

Aberlour's response to the Scottish Government's A Blueprint for 2020: Expansion of Early Learning & Childcare in Scotland consultation

January 2016

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Introduction

As Scotland's largest, solely Scottish Children's charity, Aberlour welcomes the Scottish Government's proposal to increase and extend the provision of funded early learning and childcare (ELC) places available to parents of 3 and 4-year-old, and entitled 2-year-old, children. It is our experience that, despite their entitlement, significant numbers of families are missing out on ELC provision as a result of the inflexibility of the current system, which does not allow for alternative ELC arrangements in circumstances where a family's situation prevents them from accessing funded ELC either through local authorities or other providers. We feel this can present many low-income families throughout Scotland, whose household incomes are already stretched, with unfair barriers to accessing the funded ELC provision to which they are entitled and further burdening them financially if they need to seek alternative ELC, which does not qualify as part of the current funded arrangements, to suit their own individual circumstances. We believe these current arrangements also present difficulties and barriers into work for many parents who wish to work but who are discouraged from doing so, as the costs of ELC provision outside existing funded ELC placements are prohibitive. We believe any ELC arrangements supported by the Scottish Government should aim to ensure parents can benefit not only from their entitlement to funded ELC, but also enable and empower parents who wish to pursue further or higher education, training and/or employment, to do so.

Working in over 40 locations across Scotland, we provide services which support vulnerable children, young people and families across a range of settings and contexts. The children, young people and families we support experience vulnerability and multiple challenges on a daily basis as a result of being in care, having complex additional support needs and disabilities, facing issues around dependency, or having experienced significant disadvantage. Aberlour operate family centres and early years' services supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable families in communities across Scotland, and, despite our own efforts to provide as flexible and accessible ELC as possible, as a result of the limitations of the current system of funded ELC provision we see every day just how restricting current ELC arrangements can be for families.

How do we ensure children are fully supported at the transition stages throughout their early-learner journey? What support should be provided to ensure that the ELC workforce and teachers have the skills, knowledge and capacity to support transitions?

We believe that substantial changes and improvements to the current funded ELC arrangements are required to ensure that the necessary support is available during those important transition stages of each child's early-learner journey. We know that consistency of relationships and routines are of paramount importance for children's development, and it is the experience of the parents who access ELC at our family

centres that it can be unsettling for children when frequently there are new workers who do not have existing relationships with children¹. Parents have also emphasised that nursery or family centre visits for children and parents before placements begin can support successful transitions. Furthermore, parents highlighted that home visits by ELC workers before placements begin are beneficial and can also support successful transitions, helping to develop positive relationships and reassure both children and parents prior to placements being taken up. Whilst parents have expressed how positive such visits can be for both them and their children, we understand that nurseries and other ELC settings which offer such support are limited, providing an inconsistent picture from one local authority to the next across Scotland.

We understand that often there is a perception that ELC staff are less qualified than teachers or not perceived as being “professionals”. However, the skills and knowledge required for ELC workers to effectively support children during those important early stages of development insist it is necessary they have not only the appropriate training and qualifications, but also the essential personal qualities. We believe the role of an ELC worker is as significant as that of any other educator, supporting pre-school children to develop the building blocks of learning which will provide a foundation for their future education as they move through their early-learner journey. Therefore, we feel that understanding development is a significant professional requirement for ELC workers, particularly those working with vulnerable children, as workers’ knowledge and skills should ensure their focus is on supporting children to develop confidence and resilience through building positive relationships. We believe all ELC workers – and indeed all those with any responsibility or concern for the care, support and education of children – should have an informed understanding of those central developmental theories of attachment and resilience to ensure consistency across provision, as we know that understanding children’s development can be crucial in supporting them to successfully navigate those important transition periods during the early years².

However, upskilling the ELC workforce does not simply mean equipping workers with qualifications and improving and increasing their knowledge, but is also dependent upon cultivating ELC workers’ attitudes and personal qualities. Parents who access Aberlour services have indicated how important it is to them that ELC workers can express empathy, compassion and understanding, both to children and parents, and these are key personal qualities that they would expect ELC workers to demonstrate. Therefore, we believe the development of such personal qualities could be supported through increased staff professional development opportunities for the existing workforce, as well as ensuring these attitudinal requirements of the role of an ELC worker are embedded within any professional training or qualifications undertaken by ELC workers in the future.

