and networking, helping others." (Mother of three, a teenager, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

4.7.4 Another single mother, who suffered from mental ill-health, explained that funded ELC would (in the future, once her child found a space) be of great assistance in giving her the respite that she needed and that she planned to volunteer as a way of bolstering her mental health:

"For three years now, I've been dealing with depression and anxiety, so the doctor's advice is you need to be doing something different. So that is my priority now because I just want to get out of the kind of feeling that I have every day...That is why I want to volunteer because I think it will give me a chance to meet different people, new people, different things to be done each day." (Mother of three, two in primary school and a three-year-old not currently using any childcare, lone parent from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

5 Benefits of funded ELC use

- 5.1.1 The benefits of funded ELC were noted to be largely consistent with families' rationale for using ELC generally (as discussed at Section 3.2 above). All participants agreed that funded ELC had (or would hopefully have) mutual benefits for both children and their parents:

"I think like the socialisation and being around a lot of other kids and learning from the other kids and being in that kind of group environment would be good for them [children]. Giving the parents a break and just freeing up a bit of time for them to do other stuff, whether it's paid work or learning or whatever. I suppose those are the two benefits." (Mother of one, a three-year-old about to become eligible for funded ELC, childcare managed by parents and a friend, with a disability in the household)

5.2 Benefits for the child

- 5.2.1 The benefits which participants highlighted for children largely focused on positive outcomes from attending any ELC setting, rather than identifying advantages specific to funded ELC.

Socialisation and general child development

- 5.2.2 Consistent with the main reasons for using ELC (discussed at Section 3.2), most participants felt the benefits of the provision were associated with their child's development, and in particular that their child was able to socialise, interact with and create bonds with peers:

"It's interaction with children at the same stage... because you can't get that at home unless you've got other children. As much as I try, I can't be a four-year-old and do the things and play and do what they do, as well as having opportunity to learn and hear from other adults and just have that life experience, because I'll have different views and different ways of discipline and different routines. I just think it gives them a really, really good experience and exposure to what life will be like." (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC at a private nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

- 5.2.3 Another key benefit for the child in attending ELC was learning new skills and broadening their education. It was felt children benefited from this in an ELC setting, both from the adult carer's input and peer learning:

"Even at that age [two-years-old], it's quite appropriate cos obviously they're then mixing with children their age. I find that when they're with other children, children progress in different ways, some quicker than others and I feel that by having that integration with other children, it helps push obviously the kids along as well." (Father of two, a three- and a four-year-old, both using funded ELC at a

Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent with a disability in the household)

“He’s being taught things... in the last four weeks since his last review, he’s started to sit down with his peers and he’s like chasing them round the table and they’re sharing their lunch, something that he’s never ever done before... That’s a massive jump in four weeks, like huge.” (Mother of one, an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent with a disability in the household)

- 5.2.4 Participants also felt that children benefited from increased confidence and independence, that they gained experience of non-home environments and different activities, as well as building relationships with other responsible adults:

“We thought it would be nice for her to be in an environment with lots of other children where they get to do things that basically they don’t really get to do at home and I think it’s just nice from an independence point of view as well, to get to know other adults, get used to people just coming in and out... I think it’s also beneficial for children to be in an environment that’s not at home and get to see different things, listen and talk to different people and have new experiences.” (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

Physical and mental stimulation

- 5.2.5 For some, it was felt that their child clearly benefited from the increased mental and physical stimulation provided in the ELC setting compared to what parents felt they could provide at home. One parent reported that their child had become more physically active since starting nursery, joining in with lots of different play activities:

“[My daughter] is quite advanced for her age, so there’s only so much I can do with her. Whereas if she was in a nursery, there’s people there to explore her needs and are trained to do that, like activities based on her age because I don’t really know.” (Mother of one, a two-year-old not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a childminder, lone parent, young parent)

“We do try to take her out for walks just to take fresh air but it can never be compared with going to play with other children doing all sorts of different activities. So, it’s a great idea...it’s very positive for me and it’s very important for the child’s development, mentally, socially and psychologically.” (Father of seven, five teenagers, a baby, and a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

5.2.6 Another parent reported that at home their child was spending too much time on devices/in front of screens, whereas they were much more active and sociable whilst with their ELC provider.

5.2.7 The fact that staff in ELC establishments were trained in the early years curriculum and could provide preparation for school was also seen as a strength:

“She is noticing that her child is learning how to hold a pen or pencil, and write letters, and also she comes back home with new words that she learned from nursery.” (Mother (via an interpreter) of three, two in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

5.2.8 One parent reported that they had decided to pay for childcare for their two-year-old (following a failed application for funded provision) as they felt it was important for their child to be in a social and educational environment:

“If I decided not to send my child to day-care at this stage [age two], it might affect her learning and her integration with other kids. So, it’s about the good of the child, that’s the main reason I don’t mind paying for childcare... just to make sure that she’s up to speed, she can easily adapt. By the time she turns three, she will be better prepared to go.” (Father of seven, five teenagers, a baby, and a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

Support to tackle developmental issues

5.2.9 Some participants commented that, in an ELC setting, there was a diverse range of staff with different skills sets and supports, and so they felt reassured that staff would help to identify any issues or areas of development that needed further support. This was seen as a benefit for both the child and the parents, who generally were able to discuss any concerns and work jointly with the nursery on development issues. While this was a general benefit for all families, it was particularly important for those who had, or were suspected to have, a developmental issue or an additional support need:

“Yeah, it just really helps their development. My son had a speech delay, so being able to support him through that, being able to help promote that with him without me having to do everything at home on my own, being a bit lost. Having professionals to turn to, just having someone to almost feel like part of your family I suppose. But yeah, he benefits so much from it, he absolutely loves it.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old using a private nursery, not yet using funded ELC hours, lone parent)

“So she is very happy with how the nursery staff... and how they are treating [the child]. They have been very supportive of his case and also they’re trying their best to direct them or guide the parents on

where [the child] should go to for school, because he has [additional support needs] and he needs a special needs school rather than a normal public school... from the beginning of this year there has been already 2 meetings with the parents where the nursery actually sends them feedback about the child's development and what is needed for him inside of the house, for example, for the parents to encourage or to focus on, so he can develop even better. So she feels like they have been getting the support from the nursery.” (Mother (via an interpreter) of four, two teenagers, one in primary school, and a five-year-old using ELC funded hours in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

Supporting integration and cultural inclusion

5.2.10 For ethnic minority families where English was not the family's native language, there was also some evidence that the nursery setting was helping to encourage speaking and language skills for the children:

“...when my daughter started going to the Early Childcare Centre, her speech [started] improving. She can speak better, she is better composed, she can express herself, even though before she started [nursery] she did express herself, from the time she started going to this day-care for two and a half hours, there was a great improvement. She can speak out, she feels happy, you see happiness all over her.” (Father of seven, five teenagers, a baby, and a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

5.2.11 One participant commented that others in her social network had welcomed the opportunities that their nursery presented for their children to mix with others of the same and other cultures (i.e. the environment provided exposure to cultural diversity):

“I had a comment from my friend who is from Kenya, she said she was passing by the nursery and she saw [her child] was holding hands with another black girl, so she was like, ‘Oh, she's growing up nicely!’” (Mother of three, a teenager, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

Tackling the impacts of Covid-19

5.2.12 Linked to support with development issues (as discussed at paragraph 5.2.9 above) and again, flagged as an important motivator for using ELC (at Section 3.2), some parents commented on nursery being almost a ‘life-saver’ in terms of child development and recovering from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated safety measures:

“Although he’s very much attached to me a lot of the time, I think nursery’s very, very beneficial at this age [two], especially given we’ve just been in a pandemic where [my son] was in the house for a year. He didn’t socialise, he had never communicated or been around a child his own age and he loves nursery.” (Mother of one, an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent with a disability in the household).

5.2.13 One parent also said that their child was becoming shy and fearful of strangers after spending too much time at home and so she had chosen to enrol her in a nursery (with support and on advice from the health visitor) to help her become less socially isolated. A few also reported that their child was becoming too dependent/attached to the parents/main caregiver and needed more social interaction:

“...he’s quite a handful, so I was thinking, maybe he needs something to do during the day, and in that way, he’s not with me 24/7 cos he was very attached to me and I wanted him to get to interact with other kids and stuff.” (Mother of two, one in primary school, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a local authority nursery, young parent from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

5.3 Benefits for parents and parenting

Support to work or attend education/training

5.3.1 Again, in line with the comments given in relation to the reasons for using ELC (at Section 3.2), the main benefit of the funded provision for parents was the ability to either work, earn money and provide greater financial stability for their family, or to undertake study with a view to starting or furthering a career in their chosen area. As noted in Section 4.3 and paragraphs 4.5.6-4.5.7 above, the funded ELC provision removed or reduced the childcare cost barrier and supported a number of participants back into work/training/education:

“I think it helps people to get into work after having a child... I couldn’t have afforded to go to work and pay for [my child’s] childcare when she was a baby. I just couldn’t afford it. I think it makes it a lot easier for people to get back into work.” (Mother of one, a two-year-old not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a childminder, lone parent, young parent)

5.3.2 While funded ELC provision had not prompted parents who were already working to find a new job, it had enabled them to continue with their employment, and in some cases to increase the hours they worked. The funded ELC provision was beneficial to them in reducing or eliminating their childcare costs (once they were old enough to qualify) and therefore provided greater financial stability. This was perceived to provide peace of

mind, professional headspace, and the ability to focus more on their work (especially when working at home due to Covid-19):

