

A BLUEPRINT FOR 2020: THE EXPANSION OF EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE IN SCOTLAND

QUALITY ACTION PLAN

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at
The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

First published by The Scottish Government, October 2017
ISBN: 978-1-78851-388-3

Published by The Scottish Government, October 2017

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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD



The Scottish Government recognises that the earliest years of life are crucial to a child's development and have a lasting impact on outcomes in health, education and employment opportunities later in life. We are committed to reducing these inequalities and this is why we are making an unprecedented level of investment in the early years – through universal measures such as the expansion of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) and provision of the Baby Box; plus targeted investment for low income families such as our new Best Start Grants – to support our high level ambition to give our children the best start in life.

Included within this investment package, the near doubling of the entitlement to ELC from 600 to 1140 hours per year from August 2020 is one of the most important and transformational changes we are making during our current Parliamentary programme.

On 23 March 2017, I published *A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland – 2017-18 Action Plan*, the first in a series of annual action plans, that committed us to 31 actions in the year ahead to ensure that this ambitious expansion is underpinned by the principles of quality, flexibility, accessibility and affordability. In my foreword, I highlighted that quality was the golden thread that ran through that action plan. In this action plan, focused specifically on quality, the golden thread is the need to value and invest in our workforce – from induction, continuous professional learning, guidance for professional practice, leadership and management to collaborative working and celebrating good practice – to ensure that professionals are equipped with the skills and resources they need to deliver the best possible outcomes for children.

I hope that this plan helps emphasise how much we value our well-trained, professional and skilled ELC workforce, and that its contents will support their vital role in giving children the best possible start in life – after all, there is no more important job than working with children to help nurture their development, and help shape and build their worlds.

I know that the quality of ELC in Scotland is high overall, and we already have much to be proud of. I am confident that the 15 actions set out here will further strengthen quality right across the system.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the members of the Quality Reference Group for their intense work from May to October this year in helping to shape the content of this action plan, and commend its publication as another important step on the road towards ensuring that our ambitious expansion of ELC by August 2020 is deeply-rooted in quality.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark McDonald'.

Mark McDonald

Minister for Childcare and Early Years

October 2017

ACTIONS

ACTION 1: We will strengthen the focus on child development within the assessment for all SVQ units for the Social Services (Children and Young People) group award.

ACTION 2: We will review the content of other initial qualifications in early learning and childcare, and the focus of continuous professional learning, informed by the most up to date research on child development.

ACTION 3: We will prepare a national induction resource for all staff who are new to delivering early learning and childcare to ensure that they are well supported in developing the skills and understanding they need in their role.

ACTION 4: We will create and deliver an online national programme of continuous professional learning that will be available to all early learning and childcare providers and will be centrally co-ordinated and funded.

ACTION 5: We will create a directory of continuous professional learning opportunities to help the early learning and childcare sector identify developmental support available to them once qualified.

ACTION 6: We will develop guidance that will support local authorities and early learning and childcare providers in the private and third sectors to implement the living wage commitment.

ACTION 7: From April 2018, the Care Inspectorate will include a specific focus in their inspections of early learning and childcare to assess the extent to which graduate-level practitioners are leading pedagogical practice and improving outcomes for children.

ACTION 8: We will introduce a learning and development course for school leadership teams on what drives quality in early learning and childcare and how provision for children under three sets the foundations for learning for Curriculum for Excellence.

ACTION 9: We will refresh and re-launch National Guidance on Pre-birth to Three and Building the Ambition to bring this up-to-date with new evidence that will support practice in early learning and childcare.

ACTION 10: We will promote greater use of outdoor learning and physical activity by producing a 'how to' guide on finding access to suitable outdoor areas and making the most of the opportunities that these offer to promote children's development.

ACTION 11: We will develop an online resource for parents to empower them to make choices about the right ELC setting or combination of settings for their child.

ACTION 12: We will increase support for evidence-based family learning programmes to embed this in the early learning offer for families facing disadvantage.

ACTION 13: We will identify early learning and childcare settings that have demonstrated innovation and impact in aspects of their practice and share this nationally and, where appropriate, support them to evidence and enhance their understanding of impact on children.

ACTION 14: We will strengthen the early learning and childcare content on the National Improvement Hub and introduce a dedicated landing page that directs the profession to relevant material on improving the quality of children's experiences and outcomes.

ACTION 15: We will fund a facilitator to help the early learning and childcare profession share learning and experience in improving children's learning and development, either on Glow or another online platform.

INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Government is committed to providing high quality, flexible early learning and childcare that is accessible and affordable for all families. 'A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland' consultation document was launched in October 2016. It set out our vision for an expansion that will almost double entitlement to funded early learning and childcare to 1140 hours a year by 2020 for all three and four-year olds and eligible two-year olds.

It is widely acknowledged, including by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), that the provision of universally accessible and high quality early learning and childcare helps to provide children with skills and confidence to carry into school education, and is a cornerstone for closing the poverty-related attainment gap between children from the most and least deprived communities. Evidence from both UK and international evaluations and studies of early learning and childcare programmes support the fact that all children, and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, can benefit in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes from attending early learning and childcare. However a key finding from research is that, if children are to benefit, early learning and childcare must be of high quality, with poor quality provision shown to have detrimental effects on children.

In March 2017, following a period of public consultation on the vision for expansion, we published the first in a series of action plans – 'A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland: 2017-18 Action Plan'. That action plan made it clear that quality would be the 'driving force' of the expansion. We also reaffirmed our commitment to produce a plan focused on actions to embed and further strengthen quality. This is that Quality Action Plan, which sets out the steps we will take over the next three years to ensure that the expansion delivers a high quality experience for all our children.

This Quality Action Plan has been developed in close consultation with our Quality Reference Group, made up of stakeholders who best understand, not only what drives quality, but also how we can further strengthen provision of high quality early learning and childcare in Scotland. We are grateful to all members of the Group for the passion, energy and ideas which they have brought to bear on the development of this plan. More information on the Quality Reference Group can be found at Annex A.

The development of the action plan was an opportunity to think systematically about the drivers of quality in early learning and childcare and how they link to child outcomes, to ensure that there is a comprehensive policy framework for continuously improving quality. It is therefore informed by the EU's [Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care](#) and the research evidence around the benefits of early learning and childcare for the development of children. A primary source was NHS Health Scotland's Rapid Evidence Review which is published to coincide with this action plan (Scobie and Scott 2017). The plan was also heavily informed by 'Building the Ambition: National Practice Guidance on Early Learning and Childcare' (Scottish Government 2014). It reflects key Scottish Government policies for ensuring children get the best possible start in life. [Getting it Right for Every Child \(GIRFEC\)](#) sits at the heart of all that we do in this regard. The GIRFEC wellbeing indicators of safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included are reflected in this plan.