It is our experience that some children, particularly those who have experienced vulnerability, are not always “school ready” at the same time as their peers, and therefore we believe it would be beneficial for schools to offer two school intakes during the academic year (one in August and one in January), to support the transition of those children for whom it may not be appropriate to begin school in the autumn. The transition from pre-school to primary school is a time of significant physical, social and emotional development for all children. Individual children develop at different rates as development is not a linear process and can be influenced by a variety of factors in children’s lives³. Some children make developmental leaps in only a few short months, and this can often be the difference between a child’s

¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2003/06/17458/22696>

² “Child development for child care and protection workers”. Daniel B., Wassell S. & Gilligan R. (2010); Jessica Kingsley, London

³ <http://www.parentingacrossscotland.org/media/1360/erb-transition-to-primary-school-final.pdf>

preparedness, or otherwise, for school. At such early stages, we believe there should be a focus on social skills and developing secure relationships, and it is these areas of their personal development which will ensure children are school ready. For those children who are not identified as being school ready often it can be restricting for their social and emotional development, and cause them to become frustrated, when they are indeed ready for that transition only months later than their peers, but are prevented from moving into primary school until the following August. Therefore, it is our opinion that a second primary 1 intake in January would ensure that those children who are not quite ready in the autumn are neither rushed into primary 1 prematurely nor made to wait a full year, when they will in fact be ready many months in advance. We do, however, understand this may present challenges to schools around capacity and therefore an alternative option, for children who may be school ready at a midpoint during the academic year, could be to extend the nursery setting and provision into primary 1. As a result of those physical, social and emotional changes that children inevitably experience during this particular transition, we believe this would present a more gradual progression to ensure all children are best supported through that transition, whilst still enabling them to progress at the same time as their peers.

In addition, effectively managing individual children's transitions, either into an ELC setting or from pre-school into primary school, requires that children and parents are both supported and ELC workers and teachers should seek to develop positive relationships with both to best support transitions⁴. Parents have remarked they often feel anxious and uncertain about leaving their child in an unfamiliar environment, or with people they do not know. These anxieties can be transmitted to and experienced by their children also. As previously highlighted, parents have expressed how helpful home visits by ELC workers and family visits to ELC settings have been in successfully supporting their children's transitions. Therefore, we believe that supporting children to become familiar with their new environment, in an ELC setting or school, informing parents in advance about that ELC setting or school, and informing ELC workers and teachers about children's individual circumstances and development before they progress into that new environment, are all key requirements of successfully managing each child's individual transition through their early-learning journey. We believe these essential actions to support successful transitions through children's early-learner journey can be identified as three distinct principles which should underpin all ELC provision, regardless of the particular funded ELC arrangement they access: understanding individual circumstances, effective communication and developing positive relationships.

What support is required to ensure that the ELC workforce have the skills, knowledge and capacity to deliver high quality provision for two year olds? How can the ELC sector best meet the specific learning, developmental and environmental needs of two year olds? What approach should be taken on the transition for these children when they turn three?

As highlighted previously, we believe ensuring all ELC workers are appropriately trained and qualified in order that they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills, particularly in relation to child development, is fundamental to guaranteeing quality ELC provision for all pre-school age children, including 2-year-olds. The needs of 2-year-old children are different to those of 3 and 4-year-olds, and therefore understanding child development in order to initiate age-and-stage appropriate interactions and engagement activities is crucial for all ELC workers. In addition, those essential principles of effectively and successfully supporting transitions – understanding individual circumstances, effective communication and developing positive relationships – are as necessary for 2-year-olds as they are for older children, and with

⁴ <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v3n2/dockett.html>

the same embedded approach throughout a child's early-learner experiences, we believe this should ensure that transitions for those children when they turn 3 are similarly supported appropriately.

How can the qualification routes and career paths that are open to early learning and childcare practitioners be developed to ensure that the ELC sector is seen as an attractive long-term career route?