“...not having to worry when you’re in a meeting, you know, where you cannot focus, you have to look after the child’s welfare at the same time, you’re trying to put your point across in a meeting and look as if you’re engaged in a work environment.” (Mother of three, a teenager, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

Respite and time for self

- 5.3.3 Most participants who were either not in work, education or training, or who worked less than the funded ELC hours they used, indicated that the funded ELC provision allowed them to catch up on housework, do food shopping, complete DIY tasks around the house and care for other children. A few also said that they would use the time for respite and/or catching up with friends and family (albeit often only after all other ‘demands’ were met):

“...when I’ve cleaned the house and I’ve not got anything else to do, I’ve done everything for the rest of the week, like I’ll maybe text a friend or my sister or something and we’ll go out for a coffee during the day, which I probably wouldn’t normally do if I had the kids because they just play up when you take them out.” (Mother of two, one in primary school, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a local authority nursery, young parent from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

- 5.3.4 Lone parents in particular noted that this time away from their young children was highly beneficial for their mental health. It allowed them to have some down-time, a break and time to relax:

“It kind of gives me a sort of breather as well from being a parent and actually let me be an adult.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old using funded ELC in a private nursery, young lone parent, with a disability in the household)

“It’s very important, yeah. Especially if you’re there yourself with them, to get that sort of one time to yourself. But then it’s going and getting a food shop without them there and them screaming and wanting this and that and the next thing. Getting the Christmas presents in, or just even coming home and just watching rubbish morning TV or having a cuppa, a hot cuppa is the best. Yeah, it’s the best feeling to be able to do it.” (Mother of three, two adult children, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent)

- 5.3.5 Several participants who had not started using the funded ELC provision yet, were also hopeful that it would provide them with a bit of respite and time to themselves:

“I’m hoping that, yeah, it will give me some time to actually say, I am myself again, not just a mum.” (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC, not using childcare, lone parent)

“So at the moment, everything I do, I do with my daughter... so it’s hard for me to do, you know, run to the shop because I need to get her ready, so it’s all these things like getting the house clean or like anything. And... it’s so tiring that the simplest thing takes like three times as long because I cannot do them by myself. Or even, to be honest, in the last couple of years, I can count on the fingers of one hand when I met with my friends just for a chat and it’s never like 100% because when my daughter is there, you have to concentrate on the chat and keep one eye on her. So it’s sometimes helpful to have this bit of respite, yeah.” (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC, childcare paid for in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background)

- 5.3.6 Other parents indicated that the funded ELC hours gave them a chance to consider how to use their own time and to help them achieve personal goals:

“An opportunity for me to search for new opportunities, all the things I would like to do business wise, social enterprise, more time to meet with friends... [ELC] enabled me to do more and to maximise my capacity and potential.” (Mother of three, a teenager, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

- 5.3.7 While these may appear to represent more general benefits of ELC, those who opted to utilise such provision before their child was eligible for funded provision tended to do so to allow them to work. As a result, most of those families had little additional time for respite and other activities, and therefore, these benefits tended to apply more to those who were only accessing ELC as a result of being offered funded places.
- 5.3.8 A number of other benefits were highlighted for parents, as discussed below. While many of these would also be applicable to ELC more generally (rather than being specific to funded provision only), it should be noted that the cost of privately funding ELC means that many families could not afford such provision and, therefore, the benefits would not be as widely achieved. Indeed, some participants were only using ELC hours because they were funded, and therefore, the general benefits which ELC brings were only realised by these families as a direct result of the funded provision.

Peer support and community integration

- 5.3.9 Another benefit, which was less frequently mentioned, was that ELC provided opportunities for parents to meet other parents with children of the same age. This allowed them to obtain peer support and helped them (and

their children) to feel more integrated into their local communities. This was particularly beneficial for those who had moved to the area more recently:

“I think it’s been a really good way of getting to know more families in the community... just to build up those kind of more local and community connections really. I think that’s been a huge benefit... especially having moved here not knowing anybody [several] years ago. I think you’re still developing networks and connections, so it’s been good for that.” (Mother of two, one in primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC with a childminder)

“I don’t know how to say it but, we are ‘new Scots’. We were not born or bred here, but have been here many, many years - almost 20 years. We made this our home. We feel more connected to the community [since the child started nursery], it allows us to do that.” (Mother of three, a teenager, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC in a Family/Early Years Centre, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

5.3.10 Many, however, felt that the Covid-19 pandemic and related safety measures around educational and childcare settings had vastly reduced parents’ opportunities to make links with other parents. They noted that providers often staggered drop-off and pick-up times, and that parents were encouraged not to congregate around the door. It was also highlighted that parents had not been able to attend any of the normal activities within ELC settings, all of which meant that parents were less likely to meet, chat and get to know each other. A few did not feel this was an issue as they were heading to work so did not have time to stop and chat, but for most there was disappointment that they were not able to fully benefit from the general ELC experience:

“It’s been very hard with Covid actually, because you’ve got all these set drop-off times, and you’ve got to speak two metres apart [while] queuing, and you can’t linger afterwards. I’ve never even set foot in her nursery because I’m not allowed to. So it’s very difficult to meet other parents at nursery.” (Mother of two, an eligible two-year-old not using any form of ELC, and a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a Family/Early Years Centre)

Family wellbeing

5.3.11 One mother commented that a benefit of the ELC provision was that it had given her more time to consider the needs of her older children. She explained that the youngest child was often so demanding of her time that she did not get a chance to play with, talk to, or dedicate time to older siblings, and so this had been welcomed.

5.3.12 Similarly, a few participants who did not work, study or volunteer explained that the ELC provision gave them a chance to complete domestic tasks during the day when the children were at school/nursery. This meant they

could then be available for the children and spend more 'quality time' with them at the end of the day. Parents also noted that the ELC provision reduced stress in the household (not least if a disabled adult was living with the family):

"I've got most of the day to myself and then when the kids come back, more or less I've done everything I need to do during the day, get the kids and then that's like me spending time with the kids and in the evening... and we sit down and watch a movie or do some homework. That way we're together rather than me having to go out and do stuff for this person or go and get this. That's all done during the day when they're [out]." (Mother of two, one in primary school, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a local authority nursery, young parent from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

5.3.13 In line with comments around respite and time for themselves, this same mother indicated that one of the benefits of the ELC provision for her eligible two-year-old was that it had helped to give the whole family a routine, which had been good for the whole family as well as her own wellbeing:

"I think it's helped me - like I wouldn't say be, not depressed, but like kind of come back to my old self because, obviously, the last five/six years I've been looking after the wee ones and obviously looking after a baby's hard, and then obviously as they grow up, they're starting to do their own things, get into nursery, and then I've got a bit more time for myself, which is a little bit easier... I've got this routine whereas before I didn't have a routine... they would go to sleep whenever they wanted, wake up whenever they wanted. Whereas now it's kind of in bed by half seven, sleeping by eight o'clock and wake up at half seven in the morning." (Mother of two, one in primary school, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a local authority nursery, young parent from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

5.3.14 One parent also noted that by using funded ELC they had been offered help with other issues by the staff at their ELC provider. This was seen as a benefit and highly supportive to the family more generally:

"It fits really well because they are sort of charity based, the centre she goes to, they're really good at helping - like for myself at the moment, I have been struggling mental health wise [and] financially just like a lot of people recently, and they have been good at keeping in touch and asking if we need anything or if they can help in any way." (Mother of three, two adult children, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent)

5.4 Benefits for others

- 5.4.1 Wider benefits of funded ELC were also discussed by some participants. This included relieving grandparents of at least some (if not all) of the burden of providing regular childcare which had been necessary due to the cost of privately funding this in formal settings. In addition, the funded ELC provided care for children who would otherwise have been at home, and therefore, it freed up parents time and allowed them to spend one-to-one time with younger siblings:

“I don’t like to call them elderly but they are and my mum’s not of good health either... So yeah, it can be quite hard. And to be honest, it can be quite hard on their relationship having the grandchildren over quite a lot cos my dad seems to get quite stressed out with the kids there and my mum’s just like, ‘let the kids be kids’. Then it kind of puts pressure on our relationship, so I’m like, ‘don’t shout at him for running. He’s two, that’s just what they do’. So yeah, it can be quite difficult actually having to rely on parents.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old using a private nursery, not yet using funded ELC hours, lone parent)

“So before I got the job and I was still on [maternity] leave, it was lovely in that my son went to nursery, my daughter was at school, and I could spend time with the baby and actually focus completely on her, because obviously when the older two are around, the attention goes completely on them. So it was great in that I could just focus on her.” (Mother of three, one at primary school, a baby, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours at a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 5.4.2 Overall, while the benefits to parents and general family wellbeing were welcomed, most parents expressed that the benefits to the child were the most important and overwhelming feature in decisions to send or keep their child in an ELC arrangement:

“For me, the welfare of my child is my top priority. So, when she’s happy, I’m on top of the moon.” (Father of seven, five teenagers, a baby, and a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

“I’ve gone after what is going to work best for my child and I will make everything else work around that.” (Mother of twins, two-and-a-half-year-olds, not yet eligible for funded ELC, family provided childcare, lone parent)

6 Challenges with using funded ELC

6.1 Negative impacts of ELC settings

- 6.1.1 Very few negative impacts of using ELC generally, were cited, although there was some concern that children were picking up bad habits from other children, and that, for some, too much time spent in a nursery setting in particular could make them grumpy/irritated and leave little room in the day for quality family time:

“When she comes back after a full day, she’s absolutely exhausted and it’s good in a way, you know, she’s kind of like worked hard and things. But then you come back and you’ve got a grumpy child, all they want is dinner, rest and bed and that’s all, your day is ruined by them, you just give them dinner, get them ready for bed and put them to bed and it’s like, ‘Where is that quality time?’.” (Mother of two, one at primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 6.1.2 The spread of illnesses/coughs/colds was also a frustration due to the need to take days off due to child sickness absence - some parents perceived that ELC settings were a breeding ground for viruses.