The essential characteristics of quality have been defined by our stakeholder group as:

- A high quality workforce
- Strong pedagogical leadership

- Warm and supportive interactions with children
- A holistic curriculum
- A focus on play-based learning
- Good access to outdoor play
- Supporting parents to engage in their children's learning
- Transitions that are well managed
- Professional collaboration
- Provision that is accessible to all
- High quality physical environments
- Clear quality standards and robust self-evaluation and quality assurance regimes

The rest of this action plan is structured around these characteristics. Many of these drivers are already well embedded but, where they need to be strengthened, there are new actions that build on existing foundations and work already underway. The main purpose of structuring the plan in this way is to define the characteristics of high quality early learning and childcare that we want to see reflected in every child's experience and create a shared understanding of where all of those responsible for policy, delivery and practice in early learning and childcare should be focusing their efforts.

While the responsibility for co-ordinating the delivery of this action plan rests with the Scottish Government, there is a shared responsibility for ensuring that the actions are realised and that they achieve their aims. Through their involvement in shaping this plan, we already know that our national stakeholder organisations are supportive and keen to collaborate to help to deliver the actions. Through their delivery plans, local authorities have a responsibility to take active steps to protect and enhance quality as they expand provision. This action plan sets out not only what extra national support will be made available, but also enables local authorities to identify where they can add value at a local level. Managers of early learning and childcare settings will already be clear about what is expected of them through the self-evaluation tools that they use to support quality improvement and through the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland's inspection framework. However, this action plan makes clear how we expect them to support the professional development of their staff and what resources will be available to facilitate this. Finally, this plan will demonstrate to individual early learning and childcare staff the value that we invest in them and the type of adult/child interactions that will deliver the best outcomes for our children.

The 2017-18 Action Plan explained that the service model for delivering early learning and childcare from August 2020 will prioritise quality and be underpinned by a more open, proportionate and consistent approach to becoming a funded provider. Quality will feature strongly in the national standard for delivering the funded entitlement. Setting a clear standard should be a driver, as well as a guarantee of high quality provision. The standard will be robust enough to keep standards high as well as achievable to ensure that we offer parents as much choice of provision as possible. It will apply to all providers of early learning and childcare, including local authority settings.

Through the work of the Quality Reference Group and production of this plan, we are now well placed to develop that quality standard in collaboration with representatives of local authorities and the early learning and childcare sector. The standard for funded provider status, including the quality standard, will be published by the end of March 2018.

A HIGH QUALITY WORKFORCE

The single most important driver of the quality of a child's ELC experience is a high quality workforce. There are few more important jobs than caring for, and educating, our youngest children.

The Skills Investment Plan¹ for the ELC sector sets out a comprehensive list of actions required to ensure we have a skilled workforce in place to deliver the expanded provision in 2020. Many of these are focused on building new workforce capacity but there is also a strong focus on actions needed to enhance the learning and development offer for the existing and new workforce. Some of those actions will be delivered by this quality action plan.

Initial training and qualifications

Questions have been raised in recent years about the need to strengthen the early childhood development content of the SVQ route to an ELC practitioner-level qualification, which is through the level 3 Social Services (Children and Young People) 'group award'. This award is designed to support skills development across a range of roles with children and young people, including: pre-school services and education provision; secure or residential care; and respite or foster care.

Building the Ambition stresses that to be able to support children effectively, practitioners need to have some understanding of the pattern of development of young children from birth to age five. This should enable them to provide the right type of interactions and experiences within a positive caring and learning environment, as well as to identify when a child is not making the developmental progress they should.

'An Independent Review of Scottish Early Learning and Childcare Workforce and Out of School Care Workforce' (Siraj and Kingston 2015), made the case for adding child development to the core units in the SVQ. The Scottish Government accepted this recommendation in part and committed to determining whether further work is needed to strengthen the emphasis within SVQs on early childhood development for those working in ELC settings.

All of the optional units in the group award require candidates to demonstrate knowledge of 'theories underpinning our understanding of child development and learning, and factors that affect it'. To ensure that all ELC practitioners qualifying through the SVQ route have sufficient and appropriate knowledge of early childhood development, we will work with SQA to strengthen the focus on child development within the assessment for all SVQ units. This will ensure that practitioners moving into pre-school services or education provision from another role have also demonstrated their knowledge of child development. Thereafter, through the Scottish Social Services Council's (SSSC) regular engagement with ELC employers, we will continue to monitor whether the SVQ is delivering the right skills for the sector.

ACTION 1: We will strengthen the focus on child development within the assessment for all SVQ units for the Social Services (Children and Young People) group award.

Responsibility for delivering this action will rest with SQA, who will strengthen the focus on child development by, for example, providing more support from external verifiers to centres that are delivering the SVQs, running workshops at their regular learning sessions with assessors and providing examples of good practice. The focus on child development within the assessment will be strengthened for those who begin the SVQ award from August 2018.

¹ Forthcoming, Skills Development Scotland

To help provide a route by which candidates can develop and extend their knowledge and understanding of child development, SSSC are also developing new online resources: a mobile application detailing the characteristics of a child's development and learning at different points in their progress; and an online interactive learning tool which features case-based scenarios that encourage learners to consider how observation informs assessment of a child's progress and how to plan appropriate support for the child.

Our expectation is that child development is embedded in all existing qualifications in ELC and that there is also a strong focus on this in continuous professional learning so that practice is informed by the most up-to-date evidence.

ACTION 2: We will review the content of all initial qualifications in early learning and childcare, and the focus of continuous professional learning, informed by the most up to date research on child development.

Induction

The ELC workforce will grow significantly over the next three years to deliver the expansion to 1140 hours. This includes managers, practitioners and support workers and it is vital that they are all properly inducted into their new roles and supported in their practice. By carefully planning and resourcing the induction and mentoring of this new workforce, we will ensure that children continue to experience high quality care and support.

ACTION 3: We will prepare a national induction resource for all staff who are new to delivering early learning and childcare to ensure that they are well supported in developing the skills and understanding they need in their role.

The national induction resource will:

- Make clear the policy ambition for ELC and that we recognise and value the contribution that all staff will make to delivering high quality ELC.
- Provide consistent information to new staff about, for example, codes of practice, standards and qualifications.
- Make staff aware of the range of existing and new support to be made available.
- Make clear what they should expect from their employers through their induction and beyond, including: the provision of a buddy or mentor; familiarisation with local policies and procedures; time for Continuous Professional Learning (CPL); and regular feedback on performance.

Setting all of this out in a national induction resource, together with the inclusion of a module on coaching and mentoring in the online national programme of CPL (see next action), will help ensure high quality support and mentoring is available for work-based learning.

The resource would be designed for, and available to, all staff working in ELC. The first version of the induction resource will be available from August 2018 but will be continuously evaluated for relevance and added to on a regular basis.

