



You are here: | [Newsroom](#) | [Speeches & Briefings](#) | [Expansion of Free Early Learning and Childcare](#)

23/03/17 14:57

Expansion of Free Early Learning and Childcare

Search News Items

Minister for Childcare and Early Years Mark McDonald

Scottish Parliament, 23 March 2017

Presiding Officer, this Government is committed to delivering a bright future for Scotland's children. Key to this is ensuring that all our children get the best possible start in life.

That is why we have done more than any previous devolved administration, and indeed, any other government in the UK, to expand high-quality, free early learning and childcare provision.

If we are to achieve our aim of making substantial progress to close the attainment gap between children from the least and most deprived communities and interrupt the cycle of poverty which attacks the life chances of too many of our children, we must intervene early and provide a high quality learning experience before they go to school, as well as appropriate support to enable parents to take up and stay in work, training and education.

Achieving excellence and equity for our children is a systemic challenge, one that the whole system involved in delivering education and children's services needs to respond to. That includes those sectors and services involved in delivering early learning and childcare.

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Every child and family is different, so our work with them needs to respond to those individual circumstances.

Put simply, our public services need to focus on the individual not their own organisational arrangements. Our Blueprint 2020 sets out how we will seek to achieve this by near doubling the current 600 hours per year of free early learning and childcare entitlement to 1140 hours. This expansion will be built around quality, flexibility, accessibility and affordability to meet the needs of children and families across Scotland.

Our consultation between October and January sought views on our Blueprint. I want to thank all the individuals and 128 organisations that contributed responses, or attended our seven consultation events, for their thoughtful input. We are publishing an independent analysis of those responses today.

Having carefully considered those responses, I can advise Parliament that today, we are publishing the Blueprint Action Plan which sets out 31 steps this Government will take in the coming year to work towards expansion of early learning and childcare provision to 1140 hours by 2020.

Quality is already and will continue to be at the heart of our entire approach. We will develop a Quality Action Plan by October 2017, working with stakeholders who know what drives quality and what more we need to do to strengthen this.

As part of this, we will introduce a quality standard that all providers will be required to meet before they can access funding to deliver the free hours. This will draw on existing quality standards to create a coherent, consistent national standard.

We also want to ensure that the service model maximises flexibility for families, so that all parents can take up their entitlement for their children. Parents have told us that they want choice – genuine choice – of provision across sectors.

That involves removing barriers to private and third sector providers delivering funded ELC. The service model for the future must ensure more financially sustainable provision across all sectors - including community-led provision, such as the approach to extending hours being supported through the Argyll and Bute Trial involving the Mull & Iona Community Trust.

I want to make clear that local authorities will continue to play a vital role in delivering ELC and building capacity for the expansion to 1140 hours – they will be the main guarantor of quality and enabler of flexibility and choice.

But the service model we will develop is fundamentally 'provider neutral' - prioritising the settings that are best placed to deliver quality outcomes for children, and supporting our ambition to close the attainment gap, regardless of which sector they are provided by.

Presiding Officer, this model will ensure that funding follows the child. It will be underpinned by a rigorous approach to ensure the quality of learning and care, so we will also establish a new national standard for funded provider status. Sustainability and fairness will also feature in the new model to help

drive quality.

My officials will work in partnership with local authorities to develop the detail of the funding model and the national standard. And I can also announce, Presiding Officer that we will commission a feasibility study to explore potential costs and benefits of introducing an Early Learning and Childcare Account in the future.

As already stated, local authorities will continue to play a key role in the delivery of our Action Plan and will retain their statutory responsibility to ensure that funded entitlement is available for all eligible children in their areas.

But we also need to support them to build the capacity needed in their communities to provide 1140 hours, so we will provide support to local authorities, providing access to professional and technical expertise on common and complex issues and additional service innovation and redesign capacity. That support will be shaped with the involvement of local authorities themselves.

I can further advise that we are issuing ELC expansion planning guidance to local authorities today to help them think through their key infrastructure, workforce and delivery model approaches in a systematic manner as they move towards providing 1140 hours.

Increasing the role for childminders in delivering the funded hours received significant support in consultation responses. Our new 'provider neutral' approach and accompanying funding model will help make this a reality, but we must also ensure that childminders are enabled to play their part.

So we will work with the Scottish Childminding Association and local authorities to ensure that childminders are properly promoted as a high quality option for the funded hours; and in September 2017, we will publish a new learning and development pathway to encourage more people to choose to become childminders.

Now that the policy framework has been announced, local authorities can develop more refined cost estimates for the expansion. This is key to ensuring that we collectively maximise public value from this significant investment.

I am clear, Presiding Officer that the new funding model will ensure that resources provided for early learning and childcare directly reach frontline delivery in order to best meet the needs of individual children and their families.

While the details of actual funding allocations will be made clear in the formal Budget process later this year, we will provide greater certainty to local authorities over multi-year revenue and capital funding assumptions over the coming weeks and months.

We remain absolutely committed to meeting the costs of expanding the entitlement, and I reaffirm that commitment today.

The role of the early learning and childcare workforce is critical to our principal aim of achieving better outcomes for children. The expansion will see an opportunity for the workforce to grow substantially, resulting in the creation of new employment opportunities in all parts of Scotland.

We need to demonstrate how much we value this work, by offering fulfilling career opportunities, entrance pathways and progression routes at all levels, from apprentices through to centre heads, and by ensuring that the workforce is fairly remunerated.

This will be a key focus of a new recruitment marketing campaign, which will be developed and ready for autumn 2017.

And we will work with delivery partners to develop recruitment and career pathways to assist in attracting and retaining high calibre candidates in the workforce, to raise the profile of a career in ELC amongst under-represented groups and to seek to improve gender balance across the sector.

We will also increase the focus on access to graduate-level early years educators, seeking to strengthen the practice-based element of graduate level training, with clear measures to be set out in our Quality Action Plan.

Our expansion plans will be built on a foundation of fairness for the workforce, with the Living Wage extended to all childcare staff delivering funded entitlement from the full roll out of 1140 hours in 2020.

As the First Minister stated at the weekend, we will provide local authorities with up to £50 million additional annual revenue funding to enable funded providers to pay the Living Wage to childcare staff delivering the entitlement. Up to 8,000 staff in the private and third sectors will benefit from this uplift.

Expanded provision must be accessible and delivered in a way that ensures equality of access for all children.

The consultation highlighted that it can still be difficult for some families to access their entitlement if their child is disabled or has additional support needs.

We are therefore introducing a new fund that will enable the provision of better support to meet children's needs. Providers will be able to access funding for specialist training and equipment, with a total of two million pounds available over the next four years.

Presiding Officer, research shows that high quality learning and care in early years has a positive effect on a range of outcomes for children, and has the potential to make a key contribution to closing the attainment gap.

That is why we are determined to ensure that the expansion of early learning and childcare in Scotland helps to deliver the strong foundations our children need to succeed at school and in life.

The Blueprint Action Plan being published today sets out 31 key steps we will take in 2017-18 to progress delivery on our key commitment to near double free early learning and childcare to eligible 2 year olds and all 3 and 4 year olds in Scotland by 2020.

And crucially, Presiding Officer, by founding those steps on core principles of quality, flexibility, accessibility and affordability, we will ensure that this expansion helps to give every child in Scotland an equal chance of fulfilling his or her potential.

Ends.

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