6.2 Challenges in using the funded ELC provision

Structural issues

- 6.2.1 The most commonly cited complaint about the funded ELC provision was that the different models operated between providers could be confusing, with different providers offering different patterns of hours across the day, week and year. While the different options were welcomed as they helped different needs to be accommodated, it was felt there was also confusion and a lack of transparency around the funded ELC provision.
- 6.2.2 Parents also often perceived the provision to be inflexible, with providers offering set days/hours which families had to fit in with, and no ability to swap a day if needed. This issue was perhaps more relevant to local authority nurseries where parents felt it was a ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ type of offer, and that private nurseries could offer more flexibility in terms of the days offered. However, even with private providers participants noted issues with nurseries only offering fixed sessions within a day to maximise capacity:

“My issue with it is that the way each nursery interprets those hours is different. So I think if it’s a council nursery, they have their set hours or whatever it is they offer. But in private nurseries, they can kind of do whatever they want. So what my boy’s nursery does is they offer you the all year round funded hours but it’s mornings only... So if you are a parent that works all year round and you work three full days, you’re having to pay for three afternoons... you’re

having to top-up and that's my issue with it - some nurseries are choosing to not be flexible. And I guess for some private nurseries it is a way to make money. Fair enough, I get it. But at the end of the day, it's great we've got the funded hours, but a lot of parents are having to top-up." (Mother of three, one at primary school, a baby, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours at a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 6.2.3 Places offered on the basis of fixed times of day and days of the week also presented a challenge for some parents in being able to use their full entitlement. As outlined above, it was noted that some parents might prefer five shorter days but could only access three long days per week, or vice versa. This resulted in families utilising funded ELC times they did not need/want while incurring additional costs or imposing on family members to provide top-up care. Others chose not to utilise the hours they did not need but perceived that these were then "lost"/unavailable for a blended model as the provider had allocated that full space/timeslot to the child. This was considered to limit the flexibility of the funded ELC and placed the priority largely on operational needs rather than parental/family needs:

"So we just have two full days and I know myself and I know a lot of other people can't use that, we've got children to get to school and get back, it doesn't make practical sense to pick one up at three o'clock, come home and then go out and pick the other one up later. So we ended up having those hours paid for from the government but we don't actually as parents get to use them... As far as the nursery's concerned, we use them up [the full 1,140 hours], but it's not actually parent focused, [the nursery] claim their full allowance but actually, we're not able to access it... it's a generous thing from the Scottish Government but it feels less generous when the nurseries are sort of scooping a big section of it up." (Mother of two, one in primary school, and a four-year-old using funded hours in a private nursery and paying to top-up with a childminder)

- 6.2.4 One parent suggested that the lack of flexibility meant the system did not work well for those who worked shift patterns:

"Like for our family and our situation, it works. But certainly friends that are in shifts, like my police officer friends or my nurse friends, it's more tricky... Cos you could end up with them in nursery days that you're just in the house and things like that." (Mother of two, one in primary school, a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a private nursery)

- 6.2.5 Issues were also discussed around the different intakes between settings. It was noted that school nurseries had set intakes across the year to tie in with school terms, whereas private nurseries would accept a child from their third birthday. This meant that some parents felt they were missing out on being able to use their funded ELC hours, in some cases for several months, while others could start immediately.

- 6.2.6 A few parents also indicated that they had not been clear on how they could split time between providers, or whether they could “roll-over” unspent hours. This was an issue particularly where families were not using their full allocation of hours on a weekly basis, but were using a term-time only model - they were keen to know if they could “bank” those unused hours and transfer them to another provider through the holidays.

Availability of ELC places

- 6.2.7 A few noted issues around general availability of funded ELC spaces. One parent in the sample had been unable to access a funded place for her three-year-old at the time of the interview (due to a house move), and several spoke of difficulties finding funded ELC childminders with capacity. Two participants also noted examples where they were aware of availability issues and eligible families not being able to access funded places:

“I do have families [I work with] that apply for nursery when their child’s two-years 11-months and think they’ll get a place, and they don’t realise that you won’t. So I think someone does need to explain to them when they turn two, apply for your place... State nurseries, like particularly last year with the pandemic, they were all full and children weren’t starting till they were three-and-a-half.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old about to become eligible for funded ELC, childcare managed by parents and a friend, with a disability in the household)

Quality of settings

- 6.2.8 A few parents noted issues with the quality of either the provider or the staff. One felt that staff could be judgemental, while others worried the staff may have limited training in childcare or development. Personal hygiene and ensuring the health and safety of children was also mentioned as a concern for some - which was concerning for any parent, but particularly for those whose children had additional support needs:

“She came back a week ago... she had a vest on, a cardigan and... like it’s winter... then they lost her hat which means she’s probably not had a hat on when she’s been outside.” (Father of one, a three-year-old using funded ELC at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent)

“[Interviewer: So who gives him [his medication] at lunchtime?].... Nobody now. I have to give him it in the morning and give him it at night and that caused a bit of a problem... he was getting very, very distressed... although it’s rectified now, I think they should have a bit more training on [medications]... [at home he] gets his laxative in juice and [the nursery] don’t give him juice, they give him milk... [but you] can’t put the laxative in milk or it will make the milk curdle. So it caused a bit of a problem at the start.” (Mother of one, an eligible

two-year-old using funded ELC at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent with a disability in the household)

- 6.2.9 Another parent who had experience of using a private nursery for her older child but was now using a local authority nursery for her funded ELC provision commented that the facilities in the 'free' nursery were perhaps not as good as those provided in the private sector. Specifically, she mentioned that the toilets were not as well adapted for children (i.e. the private nursery had bespoke toilets, which were low to the ground and were more accessible to children). She expressed some disappointment that local authority facilities perhaps did not receive the funding input that they required to make them as user friendly as they could be for early years learners.

Dietary issues and cost of food

- 6.2.10 There were some concerns around diet, although most settings were said to accommodate any special requests and a few parents reported that the nursery had perhaps encouraged their child to try new foods that they would not otherwise eat at home (with children being encouraged to try new things because they had been involved in the preparation and/or their peers were eating the same foods). Two parents explained that their request for Halal food provision had been well accommodated:

“We have halal food because we are Muslim, so they [the nursery] didn't mind at all... They give my daughter halal food and try to give her vegetarian food, so this is good for me.” (Mother of four, one teenager, two in primary school, and an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

- 6.2.11 Where dietary issues were specifically highlighted, although this was in a minority of cases, they represented significant issues for the families involved as the children had food aversions and additional support needs which parents felt were not being accommodated/met:

“Some of the behaviours that he's portraying... he eats the same three things on repeat... It is an issue cos they all have the same lunch and [he] just won't touch it... they will phone, then I have the option of taking something down that I know he'll definitely eat if he is so intensely hungry... or I can go and pick him up... He was gluten free for a while and twice he came home with a reaction to gluten from nursery...” (Mother of one, an eligible two-year-old using funded ELC at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent with a disability in the household)

“When the hours changed [increased to 1,140 hours], [the nursery] weren't willing to feed her lunch. My daughter has a food aversion... she's very fussy about what she eats, she only eats like just a handful of food... I used to take food in for her and then they stopped it saying that Covid had restricted that.” (Mother of one,

four-year-old using funded ELC in a local authority nursery, with a disability in the household)

- 6.2.12 One mother also noted that she would still have a food bill at the private nursery they used after her child was eligible for funded ELC hours. She was aware that other nurseries did not charge for this and so was unclear why the funding did not cover food at their chosen provider:

“I’m still going to have a bill for food, which I don’t understand... If I move him to the Early Years Centre, which we’ve been offered a place at but I’ve rejected, I’d have no fees and they would feed him... but I don’t understand why the funded hours doesn’t go towards that in this nursery... And there’s no option for me to take food in for him either... But not all private nurseries charge you a food bill, this is what I don’t get.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old using a private nursery, not yet using funded ELC hours, lone parent)

Cultural diversity

- 6.2.13 In this sample, there were no issues reported around funded ELC settings accommodating cultural diversity or meeting religious education needs - participants indicated that they would pursue this independently where it was important to them (i.e. taking their children to dedicated classes/ environments/social events outwith ELC time to give them exposure to different cultural/religious learning).

- 6.2.14 Only one family commented that a full-time funded ELC placement may interfere with their religious education plans for their child:

“We are Muslim, so we want to teach them about our religion and our culture and things as well and, again, by them being away from the house for that length of time [1,140 hours], they’re going to miss out on all of that.” (Mother of two, one at primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 6.2.15 No participants identified any issues with settings not being inclusive in terms of cultural diversity, or had experienced any language barriers in terms of supporting children with limited English. Indeed, most noted that their child had benefited from the funded ELC setting and, as outlined above, it was stressed that their language skills had developed allowing them to communicate better.

Additional support needs

- 6.2.16 A few mothers whose children had disabilities, health issues or additional support needs had made a deliberate decision not to return to work or study as they wanted to care for and spend more time with their children, as a result of their more complex needs. It was felt that working and supporting a child with health issues or significant additional support needs was not

always possible or desirable. However, this was not the case for all, with a few choosing to continue working and one mother noting that the funded ELC provision had allowed her to go to college while her child was at nursery.