Continuous professional learning

In addition to staff qualifications, continuous professional learning (CPL) is an essential component of ELC quality and is linked to children's development. Evidence suggests that CPL helps ensure staff are aware of best practice and continually supported in the workplace, which reduces staff turnover and has an even greater impact on quality than practitioners' initial training and education. Recent reports by the Care Inspectorate (2017) and Education Scotland (2017) have also highlighted the need to strengthen CPL, particularly for those working with eligible two-year olds.

We know that CPL opportunities across Scotland are not as comprehensive as they could be – both in terms of accessibility and content – and that addressing these gaps could make an important contribution to improving outcomes for children. Accessibility is hindered by: the challenge of fitting courses around commitments in the working day; employers being willing and able to fund staff to attend; geographical challenges; and the time and costs associated with travel to attend courses.

ACTION 4: We will create and deliver an online national programme of continuous professional learning that will be available to all early learning and childcare providers and will be centrally co-ordinated and funded.

The online modules will be open to all ELC providers – not just those delivering the statutory entitlement – and so will help to drive up quality across the wider sector. The national programme will focus on areas where practice and/or existing opportunities for continuous professional learning need to be strengthened. It will also seek to address barriers that inhibit part-time or accessible learning and will include the development and provision of learning through virtual and distance models.

We will create a series of stand-alone online learning modules, which will be supplemented by a webinar. The content of modules is likely to include:

- Supporting the health and wellbeing of children experiencing disadvantage, including training on equality, attachment and child protection.
- Supporting parents to further engage in their children's development.
- Building confidence in identifying and responding to additional support needs.
- Developing an understanding of curriculum rationale.
- Child development and progression in early language and literacy.
- Staff skills, knowledge and confidence in delivering learning in STEM² subjects.
- Tracking and monitoring of children's learning to ensure continuity and progression, including during key transition stages.
- Mentoring and competency-based coaching to help with the induction of staff.
- Improving understanding of, and approaches to undertaking, self-evaluation.

² Age appropriate learning in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

Where appropriate, modules will allow for progression from the knowledge, skills and understanding required at support, practitioner and lead practitioner level so that learning can be tailored to as many groups of staff as possible. The programme will be available from December 2019.

There is also a need for up-to-date and comprehensive information on CPL opportunities available to staff across the country. Practitioners are often reliant on employers and local authorities providing them with information on relevant opportunities, particularly in the private sector. The lack of a comprehensive directory of national and local opportunities not only hinders access to CPL but also hampers our ability to understand what new opportunities need to be made available and where.

ACTION 5: We will create a directory of Continuous Professional Learning opportunities to help the ELC sector identify developmental support available to them once qualified.

This directory will:

- Help practitioners to plan their professional learning.
- Promote the full range of flexible and part-time learning and development opportunities directly to staff.
- Help providers address gaps and work with the sector to plan and match provision to need.

To be included in the directory, CPL providers will have to demonstrate that they have an established method of monitoring quality, and each listing would set out how this is undertaken (including accreditation and adherence to regulation). We will also consider developing a system that allows those who have attended courses to provide structured feedback that could be made available as part of the directory.

A first version of the directory for proof of concept and testing will be published by August 2018. The directory will then be developed and evaluated for a year to explore how manageable it is to maintain and how valuable it is to the sector.

Ensuring ELC staff are encouraged and facilitated to make adequate time for CPL, and have opportunities to apply what they have learned, is also important. The requirement to register with the SSSC and to maintain post-registration training and learning has helped to enhance the professional identity of the ELC sector. ELC settings also have a statutory requirement to ensure that staff receive appropriate training to undertake their role and this is something that the Care Inspectorate monitor in inspections.

We have already created new opportunities for childminders to access learning, development and qualifications, using both formal and informal learning mechanisms. The Care Inspectorate launched [Your Childminding Journey: A Learning and Development Resource](#) in September 2017 – one of the key actions on quality in our 2017-18 Blueprint Action Plan. We are also committed to working with the Scottish Childminding Association (SCMA) and other key delivery partners to consider the potential for a requirement for childminders delivering the funded ELC entitlement to be working towards or hold the same level of qualification as an ELC practitioner employed in a group setting. Those considerations are underway.

Pay and conditions

Scotland already has a dedicated and highly qualified ELC workforce, but we know that we can do more to change perceptions about a career in ELC and to ensure it is an attractive and long-term career choice. This will require the promotion of Fair Work practices across the sector, including ensuring that staff are fairly remunerated. Public sector staff working in ELC already receive at least the Living Wage. However, our Financial Review, published in September 2016, found that around 80% of practitioners and 50% of supervisors in private and third sector settings delivering the funded entitlement are paid below the Living Wage.

The Scottish Government wants to see all childcare workers delivering the funded entitlement, across all sectors, paid at least the Living Wage from the introduction of the entitlement to 1140 hours in 2020. To enable this, and as part of the reform of the funding model, the Scottish Government will provide sufficient additional revenue funding to allow local authorities to agree rates with funded providers in the private and third sectors that enables them to pay the Living Wage to childcare workers providing the funded entitlement. The ELC Service Models Working Group has established a Living Wage sub-group to focus on developing guidance, by the end of March 2018, to assist local authorities and providers in implementing the commitment.

Action 6: We will develop guidance that will support local authorities and providers in the private and third sectors to implement the living wage commitment.

STRONG PEDAGOGICAL LEADERSHIP

Pedagogy is the understanding of how to support others to learn, as well as what we want them to learn. A good understanding of pedagogy is important in maximising the learning opportunities we offer children in ELC settings. Although all practitioners should have an understanding of pedagogy, it is important that those who are most qualified and experienced have the time and opportunity for pedagogic leadership and role modelling. There should therefore be an appropriate balance between office management tasks (like financial management and preparing staffing rotas) and leading pedagogical practice. Settings should ensure that their most qualified staff – managers and lead practitioners – have sufficient time to lead pedagogy and the funding provided for the expansion takes account of staff time required for preparation and administrative tasks.

Our commitment to ensure that, by August 2018, nurseries in Scotland's 20% most deprived areas will benefit from an additional graduate means that there will be 435 additional graduates working directly with children across all local authorities. These will be either a graduate practitioner with a relevant degree award or a teacher with early years expertise. The guidance that we issued to local authorities made it clear that the main duties of additional graduates should be to model and lead appropriate pedagogical practices throughout the setting which are broad and balanced, support the effective delivery of the curriculum and support others in understanding child development.

We need to identify the extent to which graduate-level practitioners, including the additional graduates, are spending their time providing strong pedagogical leadership and share learning about: good practice; what is possible; how it is achieved; and what the benefits are.

ACTION 7: From April 2018, the Care Inspectorate will include a specific focus in their inspections of early learning and childcare to assess the extent to which graduate-level practitioners are leading pedagogical practice and improving outcomes for children.

Leadership teams in schools with nursery classes also need to be confident leading practice in the early years. Even where the day-to-day running of the nursery is led by a graduate-level manager with a relevant qualification, it is important that they are able to engage in professional dialogue with the school leadership team about early years pedagogy, quality in ELC and the factors that contribute to this.