In order to ensure that working in the ELC sector is seen as an attractive long-term career, we believe there requires to be a significant change in the perception of the status of ELC workers. It is necessary that ELC workers are understood to be qualified and trained professionals whose role as educators is as valid and important as teachers' in the development and learning journey of our children. We believe such a shift in perception can be encouraged by providing qualified ELC workers with a clearly defined universal job title and role description, which is consistent across ELC settings and local authorities, to acknowledge their professional status.

How can we increase the diversity of the ELC workforce, in particular increasing the gender balance in the sector?

Often we find there is a perceived stigma regarding men who choose careers in traditionally female dominated sectors, such as ELC. We believe one way in which the diversity of the ELC workforce can be increased to encourage a more gender balanced sector, is to ensure better defined job titles, role descriptions and career paths, expounding the key educational focus of ELC workers. We also believe there could be greater impetus on potential ELC careers for male students undertaking education focused qualifications, which could be better encouraged by further and higher education institutions in order to support the necessary shift in perception of the ELC sector as being only suited for a predominantly female workforce.

How can payment of the Living Wage and wider Fair Work practices be encouraged across the ELC sector?

Aberlour is a Living Wage employer and we recognise the positive impact this has on our employees. We believe it is crucial that all ELC providers work towards implementing the Living Wage so that ELC is seen as an attractive career option providing a sustainable income for workers. We also believe the Scottish Government needs to take a strategic approach to the implementation of the Living wage across the sector, working alongside providers to identify and address existing barriers to implementation. Inevitably, the capacity for providers to pay the Living Wage is linked to the current funding structures for ELC provision, and therefore it is our opinion that an alternative long-term approach to funding must be planned and developed that recognises the impact that both job security and income can have on the quality and retention of the ELC workforce.

What actions should be taken to support increased access to outdoor learning, exercise and play?

We believe actions which could be taken that would support increased access to outdoor learning, exercise and play should include the mandatory provision of scheduled dedicated outdoor sessions on a weekly basis, ensuring that a number of funded ELC provided hours every week include outdoor activities. It is also our experience that creating community links and partnerships between nurseries and family centres with groups and organisations locally whose focus is on outdoor activities to deliver and lead outdoor sessions

(such as Outdoor and Woodland Learning Scotland⁵) can help to promote and encourage outdoor learning, exercise and play.

How could accountability arrangements for early learning and childcare be improved?

It is our opinion that any system which aims to promote and ensure accountability must be clear, open and transparent. Parents have expressed uncertainty around who they should contact when they encounter issues or problems relating to their children's ELC experience, particularly if there has been a difficulty with workers or managers in individual ELC settings. We believe it is vital that there is a system of accountability which ensures processes are in place which are accessible and straightforward to parents who wish to highlight issues or have concerns addressed. We believe this could be supported through the provision of a dedicated individual contact within local authorities and other ELC provider organisations whom parents can contact directly. Parents have also highlighted that regular parent meetings within individual ELC settings would promote better communication and provide greater reassurances around issue or concerns, promoting greater accountability.

What factors must be considered in delivering flexible ELC provision, while continuing to ensure a high quality service? To what extent could funded ELC support parents and carers with non-standard working hours, such as working shifts and weekends?

We believe there is a need to ensure a range of flexible, funded ELC options, as the provision of ELC in a nursery or family centre setting during traditional working hours is limiting for many families. Such arrangements fail to acknowledge the many families who find themselves discriminated against as a result of their individual circumstances, which prevent them from accessing the funded ELC provision to which they are entitled. The provision of ELC at earlier or later times of the day, requiring nurseries or family centres to have more flexible opening times, would provide greater options for parents who work non-traditional hours and who may have changing work patterns from one week to the next. In addition, weekend ELC provision would require some nurseries or family centres to operate seven days a week and would similarly provide greater choice for parents who work at weekends. A significant frustration highlighted by many parents is the failure to provide funded ELC all year round, burdening parents who work with high childcare costs during holiday periods when they have no alternative but to purchase additional childcare. In addition, for those parents who work late or night shifts, funded ELC provision which includes child minding in the evenings and/or overnight would provide an appropriate option.