6.2.17 While most parents in the sample who had a child with additional support needs were happy with their chosen ELC provider, their ability to accommodate and support their child, support the child's development, and the extent to which they liaised with/supported the family, two parents detailed the difficulties they had in accessing a suitable provider. One had been unable to use her preferred local nursery as they claimed to be unable to accommodate the child's specific needs, and as they lived in a rural area they had been left with no choice but to use another nursery much further away. There were also trust issues with this nursery's ability to suitably identify the child's needs and to provide the required care and support. This was noted to be an issue both in terms of personal development and their dietary needs:

"I have to put my trust in them and they did fail... It's not one size fits all and inclusion doesn't mean saying that the child's like every other child, you know... If the government continue to push for inclusion, they need to fund it and they need to get it right... or there's no point. There's absolutely no point to it. She's actually - and actually this is evident, really evident that [the child] thrived during the school holidays. She thrived during breaks from nursery. So [nursery's] all about the social [aspect] really for me cos she learns other skills like reading, numbers, etc. all of these things, she learned those from me." (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC in a local authority nursery, with a disability in the household)

6.2.18 The other mother, who had a pre-school child that she described as 'medically complex', discussed a perceived gap in provision - the exclusion of 'in home' childcare from the funded ELC provision. The mother explained that there was specific training attached to caring for her child which not all providers had and/or were willing or able to undertake, meaning in-home professional childcare was initially the only option. They highlighted that this had resulted in them being excluded from the funded ELC provision:

"I was made aware that there was something called the 'blended model', the 1,140 hours of a blended model which I then started to investigate... [but] it's actually written into legislation that it cannot be used for childcare in the home... even if that's a professional childcare provider." (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC at a local authority nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

6.2.19 While her child had become increasingly more able to access mainstream nursery provision (allowing them to use some of the funded ELC provision), she had felt frustrated and constrained in childcare choices because of the

legislative restrictions around home-based care and suggested that this needed to be addressed to better assist families such as her own.

6.2.20 This mother also felt there was a need for specific information (written or online) and advice about funded ELC provision for children with complex or additional support needs. It was felt this needed to be easy to access for parents. She highlighted that this was especially important because families with children living with complex needs were also often those experiencing poverty and/or social isolation issues:

“[Having a child with medically complex needs] either brings out the best or the worst in people, and it seems that, for a lot of people in the circles that I’m in, it seems as if it’s brought out the worst and marriages have broken down and [partners] are not in the picture. So overwhelmingly it was single parents. Overwhelmingly, most people had to give up their job and either take the hit and lose their house or they were already in rented accommodation... The majority of people are forced to take a childcare situation that they really, really don’t want but they feel they don’t have another option. And that’s literally - it’s a horrible thing to do to people... I think they [Scottish Government] could basically speak to people in these circumstances and understand it better cos there seems to be absolutely zero understanding of medical families.” (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC at a local authority nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

6.3 Provision during Covid-19

6.3.1 Most participants indicated that they had not encountered any issues with the provision over the Covid-19 pandemic. Most were comfortable that the ELC providers were implementing appropriate procedures to keep their staff, children and families safe:

“I believe that they’re doing their best at the moment with the restrictions that’s in place. They’ve got to keep themselves, the children safe. We’ve got to keep ourselves safe and I think I can’t fault them.” (Mother of one, a four-year-old and using funded ELC in a local authority nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

6.3.2 One family, whose child was vulnerable (but had not needed to shield) was initially worried about their child attending nursery for their funded ELC hours. However, they were reassured by the way the nursery communicated with them, allowing them to have the confidence to continue sending him:

“Of course they were worried about [their child] going to nursery during Covid. But they noticed that the nursery always informed them if there is a person or a staff member who had tested positive, so they informed the parents not to bring [the child] for two weeks at least. So after that, after they’ve seen a pattern of how the nursery is

actually taking care of it and informing them, they became more comfortable to send [the child] to the nursery, knowing that he'll be taken care of." (Mother (via an interpreter) of four, two teenagers, one in primary school, and a five-year-old using ELC funded hours in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

- 6.3.3 Several participants reported feeling frustrated and disappointed that Covid-19 safety measures meant they were not able to enter the nursery building and observe their child playing first-hand, and (as discussed at paragraph 5.3.10 above) had negatively impacted on parents' ability to get to know other parents.
- 6.3.4 One participant also noted frustration at the differences in provision during periods of lockdown. They were using funded ELC hours in a private nursery and indicated that it had closed entirely with staff placed on furlough, while local authority nurseries had provided an online offering to their children. This disparity in provision to equally eligible children was felt to be unfair:

"During lockdown, because we were at the private nursery, the nursery basically closed and all the staff were furloughed. So we had nothing. Even though everything was online, I know people whose children were at the school nursery still got maybe someone reading a book online or the teachers or staff would come and drop off activities and things, there was still that link. So for both my children, including at the time [one child] was receiving funded hours, we got absolutely nothing, which I'm still a bit miffed about cos I wondered if, were the nurseries still getting funded hours? Were we supposed to be getting something? Were we supposed to be provided with something?" (Mother of two, one in primary school, and a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a private nursery)

6.4 Valuing parenting and family

- 6.4.1 A few commented that there may be a risk of funded ELC interfering with family time/time spent at home, which they felt was undervalued:

"I just feel it's unhealthy unless there's an absolute need for them to be in nursery for that length of time [1,140 hours], it's far too much and it's just - I feel like it's going to lead to the destruction of things like the family unit, you know, they're not going to have these bonds with like siblings or parents. And even just simple things like, you know, on her days off, like we might spend a little bit of time just having a cuddle on the sofa reading a book and it's things like that, that they're going to be missing out on, you know, that physical contact, one-to-one attention. Even just her being by herself playing, being a creator, you know, quite a lot of the time, like I won't play an activity or anything, I'll just kind of leave her and it's amazing the things that she'll come up with, like just through her imaginary play and I feel like that's really important as well, to sort of encourage that

creativity and let them use their imagination and things.” (Mother of two, one at primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC in a local authority nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 6.4.2 One parent also suggested that the increase to 1,140 hours may have sent a negative public message around the value of parenting/being a mother. This participant had left their job in order to care for their children as they felt their work patterns and commitments would have negatively impacted on the children/family life, and they felt strongly that society needed to place more value on mothers/parents who are caring for their own children:

“I just think, what are we doing by paying people to look after our children, why aren't we valuing it enough... why don't we pay the parents to do it properly? Why... isn't there benefits if you've got children at home under three or something? Sometimes I don't know if we're doing it right by farming out all our childcare to somebody else... Sometimes I wonder if offering increasing, and increasing, and increasing amounts of funded childcare is actually helpful. I think if you weren't doing that, you'd need to offer more support to the parents.” (Mother of two, an eligible two-year-old not using any form of ELC, and a three-year-old using funded ELC hours in a Family/ Early Years Centre)

- 6.4.3 One parent suggested that professional childcare was perhaps not sufficiently well valued in the UK (compared to other countries), with ELC staff receiving low wages and the quality of provision suffering as a result.

6.5 Extending funded ELC to younger children

- 6.5.1 Finally, participants were asked whether they thought childcare for younger children (aged one or two) was something that they would welcome.

Extended provision for two-year-olds

- 6.5.2 There were mixed views regarding funded provision for two-year-olds. Those with eligible two-year-olds who were utilising their funded ELC hours generally felt this provision was appropriate and beneficial. Similarly, parents who worked and had used privately funded childcare provision from a young age also saw the benefits of such a proposal. These participants were generally very positive about the potential of funded ELC for younger children, with many noting this would have been a great support, if it had been available. They noted it might have allowed some parents to return to work after their maternity leave rather than leaving the workforce, or have allowed parents to return to work quicker - i.e. not having to wait until the child turned three. While others agreed in principle with some funded provision for two-year-olds, they would prefer an incremental process to introducing the hours, so that the hours/days built up over time. It was also felt this would get children used to a nursery setting once they reached age three, an issue all the more relevant during lockdown:

“We probably would have used it if it was available, I think it would have made returning to work sooner more affordable rather than accessing that funding when they’re three. But then also, I’m a big advocate of making sure that they get lots of time at home when they’re small as well, so I think getting that balance right must be tricky.” (Mother of two, one in primary school, and a four-year-old using funded ELC hours with a childminder)

- 6.5.3 Other parents, however, felt that those under the age of three were still too young to be using formal childcare settings, with participants being concerned that they would not have the physical stamina needed for prolonged periods in such settings. One family who were currently using a mix of informal care options before their eligibility for funded ELC kicked in, while noting that the main reason for doing this (instead of paying for a private place) was cost, also indicated that there were social benefits to the child being in a domestic environment until age three:

“We didn’t want to really have to pay... [and] between us and grandma, we can kind of do it, we can manage it ourselves quite easily... A lot of the nurseries that we looked at, they wouldn’t take her for less than two days and I just felt like, up until now, she’s really been a bit young to go for that length of time and we don’t need to put her in... And I feel like she gets a lot out of being at her friend’s house as well... it just keeps that relationship going, so I guess that’s another reason.” (Mother of one, a three-year-old about to become eligible for funded ELC, childcare managed by parents and a friend, with a disability in the household)

Funded ELC provision for one-year-olds

- 6.5.4 When considering one-year-olds, however, there was greater consensus. Most participants indicated that they would not use funded ELC for under two-years-old (if available). It was generally perceived that children were too young/still babies at that age. Some parents suggested they may find it difficult to “hand over” their child before the age of two, and that parents often wanted to spend time with infants and would find it hard to be separated from them (i.e. wanting to make the most of their time together when the child was very young and enjoy the experience of parenting):