This will be especially important as we empower headteachers to be the leaders of learning and teaching in their schools and nurseries through the Headteachers' Charter, announced in Education Governance: Next Steps (June 2017). We will be consulting shortly on reforms to be taken forward through the forthcoming Education Bill, including the Headteachers' Charter.

Following publication of 'An Independent Review of the Scottish Early Learning and Childcare Workforce and Out of School Care Workforce' (Siraj and Kingston, June 2015), we asked the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) to evaluate ELC learning opportunities for school leadership teams. SCEL surveyed and interviewed head teachers in summer 2016 to explore how well they thought that their professional learning was served in relation to twelve key aspects of their role as Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) early level leaders. The findings revealed there was a need for enhanced learning opportunities in respect of: early years pedagogy; theories of attachment; how young children learn and develop; leading with children and families from pre-birth to three years; and leading transitions at early level.

ACTION 8: We will introduce a learning and development course for school leadership teams on what drives quality in ELC (including what effective early years pedagogy and practice looks like) and how provision for children under three sets the foundations for learning for Curriculum for Excellence.

This course will complement the 'Into Headship' programme and be open to existing as well as prospective school leaders. It will also help to deliver the commitment in 'Education Governance: Next Steps' to develop skills for effective school leadership by enhancing the leadership support package to build the capacity and culture for teachers and headteachers to embrace their new more empowered role.

We will fund an agreed number of places on the course (likely to be three cohorts of 30 head teachers per year) from August 2018, with a decision about long-term funding made on the basis of emerging demand. Once established, we will consider how the programme could be adapted for other ELC managers who are not part of a school leadership team.

WARM AND SUPPORTIVE INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN

The quality of the interactions that children have with adults who are caring for them fundamentally affects not only their enjoyment of ELC but also the contribution that this makes to their development. Children need practitioners who: understand and act on the importance of relationships; listen and respond to their needs, desires and curiosity; respect them as active, discriminating and competent learners; and can support them as they develop self-control and self-regulation in relationships with peers and adults. There has to be a shared consensus on appropriate practice and values so that practitioners are empowered to support children in this way.

A key focus of Building the Ambition is on interactions that are characterised by a child-centred approach that is responsive to children's varying interests and needs, and offers nurture and care. Building the Ambition is complementary to the National Guidance on Pre-birth to Three (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010). This also promotes the importance of warm and supportive interactions through its focus on the rights of the child, relationships, responsive care and respect, and aims to improve and enhance evidence-based practice, preventative approaches and early intervention. It is particularly valued for its accompanying multi-media resource that includes interviews with relevant experts, and video clips to highlight good practice.

We will strengthen the content of Building the Ambition by including more guidance on: supporting eligible two year olds (particularly as they make the transition from home to ELC and to do so without risk of stigmatisation); maximising the play environment (both indoors and outdoors); and facilitating the transition to primary school. We will also refresh Pre-birth to Three to reflect changes to the policy and practice context and new research evidence.

Updating both sets of resources will also be an opportunity to 're-launch' them with an expanding workforce and to those new to working with two year olds. We will re-launch these resources in early 2019, with refreshed multi-media resources to follow.

ACTION 9: We will refresh and re-launch National Guidance on Pre-birth to Three and Building the Ambition to bring this up-to-date with new evidence that will support their practice in early learning and childcare.

The importance of warm and supportive relationships is reflected in the new Health and Social Care Standards (Scottish Government 2017), which set out what people should expect when using health, social care or social work services in Scotland. The Standards will be taken into account in Care Inspectorate inspections and quality assurance functions from April 2018. Both the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland already recognise that the quality of adult to child interaction and the strength of a child's relationship with their key worker is a key factor in determining the quality of ELC provision. Inspections and self-assessments are increasingly measuring and reporting on the quality of relationships in a service and the extent to which children are nurtured.

A HOLISTIC CURRICULUM

The curriculum in ELC is central to providing clarity and certainty on what children should learn within a caring, nurturing environment. We expect funded ELC providers across all sectors to deliver the early level of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), designed for children from age three until the end of primary one, or later for some. The principles of Curriculum for Excellence are consistent with the drivers of quality which underpin this plan, in particular, with the pedagogy and practice that encourages warm and supportive interactions and a holistic focus on child development. The key to achieving better outcomes for children is a holistic approach that recognises the connection between all aspects of child development – social and emotional, physical and cognitive.

However, for CfE to be embedded, practitioners need to know the rationale and expectations of their curriculum. It is concerning then that the Education Scotland report 'Quality and improvement in Scottish education 2012-2016' (May 2017) highlighted that there are still too many instances where the rationale for the curriculum is not clearly defined or understood well enough by staff. Other relevant areas for improvement that were identified included ensuring appropriate levels of choice, depth and challenge across all areas of learning.

To strengthen understanding of CfE among the ELC profession, we will include a module on developing and understanding of curriculum rationale in the online national programme of CPL.

A FOCUS ON PLAY-BASED LEARNING

Scotland's National Play Strategy is underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 31: Children are entitled to take part in physical activities and to play, including outdoors, and have an opportunity to experience and judge and manage risk. Play is an integral part of the Scottish Government's wider commitments to increase physical activity, combat childhood obesity and support child and adolescent mental health. Play also supports children's learning and social skills, leads to improved parent/child relationships and supports cognitive development and language skills in the early years.

Free-flow play that is not over-directed but involves active support from adults is an essential aspect of early years learning. This focus is already well embedded in the early level of CfE. 'Building the Curriculum 2' is national CfE guidance focussed on 'active learning' in the early years – learning which engages and challenges children's thinking using real-life and imaginary situations, and takes full advantage of the opportunities for learning presented by both spontaneous play and planned, purposeful play. The module on developing and understanding of curriculum rationale mentioned in action one will therefore help to strengthen the focus on play-based learning.

Retaining this active learning-based focus in the early stages of primary school helps children make a smooth transition from ELC to primary 1. The professional learning course for school leadership teams on effective early years pedagogy and practice will encourage and give confidence to school management teams to develop further these approaches in early primary school.

GOOD ACCESS TO OUTDOOR LEARNING

We know the benefits of outdoor learning, exercise and play for young children in terms of their wellbeing and physical and cognitive development. We know children are more physically active when outside. We also know that play and learning outdoors has a positive impact on learning in science by, for example, enhancing understanding of the changing seasons, enabling greater levels of physical exploration, and experiences with wildlife and the elements. There is also some evidence that outdoor learning helps to facilitate different adult/child and peer relationships, allowing some children, otherwise not reaching their potential, to flourish in this different environment (Maynard et al, 2013).

