

Briefing for the Education and Culture Committee on the Early Learning and Childcare provisions in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill

This briefing focuses on the duties relating to early learning and childcare within Part 6 of the Children and Young People Bill ahead of the oral evidence session with the Scottish Government. It aims to highlight some key issues in relation to the provisions. These issues are based on the evidence of the role of childcare in tackling child poverty and the challenges identified by parents living in low income households in accessing and benefiting from affordable, flexible, high quality childcare.¹

1. Introduction

Save the Children welcomes the Scottish Government's intention *to increase the universal provision of early learning and childcare to improve outcomes for children, in particular those from disadvantaged background; to support parents to work, provide economic security for their families and routes out of unemployment and poverty; and to support parents with the costs of early learning and childcare.* We agree that high quality early learning and childcare can deliver on these outcomes.

The provisions in the Bill to increase the amount and flexibility of funded early learning and childcare offer a step forward and go some way to 'set the stage' for a more fundamental change in how to deliver high quality early learning and childcare that meets the needs of all children and families. However, these commitments only go so far and are limited in only supporting parents with children of a certain age. We are disappointed that the Bill – given the well documented issues in relation to childcare - does not go further to drive the fundamental transformation in Scotland's childcare infrastructure that is required. We are particularly concerned that out of school care is not included in the provisions in the Bill. The extension of early learning and childcare should not detract from the need to provide support to families with children of school age.

We urge the Scottish Government to set out its long term vision and a timetable for delivering a universal and comprehensive system of early learning and childcare, including out of school care for all that improves outcomes for children and meets the needs of families. A priority for legislative and policy consideration must be how best to support families living on the lowest incomes to access affordable, flexible childcare that benefits children and helps to move families out of poverty.

- *Will the Scottish Government consider introducing a statutory right to childcare - that includes both early learning and childcare and out of school care?*

2. Mandatory amount of early learning and childcare

Save the Children welcomes the inclusion in the Bill of provision to secure a mandatory amount of early learning and childcare and extending this to 600 hours per annum for 3 and 4 year olds and some 2 year olds. However, we are concerned that only a small number of 2 year olds will benefit from this provision. We believe that the Bill could go further in this regard by extending this duty to all 2 year olds living in poverty. This would assist in meeting the Bill's policy objective of increasing universal provision to improve outcomes for children, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds and an initial focus on the *most vulnerable*.

¹ In 2012 we held a series of 'childcare conversations' with parents living in low incomes households across Scotland.

The learning and developmental aspects of this provision are essential. Whilst we acknowledge the resource implications, there is much to be gained by this investment. Save the Children believes that *high quality* pre-school education and care has a vital role to play in tackling inequalities in the early years. Children living in poverty fall behind their peers very early on in life – well before school even starts – and this gap widens as children grow. There is strong and compelling evidence that highlights that the provision of high quality early year's education and care after age two has a significant impact on a child's learning and development.² Further, the evidence suggests that the benefits of early learning and childcare are particularly profound for children living in poverty. The EPPSE study has consistently shown that *early year's provision can "...alleviate the effects of social disadvantage and can provide children with a better start to school."*

- *Can the Scottish Government clarify that the additional hours will be fully funded by the Scottish Government?*
- *Can the Scottish Government define what it means by 'early learning and childcare' and the expected outcomes it aims to see from this provision?*
- *Will the Scottish Government consider extending the entitlement of a minimum amount of funded early learning and childcare to all 2 year olds living in poverty?*

3. Flexibility

We welcome the intention to increase flexibility in delivery of early learning and childcare to meet parents' needs. A strong message from the parents who took part in our childcare conversations was that increased flexibility is needed to enable parents to balance their caring responsibilities with employment and/ or training commitments. We question whether the proposed duty on education authorities to 'have regard' to increasing the degree of choice in how these services are accessed is sufficient to meet the policy intentions in the Bill. There is a risk of local inconsistencies and more "postcode lotteries" for childcare.

- *Can the Scottish Government clarify that flexible delivery of the mandatory hours will be fully funded by the Scottish Government?*
- *How will the Scottish Government ensure that a duty on education authorities to 'have regard' to increasing the degree of choice in how early learning and childcare services are accessed is sufficient to ensure the flexibility that is required by families?*

4. Duty to consult and plan on delivery of early learning and childcare

Save the Children welcomes the duty to consult with parents about early learning and childcare needs and to prepare and publish plans to make early learning and childcare available. We believe that better information is needed to deliver appropriate services locally. Evidence suggests that a significant number of local authorities in Scotland do not know if they have sufficient childcare for working parents. Those that do have knowledge about the supply of childcare in their local area, report shortages in relation to childcare for older children and for parents who work full time.³

- *Can the Scottish Government clarify what is meant by 'representative populations of parents' and what consideration has been given to ensuring that parents from minority groups, such as parents living in poverty, are consulted?*
- *Will the Scottish Government consider extending this duty to include children of school age?*

Further information

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² See Save the Children's briefing on childcare for the Scottish Parliament debate on 8.05.13

³ Children in Scotland and Daycare Trust (2012). *The Scottish Childcare Lottery*