“Those first years with a baby, they’re the best... me personally, at the age of one, I wouldn’t, cos obviously those are the years where you’re starting to show your kids things and obviously like [their] first steps.” (Father of two, a three- and four-year-old, both using funded ELC at a Family/Early Years Centre, lone parent with a disability in the household)

- 6.5.5 One parent who was undecided whether they would use funded ELC for an under two-year-old, commented that they would have concerns because the child would be unable to communicate effectively at that age and so may not be able to express their wants/needs to a carer:

“I maybe would have [used ELC for an under two if available], I don’t know. Obviously they’re still babies at that point. It’s a wee bit nerve-racking. Whereas I think I was a bit more confident [when he turned two] at the fact that he could walk and he would tell me... if there’s something wrong. But at that point [under two], he couldn’t put a full sentence together. Whereas now he could, so I’m a bit more at ease.” (Mother of two, one in primary school, and one eligible two-year-old using funded ELC hours at a local authority nursery, young parent from an ethnic minority background with a disability in the household)

- 6.5.6 For one family who had used a privately funded provider since their child was 18 months old, there had been a noticeable difference in how settled the child had been as they grew older:

“When she first started going to nursery at about one-and-a-half, then you could see that nursery tires them out a little bit and is a bit bewildering. But when they’re sort of getting to the pre-school age, I think it’s really positive for them... for children under a year old, they are better off at home.” (Mother of one, a two-and-a-half-year-old, not yet eligible for funded ELC but using a private nursery, from an ethnic minority background)

- 6.5.7 Again, however, those parents that had returned to work following maternity leave, and had used private childcare providers, indicated that funded ELC provision/options would have been welcomed.

7 Conclusions

7.1 Key findings

Awareness

- 7.1.1 General awareness of funded ELC provision or access to “free nursery” provision from the age of three was high. However, more detailed understanding of how the funded ELC provision worked in practice was mixed. Participants with recent or current experience of school or ELC settings were more likely to be better informed, and those from higher income households were more likely to have undertaken research into the way the provision worked and what options were available to them. Conversely, first time parents or those with large age gaps between their children felt less well informed, were less likely to know where to go to find information, and reported that the terminology (such as ‘term-time’) and timings for applications and intakes were often confusing or unclear.
- 7.1.2 Language barriers were also a contributing factor for some families in terms of initial awareness, understanding their choices, and confidence in completing the application. Once using funded ELC provision, however, no participants reported any cultural bias or disadvantage within the system or with their service providers.
- 7.1.3 There was also a lack of awareness around provision for eligible two-year-olds. Those already in touch with support services (either local authority or third sector) were generally better informed and supported than those who were not, although there were exceptions.

Issues impacting decisions and use of the funded ELC provision

- 7.1.4 **Flexibility** was one of the main recurring issues for participants. This was important for both working parents and those not in work, education or training. For those in work, flexibility typically referred to being able to find funded ELC hours that suited their working hours/patterns. The choice between term-time only and full-year provision was also supportive for families in accommodating their different needs. Meanwhile those not in work, education or training appreciated where there was flexibility to drop-off late or pick-up early from their funded ELC provider - this was particularly helpful for those parents who had other children as it allowed them to co-ordinate with wider family routines.
- 7.1.5 In relation to supporting parents to/into work, education or training, flexibility was again a key issue. While most had found a funded ELC provider which could accommodate their current needs, it was suggested that parents became stuck in particular jobs/contracts/routines as they would be unlikely to find another job which would match their childcare arrangements. As such, it appears there is a perception that funded ELC provision is not flexible enough to accommodate changes in family circumstances, with families

considering funded ELC places to be largely fixed once they are established. Similarly, a few participants felt that funded ELC was not flexible enough for the needs of particular careers/jobs, for example those involving shift work, while a few others (not currently in work) felt that the funded ELC hours were too restrictive making it difficult to get a job. Others, however, suggested that they wanted work, education and training to be more flexible to accommodate a better work/life balance rather than there being a need for increases to the number of funded ELC hours provided.

- 7.1.6 In addition, it was noted that the full benefits of the intended flexibility of the funded ELC provision were perhaps not being realised by parents - and particularly for those who worked. Participants felt this was due to the way the provision was being implemented, both by local authorities and individual providers. For example, parents generally had lower awareness of the ability to use a blended model, and this had been difficult to achieve for the few who had tried to access it. Similarly, the fixed sessions offered by nurseries (both local authority and private providers) were said to benefit the providers at the expense of the intended flexibility for parents/families - indeed, a few indicated that it meant that some of their allocated funded provision was unusable.
- 7.1.7 Despite these limitations, however, several participants (across a range of backgrounds) indicated that the funded ELC provision had supported them to either find employment or take up a college course or training. The time which funded ELC provision afforded parents, as well as the financial support was key in motivating such changes.
- 7.1.8 **Consistency** in the use of providers was another common theme and preference discussed throughout the interviews. It was felt this provided stability for both children and parents, which was important for making both feel comfortable with the provision. This impacted on parents' decisions about which provider to use, with families tending to stick with providers they had used before and were happy with, or continuing to use private providers (childminders or nurseries) for funded ELC provision where the child had a pre-existing place.
- 7.1.9 There was also evidence that a desire for consistency drove decisions around which provider to use for young children to ensure they did not have to move when they became eligible for funded ELC hours.
- 7.1.10 For those using local authority nurseries attached to primary schools, the consistency between the nursery and the school was important in supporting and assisting transitions.
- 7.1.11 **Type of provider** or the 'ethos' of providers was also important to some families. Some parents favoured outdoor nurseries and more child-led approaches. Others preferred childminders due to the lower number of children in the setting. However, it was noted that there was a general lack of each of these different types of providers.

- 7.1.12 Those who preferred a nursery setting, typically indicated they felt their child would benefit from socialising with the larger number of children who attended, as well as interacting with the range of childcare professionals working in these settings.
- 7.1.13 However, the key priorities for participants when choosing a funded ELC provider included accessibility/convenience, along with the quality of the staff and facilities.

Impacts of funded ELC

- 7.1.14 Impacts of the funded ELC provision were generally seen as positive for the child, the parents, and overall family wellbeing. ELC was considered to support the child's general development, both socially and educationally. Several participants also noted that the ELC staff had helped to identify additional needs and supported the child and family to address these.
- 7.1.15 For parents, the funded ELC provision was said to support them back/into work, education or training, and/or allowed them time to tackle housework or other 'chores', reducing stress in the household and meaning that time with their child was more relaxed quality time. It was also noted to support parents with their own mental health, and in particular, was highlighted as providing valuable respite for lone parents, as well as couples where one parent took on the majority of the childcare responsibilities.
- 7.1.16 Covid-19 had perhaps hampered parents' ability to benefit from peer support as a result of using funded ELC. While some noted they had managed to get to know other parents and that it had been important for community integration, others suggested that the Covid-19 safety measures introduced in childcare settings meant there had been little opportunity for parents to meet and chat - this was seen as understandable but also disappointing. The funded ELC provision was, however, seen as helpful in supporting families and children to tackle some of the developmental issues that were perceived to have arisen as a result of the Covid-19 safety measures. This included addressing separation anxiety, and providing valuable experiences outwith the home.
- 7.1.17 In several cases, funded ELC had also relieved some of the childcare burden on other family members (often grandparents) or had allowed parents to spend more dedicated one-to-one time with their other children (particularly babies, but also older children), both of which were highly valued.
- 7.1.18 While several participants would like the total number of funded ELC hours to be increased to better meet their needs (typically for working parents), there was also a sense, for a few at least, that the government and perceived societal desire to have both parents in work and utilise formal childcare perhaps undervalued the parenting role. It was suggested a wider debate may be needed around this and how to redress the balance placed on work versus family time/bonds.

7.1.19 The experiences of those who had someone in the household with a physical or mental health issue, a disability or additional support needs, varied in line with the wider sample. Some had positive and supportive experiences of funded ELC, but a few did experience more unique and highly impactful challenges around finding provision that was suitable for their own needs or those of their children.

7.1.20 Finally, while many of the decision making factors, issues and benefits of funded ELC were largely consistent with ELC use more generally, the funded provision was essential to ensure widespread uptake and therefore realisation of the general benefits. Without funded provision many families on low incomes would not be able to afford to access the benefits of ELC, and the 1,140 hours provided greater scope for parents to find work/training/education or undertake other activities compared to the previous provision.

7.2 Conclusion

7.2.1 Overall, parents engaged well with the research, with more families ultimately involved in the work than initially anticipated. One gap however, was the low number of participants who were eligible for funded ELC but that had not taken up a place. This could be symptomatic of the very low proportions of those with children aged three and four that have not accessed the provision, and a lack of awareness around the provision or eligibility among those with eligible two-year-olds. The research found that, those already in touch with local authority or third sector support services were generally already using their eligible two-year-old provision, therefore, the gap in the research is focused on those that are not in touch with services. As they are also less likely to be aware of their eligibility, such families are very difficult to identify and reach.

7.2.2 While the aims of the research included consideration of issues and barriers faced by families, it should be stressed that many participants were positive overall about the funded ELC provision. Most difficulties discussed were linked to the way the provision was being implemented rather than there being any perceived issues with the policy in principle - the only exception being the exclusion of 'in-home' care for children with multiple or complex support needs.

7.2.3 On the whole, the funded ELC system was considered to be a significant support to families for a range of different reasons, and although challenges were identified, most participants had found a provider to suit their needs and were happy with the provision:

"I think it's really good... I think it's a fair amount of hours. I think it helps the majority of families. Yes, there's always families that will need five days or that work five days. But I think it's very fair and I think it's very good." (Mother of one, a four-year-old using funded ELC at a private nursery, lone parent with a disability in the household)

Appendix A: Screener questionnaire

Screener Questionnaire

Please answer the questions below to help us make sure we speak to a wide range of people and to allow us to ask only questions that are relevant for you.