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

There are a range of resources available on the National Improvement Hub to provide [support for professional development in outdoor learning](#) across the 3-18 curriculum. Additionally, the Care Inspectorate's 'My World Outdoors'³ (March 2016) aims to encourage further development of high quality outdoor play, and the Scottish Government's recent publication 'Space to Grow'⁴ (June 2017) provides guidance on the provision of high quality outdoor spaces for ELC and Out of School Care (OSC) settings.

Two of our nationally-funded delivery model trials, in Edinburgh and Angus, focus on outdoor learning. In Edinburgh, 16 children from two school-based nurseries with particular support needs, spent half of every day in an outdoor setting. Evaluation is underway but early benefits were seen in relation to the happiness and socialisation of children, and their growing confidence and enthusiasm, both while outdoors and when back in the nursery setting. The children expressed a strong preference for being outdoors and parents have expressed similar satisfaction with their children's experiences. In Angus, a rural nursery setting has bought and tailored a yurt to open up the nursery to the outdoors for children to use as part of their expanded hours from August 2017. Inspiring Scotland is also working with Glasgow City Council's Early Years Team to test the impact of a collaborative early years model of outdoor play and learning in areas of high deprivation.

One of the barriers to increased outdoor learning is a perceived difficulty in setting up or accessing outdoor space. We will help remove this barrier by producing a step-by-step guide for practitioners which provides practical advice on how to access outdoors spaces, including land or forest areas owned by local authorities, private landowners or national bodies (such as the Forestry Commission and Scottish Natural Heritage) to create safe, nurturing and inspiring outdoor learning experiences. The guide will also support providers through the Care Inspectorate's registration process for outdoor provision and provide good practice examples of how to use outdoor play to promote learning across the curriculum, and encourage all ELC providers to give children more hours of age-appropriate physical activity, with all children benefiting from at least two hours per week.

ACTION 10: We will promote greater use of outdoor learning and physical activity by producing a 'how to' guide on finding access to suitable outdoor areas and making the most of the opportunities that these offer to promote children's development.

3 [My World Outdoors](#). Care Inspectorate 2016.

4 [Space to Grow - Design guidance for early learning and childcare and out of school care services](#). Scottish Government. 2017

The guide will be published by December 2018 and will have wider relevance beyond ELC. Enhanced access to outdoor learning in ELC will inevitably lead to increased demand and expectations for a similar experience as children transition into primary school and out of school care. It will also contribute to the commitment in the Scottish Government [STEM Education and Training Strategy for Scotland](#) to enhance opportunities for children in ELC to establish STEM fundamentals, learning particularly about their natural environment through outdoor play.

SUPPORTING PARENTS TO ENGAGE IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The home is the first and most important place for children to grow and develop (Melhuish, 2015; Scottish Government, 2015). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report 'Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education' (Sosu and Ellis, 2014) found that parental involvement programmes that focus on helping parents to use appropriate strategies to support their children's learning at home have a positive impact on reducing the poverty-related attainment gap.

A high quality ELC offer should support parents in their role as the primary influence on child outcomes. Promoting parental engagement in children's learning while children attend ELC is an important opportunity to make parents feel valued, instil them with confidence in their role and demonstrate that educational institutions are accessible and approachable. The Stay, Play and Learn sessions⁵ (run by Early Years Scotland) are an excellent example of where this is already happening.

To build staff confidence to engage with parents, we will include a module on this in the online national programme of CPL, highlighting the contribution this can make to children's development and supporting staff to find appropriate strategies.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge will also fund an ELC summit in early 2018. The summit will take stock of current examples of how the ELC offer is being used to support parents to engage in their children's learning and how we can strengthen the contribution that ELC practitioners can make. This will help to inform the content of the module.

One of the earliest opportunities to strengthen parental engagement is to make them an active agent in the choice of ELC provision for their child. As we move to a Funding Follows the Child model, we will support parents to feel confident in the move to a ELC settings that they make for their child, by providing clear and accessible information that empowers parents to make the choices that best support their child's development.

ACTION 11: We will develop an online resource for parents to empower them to make choices about the right ELC setting or combination of settings for their child.

⁵ These are also offered as one of the ELC options for the funded 600 hours of ELC entitlement for eligible two year olds and their parents/carers.

The reference resource will outline the options which are available to families (including choice of provider, outdoor provision and a blended model of ELC) and practical advice about identifying settings and provision that best meet the needs of different children and how to access support for children with additional support needs (ASN). The guidance will be ready for March 2019.

Our ambitions around parental engagement go beyond encouraging parents to support their child's development. Building the Ambition describes not only the value of supporting parents to engage in their child's learning but also to focus on their own learning.

Family learning encourages family members to learn together, with a focus on intergenerational learning and enabling parents to learn how to support their children's learning journey. For some adults, a family learning course can be the first step to taking up further adult learning and training opportunities or employment. For children, this can have an impact on attainment and their own individual learning journey.

Education Scotland's Review of Family Learning (December 2016) concludes that embedding family learning across education, health and socio-economic policies is crucial to closing the poverty related attainment gap. It recommends that funding should be made available for family learning programme development and delivery at a strategic and local authority level.

Increasing the support available for evidence-based family learning programmes will benefit both parents and children by increasing parenting skills and parental confidence and so improving interactions within the family. This can lead to increased pupil attainment and can also enhance skills development, employability, and opportunities for progression into further education for parents.

ACTION 12: We will increase support for evidence-based family learning programmes to embed this in the early learning offer for families facing disadvantage.

There will be further opportunities to support parents to engage in their children's learning as we take forward the Programme for Government commitment to develop a national action plan on parental engagement, and in the forthcoming Education Bill which will enhance the role of parents in schools by strengthening, modernising and extending the 2006 Parental Involvement Act and, where relevant, extending provision to apply to ELC settings.

TRANSITIONS THAT ARE WELL MANAGED

In an ELC setting there are several transitions we expect a child to manage, from: home to the setting; person to person; setting to setting; outdoors to indoors and ultimately from ELC to primary school. It is essential that all of these are handled sensitively, inclusively and positively.

Building the Ambition is already strong on the importance of transitions and pays particular attention to the needs of the eligible two year olds when considering transitions *within* the setting. As part of the refresh of the National Guidance on Pre-birth to Three and Building the Ambition, we will strengthen the guidance on supporting children when they make the transition from home to ELC.

We know that in some cases primary schools are supporting transitions by embedding early years specialists in Primary 1. As stated in the 2017-18 Action Plan, we will identify and share examples of how, through the Scottish Attainment Challenge, schools are supporting transitions from ELC to primary school using Attainment Scotland Funds.

CfE early level, covering children from age three, should ensure that children's wellbeing and learning is supported in a continuous and progressive way across ELC settings and into primary school. Curriculum for Excellence benchmarks were published during 2017 to provide clear statements about what learners need to know and be able to do to achieve each level in CfE, including the early level by the end of P1 (for most children).