We also believe flexibility is vital for working parents but recognise that such flexible provision will present significant challenges in ensuring consistency and quality. We believe the development of a national ELC framework which outlines the available flexible models of ELC universally available across local authorities would support the consistency and quality of such flexible provision and delivery of funded ELC. We also feel that the necessary flexibility requires greater collaboration between all providers of ELC across settings and local authorities, as well as the Scottish Government, to ensure such an ELC framework provides the required consistency and quality, with all ELC providers acting as equal partners supporting the development of such a national framework and the subsequent provision and delivery of ELC.

We feel there is an opportunity for large employers, particularly those within the public sector, such as local authorities and NHS Scotland, to become designated ELC providers. Resourced through the extension

⁵ <http://owlsotland.org/>

of funded ELC, we feel this would ensure a flexible and accessible option for employees who are entitled to funded ELC. Supporting and aiding flexible working and practical considerations such as and dropping off and collecting their children, such provision located in the same or a nearby premises to where parents work could ensure ELC arrangements were better aligned to working hours or shift patterns of parents in such circumstances. There are employers across Scotland who are part of flexible working schemes such as the “Happy to Talk Flexible Working” initiative, which aims to promote employers’ flexibility and awareness of the necessary work-life balance for working parents, and is highlighted as a key focus as part of their approach to recruitment⁶. It is our opinion that the further development of such initiatives across Scotland, through encouraging all employers to offer such incentives by highlighting the impact family friendly working practices can have on productivity, would help to support more employers to recruit working parents, and consequently more parents into employment.

However, it is also our opinion that more flexible provision should include flexibility of support and/or setting for children, and not just focus on flexible arrangements solely for the purpose of allowing or supporting parents to work, as we believe children benefit from the provision of ELC for their own development and not simply to enable their parents to work. The provision of different ELC options for parents which take into consideration individual family circumstances and parents’ working arrangements, as well as their child’s own needs and routines, would allow them to choose the funded ELC option which works best for them and their child. Whilst we acknowledge that for many parents employment is an ambition which they often find it difficult to realise, as a result of the current model of funded ELC, for other parents it may not be possible, or they may have chosen not, to work, and, therefore, parents in those circumstances should not be denied access to similarly flexible ELC arrangements, if that same flexibility can benefit them and their family in other ways. It is the experience of parents who access Aberlour services that such inflexibility can often impact upon existing relationships with family and friends, often leading to loneliness and isolation. Therefore, we believe a more flexible system of ELC provision should take into account individual circumstances of families, not simply for the purpose of supporting parents into employment but in order to support them to be active members of their communities and to maintain healthy, functioning social relationships.

It is also our experience that the current arrangements for funded ELC provision are too narrowly focused on parents, when grandparents and other family members are often a child’s de facto primary carer. Therefore, we believe the provision of more flexible ELC must ensure individual circumstances are recognised and that where a child’s parents are not their primary carers then funded ELC must be available and accessible for whomever is the child’s primary carer.

We also believe alternatives to the provision of the proposed 1140 hours of funded ELC should be available to parents who could better benefit from support in other ways. It is our experience that often the parents of eligible 2-year-olds do not require additional ELC, but, in fact, could benefit from more family and parenting support. Aberlour family centres use the “Five to Thrive” model, an attachment based approach to positive parenting⁷. This approach can support ELC workers to engage with both children and their parents, providing a focus which helps to highlight the importance of relationships as the foundation of early learning on which parents can model their own interactions with their children. It is our opinion that such examples of family and parenting support should be included as part of any flexible model of ELC provision, which would ensure that for those families who require it, part or all of their funded ELC

⁶ <http://familyfriendlyworkingscotland.org.uk/happy-to-talk-flexible-working/>

⁷ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/five-to-thrive-evaluation-report.pdf>

entitlement would support and resource the delivery of such parenting and family support. Parents have also highlighted that they would like to see more opportunities for parental involvement with their children during ELC sessions, such as “stay and play”. In addition, we feel resources could be provided directly to parents as part of funded ELC provision for activities that they can do with their children that aim to further develop such positive parent-child relationships, as well as enhance parenting skills.

How can we ensure fair and sustainable funding for all providers offering the ELC entitlement?