1. Before hearing about this research, had you heard about the 1140 hours of free Early Learning and Childcare? (That's the childcare that your local authority or one of their partners provides. Sometimes it's called 'funded childcare'.)

Yes No Don't know/Can't remember

2. Do you currently use any of the free 1140 Early Learning and Childcare hours?

Yes No Don't know/Not sure

3. Please tell us how many children (of any age) you currently have caring responsibilities for?

3 or less 4 or more Prefer not to say

4. What age group are you in?

25 years or younger 46+
 26 - 45 years old Prefer not to say

5. Are you:

Married/Civil Partnership/Co-habiting
 Separated/Divorced/Lone Parent
 Other (please describe):
 Prefer not to say

6. Are you currently in work, training or education? (Please tick all that apply)

Working part-time Part-time in education/training
 Working full-time Full-time in education/training
 Apprentice/trainee part-time Not in work, training or education
 Apprentice/trainee full-time Prefer not to say

7. Do you receive the Scottish Child Payment?

Yes No Prefer not to say

8. Are you, or anyone in your household, living with a health problem, or a long-term physical or mental ill-health condition or disability?

- Yes No Prefer not to say

9. What is your ethnic group?

- White Scottish/British/Irish
 White Gypsy/Traveller/Roma
 White Other
 Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
 Asian, Scottish Asian or British Asian
 African, Scottish African or British African
 Caribbean or Black
 Other ethnic group
 Prefer not to say

10. What local authority do you live in?

11. Would you say you live in a:

- Rural area/hamlet/small village (e.g. with no local school)
 Large village or small town (e.g. with a local primary school)
 Large town (e.g. with primary and secondary school)
 City (e.g. with several primary and secondary schools)

Appendix B: Interview topic guide

[ASK ALL] Introduction

1. You said in your questionnaire that you have [NUMBER] children. Please can you begin by telling me their ages please:
 - Ensure this includes at least one child age 3 or 4, or an eligible 2 year old (or nearly eligible, e.g. aged 1.5 if an eligible 2 or aged 2.5 for all others).
 - Establish if there are other children in the family, and whether they are older or younger.
2. Who else is in the household with you and the children?
3. What does a typical day during the week look like for your family? (i.e. how do you all spend your week days?)
 - Note whether there are school drop-offs and how these are made;
 - Note whether any childcare is used for pre-school children (formal - check setting, or informal - check who provides this);
 - Note whether any before- or after-school care/clubs is used for school aged children;
 - Note whether parents/carers are in work/training/education;
 - Note whether they do any unpaid work, e.g. volunteering, caring for others, etc.;
 - Check if there are any key variations (e.g. part-time work/education, etc.) and what typically happens on those days.
- 4a. [IF NECESSARY] You said you use a nursery, is this a school/local authority run nursesey or not?
- 4b. [IF NECESSARY] You said you use a private nursery/childminder. Is this a free/funded place or do you have to pay for this?

If respondent does use funded ELC provision, use Section A for the interview.

If respondent does not use funded ELC provision, use Section B for the interview.

If child is not yet eligible for funded ELC/respondent is still deciding, use Section C for the interview.

Section A: Ask those who use funded ELC

Awareness

5. How did you first hear about the free ELC provision?

Probe for:

- Sources of information (e.g. friends & family, health visitor, GP, social worker, mother and baby/toddler groups, schools, etc.)
- Format of information (e.g. online, newspaper, TV., with other information about child, hard copy leaflet or info, etc.)
- Do you remember seeing any information about the free ELC provision with the Best Start Grant or other information about supporting families?
- [FOR THOSE WITH A CHILD IN THEIR SECOND YEAR OF ELC] How did you hear about the extension of the free hours, from 600 to 1140 hours?

6. Based on your understanding of the free ELC provision, how does this work locally?

Probe for, and determine if this is based on perception or experience:

- Eligibility
- Use of the hours - all or nothing, able to use a portion of the time, term time only or spread over full year
- Flexibility - able split the time between more than one provider, able to vary use (start/end times, days of the week, etc)
- Check for any misunderstandings re impact on social security benefits

7. What, if anything, could be done better to improve information about the funded ELC provision? (e.g. timing of info, source, format, other)

Use of ELC and Fit with Needs

8. What are your main reasons for using the ELC provision? [ASK WITHOUT PROMPTING INITIALLY] (e.g. to allow you to work, for the child's development, etc.)

9. How did you decide what type of childcare to use, who the provider would be, and how many days/hours you wanted/needed?

- What were the most important considerations for you?
- Did you make the decision alone and/or did anyone help you make the decision?
- Were your choices restricted in any way?
- Were you happy with the decision you made at the time? Did your decision change at any time before or after your child/children took up a place?

10. Do you currently use the full 1140 hours or not?

If yes:

- Is this enough for your needs, or do you need to top-up with either help from family/friends or pay for extra hours?

- If you need additional hours, what impact did this have on your decisions around what provider(s) and hours to use, and any other wider impacts?
- Did you have to change or reduce your work/education/training hours to fit in?

If no:

- How many hours do you use? (Probe whether these are whole days over fewer sessions or shorter days spread over the full week)
- Why do you not use the full 1140 hours?
- Are your current hours enough for your needs, or do you need to top-up with either help from family/friends or pay for extra hours?
- If you need additional hours, what impact did this have on your decisions around what provider(s) and hours to use, and any other wider impacts?
- Would you consider increasing your use of the ELC hours in the future? What would need to change for you to want to use more hours/the full 1140 hours?

11. How well do you feel the ELC you use fits with the family's needs, and are there any issues with this? How much of an impact did this have on your decision to use/how you chose to use the ELC provision?

Probe for:

- Other family members routines, journeys, etc. (e.g. school, before/after-school care, clubs, appointments, etc.)
- Parents/carers work, training or education needs
- Social time (e.g. social activities, visits with family/friends, other mother and toddler groups, other social activities/events)
- Impact of holidays/what you do out of school term time?
- Any other needs/routines

12. Do you have family/friends nearby who could have helped/do help with childcare?

If yes:

- What things did you consider when deciding between this informal help from family/friends and using the ELC provision?
- Were you influenced in any way by friends or family when making your childcare decisions? If yes, in what way?

Work, Training or Employment

13. You said in the questionnaires that you [are/are not] in work, training or education:

Ask if in work/training/education:

- What issues did you consider when deciding to go into/back to work/training/education after having your child/ren? What was the main driver/motivating factor to look for work/training/education or to increase your hours?

- Probe for: financial reasons, good support available to get work/training/ education, wellbeing reasons, self-esteem, normal habits, extended ELC hours, felt they should/it was expected, etc.
- Have you been able to find appropriate work/training/education that fits with your childcare arrangements and family circumstances? How easy was it to find work/training/education?
 - Probe: Have you contacted job centres? Did the job centre/ employability support service tell you about the free ELC hours? Was the job centre aware of the ELC provision and help you find something to suit those hours?
 - Probe: How well does the ELC provision and employment/training/ education work together, both in terms of policy/messaging and in reality?
- Did the provision of the 1140 funded ELC hours have any impact on your decisions about or patterns of work/training/education patterns?
 - **If yes**, what was this? (e.g. entered/re-entered work/training/ education, increased hours, changed hours to fit childcare, etc.)
 - **If not**, why not? (e.g. already full-time employed, didn't want to increase hours, have other commitments, etc.)
- Did your work/training/education impact on your decision to use ELC? Please explain.
- How easy or difficult was it to match the 1140 ELC hours to your working/ training/educational hours? Did you find it suitable to meet your needs?
 - If yes/easy, in what way, please explain? Why was this important?
 - If no/difficult, what was the problem and how could this be improved?

Ask if not in work/training/education:

- What are the reasons for you not working, training or being in education?
 - Probe for: not able to work, other commitments/responsibilities, lack of suitable/affordable childcare, family circumstances/norms, expected impacts to income/benefits or not financially beneficial, no financial need, etc.
- Have you been looking for work/training/education that fits with your childcare arrangements and family circumstances? How easy/difficult has this been?
 - Probe: Have you contacted job centres? Did the job centre/ employability support service tell you about the free ELC hours? Was the job centre aware of the ELC provision and help you find something to suit those hours?
 - Probe: How well does the ELC provision and employment/training/ education work together, both in terms of policy/messaging and in reality?
- Has the provision of the funded ELC hours had any impact on what you think about working/training/education?

- Do you feel that by using the ELC provision there is an expectation on you to work, be in training or education?

14. Do you feel that the ELC is flexible enough to support changes in working patterns, or to move between education, training and work?

- If yes, please explain?
- If no, in what way would it not support this and how could it be changed to better accommodate such changes?
- Was this a factor in your decision to use it?

Unpaid Activities

15. Has the provision of the funded 1140 ELC hours allowed you to consider, start doing, or increased any unpaid work, or other things, like volunteering, caring for others, joining community groups, etc.?

- If yes, what has this supported, and in what way did this help?
- If no, please explain why not?

16. What other activities do you feel the ELC provision has enabled you to do?

- **Probe for:** respite/time to yourself; time to spend with other children; time to catch up on housework, shopping, personal business; maintain social contact with others; anything else?

Other Considerations for Using ELC

17. Are there any other factors that impacted your decision to use the ELC provision or not, or why you chose the type of provider, number or pattern of hours used?