The expansion in ELC is likely to result in more variation in patterns of attendance at ELC (different drop-off and pick up times) and might also increase the use of multiple settings (involving multiple providers across the day/week). The latter might include not only different settings providing the funded hours about also 'top-up' or 'wrap around' care. Sharing information about children's needs and interests and tracking their progress across the curriculum will therefore have to be carefully managed. We will therefore include a module in the national programme of CPL on how to collaborate in tracking, monitoring and planning across the curriculum.

PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION

The delivery of ELC is underpinned by the central elements and values of GIRFEC, one of which is that professionals must work together in the best interests of the child. Partnership working should operate both: at the individual level, with relevant professionals cooperating to support the needs and development of a child; and at a system level that involves inter-agency collaboration to drive improvement and innovation that will generate wider benefits.

At the individual level, we are putting measures in place to ensure that appropriate data on children's progress is shared between professionals working with children from the early years onwards. The Children and Young People's Information Sharing Bill currently before Parliament is amending the information sharing provisions in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 in response to the Supreme Court ruling to bring consistency, clarity and coherence to the practice of sharing information about children's and young people's wellbeing across Scotland. The Bill makes explicit the steps that practitioners must follow when considering whether to share information with, or by the Named Person service. This will ensure that the sharing of information is compatible with current law (Data Protection legislation, ECHR and law of confidentiality).

This new approach will provide a legislative prompt for information sharing that will underpin the effective operation of the GIRFEC approach and the provision of the Named Person service across the country so that children and families get access to the right support at the right time if they need it, regardless of where they live. In addition, we will provide clear and easy to understand guidance on information sharing to support and illustrate good practice as requested by many practitioners and parents. By explaining how data can be shared in accordance with current law, this should offer health visitors and ELC practitioners guidance on how to ensure that any developmental concerns, highlighted at the 27-30 month review, can be shared with ELC settings to support the needs and development of a child.

Cross-professional working is an important feature of the Children and Young People Improvement Collaborative (CYPIC). This brings together the Early Years Collaborative and the Raising Attainment for All programmes to deliver quality improvement throughout the child's journey, from pre-birth to 18 and beyond. Through a team of Scottish Government Improvement Advisors, national and local learning sessions, training activities and a quality improvement awards programme, local services are supported to test, measure, implement and spread new and better ways of working to make services more effective

and responsive to the needs of children and families. Improvement Advisors from CYPIC are working with ELC settings, local authorities, health visiting teams, third sector organisations and families to improve the uptake of the offer to eligible two year olds. This has involved improving access to information and services, joint working to ensure that families who stand to benefit are made aware of the offer, and simplification of the application pack.

The annual CYPIC learning sessions allow practitioners from a range of services to come together to share and learn from one another. The sessions are an opportunity to build stronger connections and partnerships and to work collaboratively to scale up and share those improvements that are proven to work. We will continue to encourage ELC practitioners to engage in CYPIC and continue to strengthen the ELC content of the learning sessions within the 3-18 curriculum focus of these sessions.

We are aware of a number of ELC settings that are demonstrating innovative or exemplary practice that has had a positive impact on quality of provision and outcomes for children. Some of these examples have already been shared on the National Improvement Hub. We recognise that even more can be done to encourage others – not only to experiment with new approaches but to evaluate impact and share what they learn – and to celebrate improvements and innovations that are successful in supporting particular types of outcomes (such as, closing the gap in speech and language development, supporting progression across transitions; outdoor learning, community engagement and nurture approaches) or supporting children facing complex challenges.

ACTION 13: We will identify ELC settings that have demonstrated innovation and impact in some aspect of their practice and establish ways to share this nationally and, where appropriate, support them to evidence and enhance their understanding of impact on children.

The shared learning would highlight the journey of improvement for the setting and staff – emphasising how to achieve on-going improvement as much as how to adopt a particular type of practice. This would result in a deeper understanding of how an ELC setting can set about improving and potentially transforming their setting for the benefit of children and families. As well as being provided with support to showcase practice, the settings would be provided with a resource to help evaluate impact and consider how to further enhance this. We will issue a call for interest in April 2018 and build material on the centres over the next few years as we implement the expansion.

Driving improvement through inter-agency collaboration is one of the primary purposes of the new Regional Improvement Collaboratives being established in partnership with local government.

Regional Improvement Collaboratives will ensure and enhance the educational improvement support for teachers and practitioners through dedicated teams of professionals. These teams will include, but not be limited to, Education Scotland and local authority staff and will provide sector, and subject specific advice to practitioners to drive improvement.

The Regional Improvement Collaboratives will support wider collaborative working across the ‘system’, including working with education, social work, health, Community Planning Partnerships and others to ensure that, together, we ‘get it right for every child’. A coherent focus across all partners will be achieved through the delivery of a regional improvement plan and associated work programme aligned with the National Improvement Framework. The first round of regional improvement plans will be delivered in January 2018.

A Joint Steering Group (co-chaired by the Scottish Government and Local Government) to support the development of the Regional Improvement Collaboratives has defined a set of guiding principles which should be core to all of the Collaboratives. One of these principles is that activity should not be restricted to schools alone, but encompass the range of learning environments that are experienced by children and young people, including all ELC providers delivering the funded entitlement.

ELC THAT IS ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

ELC provision must ensure equality of access for, and account for the varying needs of, all children. These needs can vary depending on a number of factors, including whether a child is disabled and/or has additional support needs (ASN), is learning English as an additional language, lives in a socio-economically deprived area, is living on a low income or has challenging family circumstances.

Education authorities in Scotland have a statutory duty to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of their pupils, including pupils in ELC.

We will continue to support implementation of the Additional Support for Learning Act (2004, as amended) to ensure children's needs are identified and provided for. We are committed to revising and improving statutory guidance on the Act, including clarifying responsibilities with regard to ELC. Following a consultation over this summer, the 'Supporting Children's Learning Code of Practice' (statutory guidance for the Act) has now been amended to take account of changes made by the Education (Scotland) Act 2016, and other relevant legislative and policy developments. The revised Code is expected to be published by the end of 2017, with the amendments to the Act intended to commence in January 2018. The Scottish Government is also developing a range of activities to support practitioners to develop and reflect on professional practice on inclusion - more details on which will be announced shortly.

An ELC Inclusion Fund has been created with £2 million funding to enable staff to better support children with disabilities and other additional support needs. The fund will cover one-off or short term funding for specialist ASN learning and development for ELC staff, as well as for specialist equipment, including establishing equipment banks in local areas, making small-scale adaptations to existing environments and providing sensory spaces. The Fund will complement the range of legal and policy provisions already in place that promote inclusion and accessibility in ELC settings for children with disabilities and other additional support needs. The Scottish Government is currently conducting a formal tendering process to appoint an external contractor to manage delivery of the Inclusion Fund on our behalf. The fund will open for applications by early spring 2018.

We will also continue to provide Scottish Government funding for the Enquire advice service for parents and others on support for learning issues in ELC settings as well as schools.

To help assess if we are meeting the needs of children with additional support needs we are expanding the information that we routinely collect. The questions in the current ELC annual census on ASN have been amended to cover the range of reasons for support; include a question on disability; and collect information on all support plans in place for children with ASN. These changes were introduced to the September 2017 census and analysis from this collection will be published for the first time in December. Wider changes being made to the census will go further to help assess the needs of children accessing their ELC entitlement. We are hoping to move towards an individual child level data collection by 2021, including characteristics data such as additional support needs, providing a much richer source of data for the sector. We intend to use this information to help identify specific groups for targeted support, improve outcomes for children and reduce inequalities.

To help raise awareness of entitlement and streamline the identification of needs, we are currently developing a framework to support disabled children, young people and their families. The framework is expected to improve:

- Information – so that children, young people and their parents will be more aware of services and their rights and entitlements;
- Access – to make it easier for needs to be identified, and support and services to be accessed; and
- Transitions – so that support/services at key points of transition including in the early years will be better aligned and more responsive to needs.

The framework, which is a specific Programme for Government 2017-18 commitment, will cover all aspects of a child’s life from birth to adulthood. The aim is to consult on this later this year and then publish the Framework by autumn 2018.

Accessibility and inclusion are also promoted in ‘Space to Grow’ (see ‘high quality physical environments’ below) which recognises the impact of good design principles on all children, including those with ASN and disabilities. It includes examples of space to create relaxed, calm and inclusive environments for children.

Consistent with GIRFEC, ELC provision must be flexible enough to support all children and families whatever their need. The needs of each and every child should be considered separately and support offered accordingly. Meeting the additional needs of children should be the responsibility of all staff working in ELC, and not just those with training in a particular disability, condition or challenge. Learning and development should be available and accessible to all staff to help them to build their confidence in identifying and responding to a wide range of additional needs. A module on this will be included in the on-line programme of CPL. This will include advice for staff on where and how to seek additional support. Similar advice will be provided for parents in the online resource described at action 11.

HIGH QUALITY PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

As we expand ELC provision, it is important that we have the right physical infrastructure, both indoors and outdoors, to improve outcomes for children. This includes capacity but also appropriate and stimulating learning, care and development environments for all children in ELC.

‘Space to Grow’ (Scottish Government, June 2017) aims to maximise the positive experiences for children and improve the quality of care and learning by helping ELC services to think innovatively about the design of their settings. The guidance is a useful tool for providers, planners and architects when creating, extending or refurbishing ELC settings. Although the guidance provides many insights into what constitutes good design, illustrated through case studies from Scotland and further afield, it acknowledges that all environments are unique. The focus throughout remains on the positive impact a well-designed indoor and outdoor environment has on improving outcomes and experiences for children. Dissemination activity by the Care Inspectorate is currently underway to maximise the impact and benefits of this new guidance.

The concept of the environment is wider than just buildings, space and infrastructure. Building the Ambition offers a wider concept of the child’s immediate environment: “flexible in offering choices and carefully selected resources which capture interest to create moments which spark children’s play” and providing access to “props and spaces both inside

and outside where children can play". The key is to establish a safe, secure and inspiring physical environment for learning indoors and outdoors, with spaces for children to play together and to be alone or with a few others, and materials and resources that support creativity and learning.

Access to physical resources is clearly important, but more so are practitioners skills in making optimum use of physical and learning environments. 'Building the Ambition' sets out very clearly what sort of immediate environment young children need at different developmental stages, and what sort of environment helps put pedagogy into practice and promote the child's wellbeing, communication, curiosity, inquiry and creativity. As part of the refresh of Building the Ambition we will strengthen content on creating learning environments for two year olds.

CLEAR QUALITY STANDARDS AND ROBUST SELF-EVALUATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE REGIMES

There is already much emphasis within ELC on self-evaluation, quality assurance and improvement to ensure that high quality provision meets the needs of individual children.

Funded ELC is currently underpinned by a dual quality assurance system. Education Scotland undertakes inspections of all educational establishments including ELC settings delivering the funded ELC, with inspections focusing on 'How Good is Our Early Learning and Childcare?'. The Care Inspectorate inspect health and social care settings, including all childcare providers in Scotland whether or not providing funded ELC, with their inspections focusing on the National Care Standards. These inspections are intended to improve outcomes for children by providing assurance about the quality of ELC and promoting improvement. As well as delivering a quality assurance audit, these inspections are an important part of the improvement cycle.

This independent scrutiny is complementary to the setting's self-evaluation - both organisations place robust self-evaluation at the heart of the inspection framework and continuous improvement. 'How good is our early learning and childcare?' is also a tool to support rigorous evidence-based self-evaluation by all ELC settings to identify areas for improvement and to aim for excellence.

Since August 2011, Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate try to visit ELC centres together and complete a shared inspection where both organisations are scheduled to inspect. The aim is to provide a more coherent set of messages for the service and service users and to minimise unnecessary scrutiny. However, respondents to the Education Governance: Next Steps reported that the current inspection process for ELC is overly bureaucratic and can lead to confusion for parents. Next Steps therefore stated that Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate will further enhance their single shared inspection model for ELC and ensure that a service will only be subject to a single inspection per cycle. A collaborative working group and an external stakeholder group have been established to further develop a shared inspection framework. This will be developed by 2018 and will take cognisance of the best practice from both organisations' current approaches to scrutiny.

CLOSING THE ATTAINMENT GAP

The Scottish Government has been clear about its commitment to closing the poverty-related attainment gap between children and young people from the least and most disadvantaged communities. Ministers are committed to making demonstrable progress in closing the gap during the lifetime of this Parliament, and to substantially eliminate it in the next decade and are currently consulting on the indicators to be used to measure progress⁶.

We know that the socio-economic gap in cognitive development opens up well before children start primary school. Narrowing this gap in the years before school must be part of the strategy to promote equity. Our aim is therefore to see ELC fully integrated with wider policy on improving attainment and closing the gap.

Quality is at the heart of the expansion in ELC entitlement but our vision is for equity as well as excellence. The expansion of ELC will support the vision of an education system that delivers both excellence and equity in equal measure for all children in Scotland, with regard to the development of physical, cognitive and social skills. ELC should therefore ensure a high quality experience for all children, which complements other early years and educational activity to close the attainment gap.

Several studies have shown that good quality ELC can have a positive effect on the educational, cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes for children in both the short and long term, including those who are most deprived in terms of household income. Indeed some research has found that the benefits of ELC are even greater for children from more disadvantaged families.

While we aim to do the best for every child, this does not mean doing the same for all children. Children experience ELC as good quality when it is responsive to their individual and varying circumstances. Not all children and families are in need of the same kind of professional support.

Our ELC strategy for achieving greater equity in child outcomes is to ensure that the children who need it the most benefit from an enhanced ELC offer – so far, an earlier offer for eligible 2 year old children and, from August 2018, access to support from an additional graduate-level practitioner for children attending nurseries serving the most disadvantaged areas.