Probe for:

- Appropriate for the child (e.g. due to age, needs, familiarity, etc.)
- Accessibility (especially rural/remote communities)
- The influence of family or friends
- Family norms (e.g. that's what the older children did, that's how our family has done it through the generations, etc.)
- Quality of one setting vs another
- Consideration of alternative options

Benefits and/or issues with using ELC

18. What would you say are the **positive impacts or benefits** of ELC? [ASK UNPROMPTED INITIALLY]

Probe for:

- Benefits for the **child**? (e.g. socialisation, education, nutrition, nurtured, safe, opportunities to try activities, etc.)
- Benefits for them/the **parents/carers**? (e.g. financial as it allows them to work and/or reduce childcare costs? Time out for themselves/to do other things? Access to advice and support re their child's development? Access

to greater levels of peer support as a result of using ELC? Parents/carers making friends themselves? (Are there any corresponding links to mental health?)

- Benefits for **other family members** (e.g. siblings, older family members or those requiring care, etc.)

19. Do you think there are any **negative impacts, drawbacks or issues** with ELC? [ASK UNPROMPTED INITIALLY]

Probe for:

- Drawbacks/issues/challenges for the child?
- Drawbacks/issues/challenges for the parents/carers?
- Drawbacks/issues/challenges for other family members - e.g. siblings, grandparents, other family members, etc.?

20. Are there any other **challenges or barriers** which make it difficult to use the ELC provision that we've not already talked about? **If appropriate, probe for:**

- Any local issues due to the LA model adopted?
- Any difficulty in finding accessible/suitable provision for children with disabilities or additional support needs?
- Any difficulties in finding culturally appropriate/sensitive provision?
- Any COVID-19 related issues? (e.g. to protect those who needed to shield, concerns re child's exposure to infection, etc.)

21. And what changes could be made to overcome these challenges or barriers?

22. How strongly did these benefits, drawbacks or barriers feature in your decision to use the ELC provision or not, or why you chose the type of provider, number or pattern of hours used?

23. Do you think you would have used the funded ELC if it was available for younger children (e.g. 1 and 2 year olds)?

- Why / Why not?
- What would the barriers be, if any?
- To what extent do you feel the setting would be appropriate/inappropriate for this age group?
- Would the benefits and drawbacks be any different for this younger age group?

Any Other Comments

24. Is there anything else about ELC provision or the decisions that you made in relation to ELC that you would like to add, that I have not given you a chance to say?

Thank and close.

Section B: Ask those who do not use funded ELC

Awareness

5. You said in the questionnaire that you [had/had not] heard of the free/funded 1140 hours of ELC provision:

Ask if they had heard of it:

- How did you first hear about the free 1140 hours of ELC provision?

Probe for:

- Sources of information (e.g. friends & family, health visitor, GP, social worker, mother and baby/toddler groups, schools, etc.)
- Format of information (e.g. online, newspaper, TV., with other information about child, hard copy leaflet or info, etc.)
- Do you remember seeing any information about the funded ELC provision with the Best Start Grant or other information about supporting families?
- What, if anything, could be done better to improve information about the funded ELC provision? (e.g. timing of info, source, format, other)

Ask if they had not heard of it:

- What would be the best way to make parents aware of it?

Probe for:

- Preferred/trusted sources?
- Preferred/accessible formats?
- Timing of information?

6. Do you know how the free ELC provision works locally?

Probe for, and determine if this is based on perception or experience:

- Eligibility
- Use of the hours - all or nothing, able to use a portion of the time, term time only or spread over full year
- Flexibility - able split the time between more than one provider, able to vary use (start/end times, days of the week, etc)
- Check for any misunderstandings re hours available or impact on social security benefits

Use of ELC and Fit with Needs

7. While you don't use any of the funded ELC provision, do you use any other types of childcare?

If yes:

- Please outline what childcare you use?

If no:

- Do you have family/friends that help out when you do need childcare?
- What things did you consider when deciding between informal help from family/friends and using other more formal settings?

8. Why did you choose this over the ELC provision?

- How did you choose which type and providers to use (or not use), and the pattern of days/hours you wanted/needed? What factors were important?

- How well does this meet your needs?
- Were your choices (of provider or hours) restricted in any way?
- Did you make the decision alone and/or did anyone help you make the decision?
- Were you happy with the decision you made at the time? Did your decision change at any time before or after your child/children took up a place?

9. What are your main reasons for not using the free ELC provision? [ASK UNPROMPTED INITIALLY]

Probe for:

- Convenience
- Flexibility
- Family needs/routines
- Appropriate for the child (e.g. due to age, needs, familiarity, etc.)
- Influence of family or friends
- Family norms (e.g. that's what the older children did, that's how it was for me, etc.)
- Considerations of one setting vs another (both formal and informal settings)
- Any other factors/considerations (e.g. parents want to be with the child, possible stigma for eligible 2s, concerns over impacts to social security benefits, concern that they'd be an expectation for them to work, concerned about what they would do with their time, don't need/want government funding, etc.)

10. Would you consider using the funded ELC provision in the future?

- If yes, under what circumstances? What would need to change for you to use it?
- If no, why not?

Work, Training or Employment

11. You said in the questionnaire that you [are/are not] in work/training/education:

If in work/training/education, and not covered above, ask:

- What issues did you consider when deciding to go into/back to work/training/education after having your child/ren? What was the main driver/motivating factor to look for work/training/education or to increase your hours?
 - Probe for: financial reasons, good support available to get work/training/ education, wellbeing reasons, self-esteem, normal habits, felt they should/it was expected, etc.
- Have you been able to find appropriate work/training/education that fits with your childcare arrangements and family circumstances? How easy was it to find appropriate work/training/education that fits in?
 - Probe: Have you contacted job centres? Did the job centre/ employability support service tell you about the free ELC hours? Was the job centre aware of the ELC provision and help you find

something to suit those hours? How well does your working hours and current childcare match-up?

- Probe: How well does the ELC provision and employment/training/education work together, both in terms of messaging and in reality?
- Has your childcare arrangements impacted on the amount you can work, or has your working patterns impacted on your choices of childcare options? Please explain.
- Do you need additional informal support to meet your needs? (e.g. help from family/friends) If yes, what is the impact (positive and/or negative) of this on you, your child and those family members/friends providing the help?

If not in work/training/education, ask:

- What are the reasons for you not working, training or being in education?
 - Probe for: not able to work, other commitments, lack of suitable/affordable childcare, family circumstances/norms, expected impacts to income/benefits or not financially beneficial, no financial need, etc.
- Have you been looking for work/training/education that fits with your childcare arrangements and family circumstances? How easy/difficult has this been?
 - Probe: Have you contacted job centres? Did the job centre/employability support service tell you about the free ELC hours? Was the job centre aware of the ELC provision and able to help you look for something to suit those hours?
 - Probe: How well does the ELC provision and employment/training/education work together, both in terms of messaging and in reality?
- Has the provision of the free ELC hours had any impact on what you think about working/training/education?
- Would you feel that, if you used the ELC provision there would be an expectation on you to work, be in training or education?

Unpaid Activities

12. Do you do any unpaid activities, like caring for others, volunteering, joining community groups, etc.?

- If yes, what do you do and how does your childcare fit in with this?
- If no, please explain why not?

13. What other activities does your chosen childcare (including informal support from family/friends) enable you to do?

- **Probe for:** respite/time to yourself; time to spend with other children; time to catch up on housework, shopping, personal business; maintain social contact with others; anything else?

Positive and Negative Impacts of ELC

14. Although you don't use it, what would you say are the **positive impacts or benefits** of ELC, if any? [ASK UNPROMPTED INITIALLY]

Probe for:

- Benefits for the **child**? (e.g. socialisation, education, nutrition, nurtured, safe, opportunities to try activities, etc.)
- Benefits for them/the **parents/carers**? (e.g. financial as it allows them to work and/or reduce childcare costs? Time out for themselves/to do other things? Access to advice and support re their child's development? Access to greater levels of peer support as a result of using ELC? Parents/carers making friends themselves? (Are there any corresponding links to mental health?)
- Benefits for **other family members** (e.g. siblings, older family members or those requiring care, etc.)

15. What do you think are the **negative impacts or drawbacks** with ELC, if any? [ASK UNPROMPTED INITIALLY]

Probe for :

- Drawbacks/issues/challenges for the child?
- Drawbacks/issues/challenges for them/the parents/carers?
- Drawbacks/issues/challenges for other family members - e.g. siblings, grandparents, other family members, etc.?

16. What are the main **challenges or barriers** which make it difficult to use the ELC provision that we've not already talked about? And what changes would be needed to overcome these?

If appropriate, probe for:

- Any local issues due to the LA model adopted?
- Any difficulty in finding accessible/suitable provision for children with disabilities or additional support needs?
- Any difficulties in finding culturally appropriate/sensitive provision?
- Any COVID-19 related issues? (e.g. to protect those who needed to shield, concerns re child's exposure to infection, etc.)

17. How strongly did these benefits, drawbacks or barriers feature in your decision not to use the ELC provision?

18. Do you think you would have used the funded ELC if it was available for younger children (e.g. 1 and 2 year olds)?

- Why / Why not?
- What would the barriers be, if any?
- To what extent do you feel the setting would be appropriate/inappropriate for this age group?
- Would the benefits and drawbacks be any different for this age group?

19. Is there anything else about ELC provision or the decisions that you made in relation to ELC that you would like to add, that I have not given you a chance to say?

Thank and close.

Section C: Ask those who are still deciding/kids not yet eligible

Awareness

5. You said in the questionnaire that you [had/had not] heard of the free/funded 1140 hours of ELC provision:

Ask if they had heard of it:

- How did you first hear about the free 1140 hours of ELC provision?