It has been disappointing then that the uptake levels for 2 year olds is currently lower than expected – at an estimated 35% of the eligible population across Scotland. One of the commitments in the 2017-18 Blueprint Action Plan is to provide dedicated support to local authorities to help improve uptake amongst eligible two year olds. As already explained in the section on professional collaboration, this will include access to an improvement pack, with guidance and suggestions, which is flexible enough for local authorities to adapt to their local circumstances. This is being developed in collaboration with local authorities and Scottish Government improvement advisers. Promoting alternative models of provision, such as Stay and Play, should also make the ELC offer more attractive to parents who do not want to use traditional nursery sessions.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge is used to support improvements in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing and it is possible for schools to use this funding to support children transitioning from ELC to primary school. We are already aware of some examples and have committed to sharing these and others to help inspire more ELC settings to explore the opportunities that the funds offer. Increasing support for family learning will also enhance the ELC offer for children experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

⁶ See the [Measuring the Attainment Gap consultation](#). To measure progress in the early years, the current proposal is to use data on: the proportion of children showing no developmental concern at the 27-30 month health visitor review; and teacher judgement data on the achievement of CfE levels in literacy in P1 (reading, writing and listening and talking).

Making sure that ELC practitioners know that they have an important role to play in the Scottish Attainment Challenge should help enhance the contribution that ELC can make to closing the attainment gap.

The National Improvement Hub was launched in February 2016 to support the Scottish Attainment Challenge by providing information and support which enables teachers and ELC practitioners to improve their practice quickly and increase the quality of learners' experiences and outcomes. The Hub provides access to: self-evaluation and improvement tools, knowledge/research, teaching and assessment resources, exemplars of practice and support for online collaboration and networks. The National Improvement Hub is designed to reflect the continuous 3-18 curriculum, with no distinctions between ELC, primary and secondary. While there are some ELC resources already available via the Hub, these have to be accessed using search terms rather than via a dedicated ELC platform.

ACTION 14: We will strengthen the ELC content on the National Improvement Hub and introduce a dedicated landing page that directs the profession to relevant material on improving the quality of children's experiences and outcomes.

The new landing page will be ready for May 2018, with content to be built up gradually thereafter.

Glow is Scotland's nationally available digital environment for learning. A Glow account provides access to a number of web services and procured resources that allow users to create, collaborate and innovate. There are a number of professional learning communities on Glow (such as The Scottish Attainment Challenge community, the National Outdoor Learning Community and the National Numeracy Hub) which provide content (including presentations) and a forum for online collaborative exchange and professional learning. There is already an ELC section within Glow but additional resources are required to stimulate interactions, generate and facilitate conversations and ensure material is kept up-to-date about how ELC can improve cognitive outcomes for children. This could be achieved by introducing a dedicated facilitator.

ACTION 15: We will fund a facilitator to help the early learning and childcare profession share learning and experience in improving children's learning and development, either on Glow or another online platform.

We also need to ensure that all ELC practitioners are able to gain access to Glow. Access to Glow for the ELC practitioners working in partner provider settings is provided via their local authority. The Scottish Government has an action in the National Digital Learning and Teaching strategy to increase take up of the offer to ELC practitioners. We would also want to ensure that other relevant professionals were given access to promote cross-professional working. Access to Glow can be provided to these professionals, if individuals meet certain criteria, including that they hold a recently checked PVG certificate. If these access barriers cannot be addressed, we will develop a separate interactive platform for the ELC sector.

Assuming the access barriers can be addressed, a dedicated facilitator could be in place by May 2018. If a new platform is required, this action will take longer to deliver.

CONCLUSION

As the Minister highlighted in his foreword, the quality of funded ELC in Scotland is already high overall⁷. The references throughout this action plan to ‘strengthening’ quality should not be taken to imply that there are inadequacies in the provision that is currently being offered to families. Instead, it reflects two things: a recognition that, in order to protect that high quality as we build towards delivering 1140 hours of funded provision, support to the sector will have to increase; and an ambition to see that quality even further enhanced so that we offer families as much choice and accessibility as possible, and our children the best possible start in life.

This action plan has been an opportunity to reaffirm what experience and the research evidence tells us about what drives quality in ELC. The most important factor is that ELC is delivered by a profession that is dedicated to the care, learning and development of our youngest children. The quality of children’s day-to-day experience of our ELC offer, and the potential to use that offer to improve longer-term outcomes for children, depend primarily on the quality of human interaction that they have with those working in the sector. It is important that we value and support that workforce. We hope that the actions set out in this plan demonstrate this, and our strong commitment to investing in their professional identity and development.

That sense of identity and value should be felt in equal measure across all providers of ELC: local authority; private; third and voluntary sector; and childminders. We recognise the contribution that all providers, across all sectors, make to delivering high quality ELC to our children, and we will support all providers equally in maintaining and improving quality.

7 See Care Inspectorate 2017

ANNEX A: MEMBERSHIP OF THE ELC QUALITY REFERENCE GROUP

Chair: Liz Levy, SG ELC policy unit – Quality

Secretariat: Kate Smith, SG ELC policy unit – Quality

Members

Lesley Gibb, ADES

Janice Collins, ADES

Frances Rodman, ADES

Cath Agnew, Care Inspectorate

Thirza Wilson, Care Inspectorate

Sian Neil, Education Scotland

Irene Audain, Scottish Out of School Care Network

Jean Carwood Edwards, Early Years Scotland

Laura Caven, COSLA

Louise Gaddi, SQA

Jaci Douglas, Care and Learning Alliance

Jane Malcolm, National Day Nurseries Association

Alison Precup, Scottish Social Services Council

Ann McSorley, Scottish Social Services Council

Anne Tavendale, Scottish Social Services Council

Clare Simpson, Parenting Across Scotland

Maggie Simpson, Scottish Childminding Association

Christine Stephen, University of Stirling

Aline Wendy Dunlop, University of Strathclyde

Dorothy Johnson, University of the West of Scotland

Ruth Deplacido, Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists

Vicky Crichton, Save the Children

Rachel Cowper, Inspiring Scotland

Sybil Laing, College Development Network

Kerry McKenzie, NHS Health Scotland

Jackie Brock, Children in Scotland

Scottish Government

Sharon Glen, Children and Families Analysis

Wendy Van Der Neut, Children and Families Analysis

Heather Douglas, Seconded to ELC trials team

Aileen McLean, Seconded to ELC trials team

Emily McLean, Supporting Learners team

Ruth Christie, Rights/Participation team

Ewan Mackenzie, Scottish Attainment Challenge

Katy Hindmarsh, Curriculum for Excellence

Jeff Maguire, SG ELC policy unit – Quality

Craig Flunkert, Parental Engagement

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Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland
21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS309806 (10/17)

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