Probe for:

- Sources of information (e.g. friends & family, health visitor, GP, social worker, mother and baby/toddler groups, schools, etc.)
- Format of information (e.g. online, newspaper, TV., with other information about child, hard copy leaflet or info, etc.)
- Do you remember seeing any information about the funded ELC provision with the Best Start Grant or other information about supporting families?
- What, if anything, could be done better to improve information about the funded ELC provision? (e.g. timing of info, source, format, other)

Ask if they had not heard of it:

- What would be the best way to make parents aware of it?

Probe for:

- Preferred/trusted sources?
- Preferred/accessible formats?
- Timing of information?

6. Do you know how the free ELC provision works locally?

Probe for, and determine if this is based on perception or experience:

- Eligibility
- Use of the hours - all or nothing, able to use a portion of the time, term time only or spread over full year
- Flexibility - able split the time between more than one provider, able to vary use (start/end times, days of the week, etc)
- Check for any misunderstandings re hours available or impact on social security benefits

Current Childcare

7. Although your child's not old enough for the free ELC places yet, do you use any other form of childcare just now?

If yes:

- Please outline what childcare you use and why?

If no:

- Do you have family/friends that help out when you do need childcare?
- What things did you consider when deciding between informal help from family/friends and using other more formal settings?

Plans for Use of ELC and Fit with Needs

Please note: all questions from this point to the end are focused on what you plan to do in terms of childcare once your child is eligible for the ELC provision.

8. When your child becomes old enough for the ELC provision, what is your plan for childcare? How will your current arrangements change, if at all?
9. What are the main reasons for your choice in childcare provider going forward (i.e. once the child is old enough for the ELC provision)? [ASK WITHOUT PROMPTING INITIALLY]
10. How have (or will) you decided what type of childcare to use (if any), who the provider would be, and how many days/hours you want/need?
 - What have been (or will) be the most important considerations for you?
 - Did (or will) you make the decision alone and/or did anyone help you make the decision? Were you influenced by family/friends or others in any way?
 - Do you feel your choices are restricted in any way?
 - Are you happy with the decision you've made about your future childcare use? Is there anything that might make you change your mind?
11. Do you plan to use the full 1140 hours or not?
 - If yes:**
 - Is this enough for your needs, or will you need to top-up with either help from family/friends or pay for extra hours?
 - If you will need additional hours, what impact will this have on your decisions around what provider(s) and hours to use, and any other wider impacts?
 - Will you have to change or reduce your work/education/training hours to fit in?
 - If no:**
 - How many hours will you use? (Probe whether these are whole days over fewer sessions or shorter days spread over the full week)
 - Why will you not use the full 1140 hours?
 - Will these hours be enough for your needs, or will you need to top-up with either help from family/friends or pay for extra hours?
 - If you will need additional hours, what impact will this have on your decisions around what provider(s) and hours to use, and any other wider impacts?
 - Do you think you will consider increasing your use of the ELC hours in the future? What would need to change for you to want to use more hours/the full 1140 hours?
12. How well do you feel your planned childcare arrangements will fit in with the family's needs, and are there any issues with this? How much of an impact did this have on your decision to use/not use the ELC provision?
 - Probe for:**
 - Other family members routines, journeys, etc. (e.g. school, before/after-school care, clubs, appointments, etc.)

- Parents/carers work, training or education needs
- Social time (e.g. social activities, visits with family/friends, other mother and toddler groups, other social activities/events)
- Impact of holidays/what you do out of school term time?
- Any other needs/routines

Work, Training or Employment

13. You said in the questionnaire that you [are/are not] in work, training or education:

Ask if in work/training/education:

- What issues did you consider when deciding to go into/back to work/training/education after having your child/ren? What was the main driver/motivating factor to look for work/training/education or to increase your hours?
 - Probe for: financial reasons, good support available to get work/training/education, wellbeing reasons, self-esteem, normal habits, felt they should/it was expected, etc.
- Have you been able to find appropriate work/training/education that fits with your current and planned childcare arrangements and family circumstances? How easy was it to find work/training/education?
 - Probe: Have you contacted job centres? Did the job centre/employability support service tell you about the free ELC hours? Was the job centre aware of the ELC provision and help you find something to suit those hours?
 - Probe: How well does the ELC provision and employment/training/education work together, both in terms of messaging and in reality?
- Has the provision of the 1140 funded ELC hours had any impact on your plans for, or patterns of, work/training/education?
 - **If yes**, what was this? (e.g. entered/re-entered work/training/education, increased hours, changed hours to fit childcare, etc.)
 - **If not**, why not? (e.g. already full-time employed, didn't want to increase hours, have other commitments, etc.)
- Did your work/training/education impact on your decision to use ELC? Please explain.
- How easy or difficult was it to match the 1140 ELC hours to your working/training/educational hours? Did you find it suitable to meet your needs?
 - If yes/easy, in what way, please explain? Why was this important?
 - If no/difficult, what was the problem and how could this be improved?

Ask if not in work/training/education:

- What are the reasons you not working, training or in education?
 - Probe for: not able to, other commitments/responsibilities, childcare issues, family circumstances/norms, expected impacts to income/benefits, not financially beneficial, no financial need, etc.
- Have you been/do you plan on looking for work/training/education that fits with your planned childcare arrangements once you can access the ELC provision? How easy/difficult has this been?

- Probe: Have you contacted job centres? Did the job centre/ employability support service tell you about the free ELC hours? Was the job centre aware of the ELC provision and help you find something to suit those hours?
- Probe: How well does the ELC provision and employment/training/ education work together, both in terms of messaging and in reality?
- Do you feel that by using the ELC provision there is an expectation on you to work, be in training or education?

14. Do you feel that the ELC is flexible enough to support changes in working patterns, or to move between education, training and work?

- If yes, please explain?
- If no, in what way would it not support this and how could it be changed to better accommodate such changes?
- Was this a factor in your decision to use it/not use it in future?

Unpaid Activities

15. Do you think you are likely to start, or increase any current levels of unpaid work, or other things, like volunteering, caring for others, joining community groups, etc. as a result of the ELC provision?

- If yes, in what way will this help?
- If no, please explain why not?

16. What other activities do you feel the ELC provision will enable you to do?

- **Probe for:** respite/time to yourself; time to spend with other children; time to catch up on housework, shopping, personal business; maintain social contact with others; anything else?

Other Considerations for Using ELC

17. Are there any other factors that have impacted your thinking/decision to use the ELC provision or not, why you will choose a particular type of provider, or the number or pattern of hours you will use?

Probe for:

- Appropriate for the child (e.g. due to age, needs, familiarity, etc.)
- Accessibility (especially rural/remote communities)
- The influence of family or friends
- Family norms (e.g. that's what the older children did, that's how our family has done it through the generations, etc.)
- Quality of one setting vs another
- Consideration of alternative options

Benefits and/or issues with using ELC

18. What would you say are the **positive impacts or benefits** of ELC? [ASK UNPROMPTED INITIALLY]

Probe for:

- Benefits for the **child**? (e.g. socialisation, education, nutrition, nurtured, safe, opportunities to try activities, etc.)
- Benefits for them/the **parents/carers**? (e.g. financial as it allows them to work and/or reduce childcare costs? Time out for themselves/to do other things? Access to advice and support re their child's development? Access to greater levels of peer support as a result of using ELC? Parents/carers making friends themselves? (Are there any corresponding links to mental health?)
- Benefits for **other family members** (e.g. siblings, older family members or those requiring care, etc.)

19. Do you think there are any **negative impacts, drawbacks or issues** with ELC? [ASK UNPROMPTED INITIALLY]

Probe for:

- Drawbacks/issues/challenges for the child?
- Drawbacks/issues/challenges for the parents/carers?
- Drawbacks/issues/challenges for other family members - e.g. siblings, grandparents, other family members, etc.?

20. Are there any other **challenges or barriers** which make it difficult to use the ELC provision that we've not already talked about? And what changes could be made to overcome these? **If appropriate, probe for:**

- Any local issues due to the LA model adopted?
- Any difficulty in finding accessible/suitable provision for children with disabilities or additional support needs?
- Any difficulties in finding culturally appropriate/sensitive provision?
- Any COVID-19 related issues? (e.g. to protect those who needed to shield, concerns re child's exposure to infection, etc.)

21. How strongly have these benefits, drawbacks or barriers featured in your thoughts/ decision on whether to use the ELC provision or not?

22. Do you think you would have used the funded ELC if it was available for younger children (e.g. 1 and 2 year olds)?

- Why / Why not?
- What would the barriers be, if any?
- To what extent do you feel the setting would be appropriate/inappropriate for this age group?
- Would the benefits and drawbacks be any different for this younger age group?

Any Other Comments

23. Is there anything else about ELC provision or the decisions that you made in relation to ELC that you would like to add, that I have not given you a chance to say?

Thank and close.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact <email address> for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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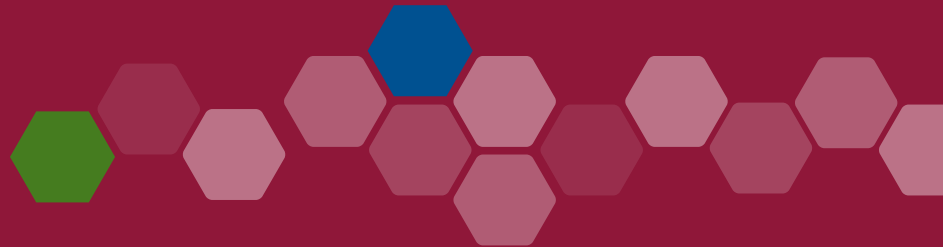
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