We believe a fair and sustainable model of funding that allows for longer term planning, development and security, of both service provision and jobs, is essential in providing consistent and quality universal ELC. It is our opinion that a long-term approach to funding would ensure ELC provision can be planned and developed in such a way that ELC workers have job security and view ELC as a viable career option, supporting the development and growth of the ELC workforce more generally. It is our experience that too often ELC workers operate under the near continuous threat of redundancy as a result of current short-term funding models, with an inevitable impact on both the quality and retention of workers. We believe that the quality and development of the ELC workforce is crucial in delivering quality ELC provision, and maintaining and developing that workforce must be part of any funding consideration.

What more can we do to promote and support the involvement of childminders in the entitlement to ELC? What are the barriers, if any, to becoming a childminder? How can we ensure quality while preserving the unique value of home-based care?

We understand that in many circumstances child minding provision rather than ELC placements are often necessary for parents who have non-traditional working patterns, and can provide the necessary flexibility that allows parents to plan their childcare around their lives – not plan their lives around their childcare. There are examples of local authorities which have recognised this and have included child minding as part of the funded ELC provision in their areas. However, these examples are few and far between and only further highlight the inconsistency of funded ELC provision across local authorities. To remedy this, we believe the Scottish Government should ensure that, as part of the provision of more flexible funded ELC, child minding should be offered as a dedicated option for those families who require ELC at times of the day or week when other ELC options are not available.

One further way in which child minding could be better promoted and supported would be for current regulations around child minding practice to be reviewed. Often we find that the homes of child minders are prevented from becoming nurturing environments as a result of over regulation of child minding arrangements, too often insisting upon a sterile environment which detracts from a sense of homeliness and comfort. We recognise that necessary standards around health and safety arrangements for all regulated environments for children are essential, however more flexibility could be applied depending on individual ELC settings to ensure homeliness and comfort are as important factors as safety and security, when assessing the suitability of a child minder’s home.

How do we ensure that the voice of children and their families is heard as we plan this expansion?

We believe that it is essential to ensure that children and families are at the centre of planning and development around the expansion of ELC provision. Parents are key stakeholders within ELC and they should be regarded as equal partners alongside local authorities and other ELC providers, whose opinions and ideas are as valid as providers and practitioners. We believe such participation can be supported

through the development of parent forums and consultation sessions that can be coordinated via individual ELC settings. In order to ensure such participation is supported meaningfully, it will require the Scottish Government, local authorities and other ELC providers to work collaboratively to provide such opportunities for consultation and participation. In addition, ensuring parent representation on working groups or committees designed to oversee the planning and development of the expansion of ELC is also crucial to ensure parents' voice is listened to and acted upon. Consideration must also be given as to how best to engage with parents whose voice is often not heard, particularly parents of eligible 2-year-olds, as it is the experiences of those parents which can help identify the day-to-day practical issues and concerns parents from low-income households encounter, and can best help to inform any approach which is designed to address such concerns.

How can we ensure equality of access for all children? What barriers do children with disabilities and additional support needs currently face in accessing early learning and childcare? What further action is required to address these barriers?

It is our opinion that ambiguity within existing legislation around the provision of ELC placements causes inconsistency around access, and a lack of clarity around methods of delivery, as outlined in Section 51 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2015, already creates barriers to some families accessing ELC entitlements⁸. Therefore, we believe the guidance around the existing policy and legislation relating to methods of delivery must be reviewed as part of the development and extension of funded ELC, in order to ensure implementation and provision of ELC models from one local authority to the next is consistent.

Aberlour provides specialist residential and respite service for children with disabilities and ASN across Scotland. It is our experience that there are often barriers for ASN children in accessing their ELC entitlement, as a result of too few qualified ELC workers available to provide the necessary and appropriate individualised support to those children with ASN. Parents have also highlighted that often the physical environments are simply not appropriate or accessible for some children with ASN. Therefore, it is our opinion that as part of the planning for developing an ELC workforce for the future there is a requirement for all ELC workers to be suitably qualified to understand and support the needs of the full spectrum of ASN children. We believe this requires to be an embedded aspect of any future professional development and qualifications for all ELC workers. Such issues around access for children with ASN could also be addressed with improved transitional arrangements, as outlined previously, allowing for better planning and preparation as a result of understanding individual circumstances of children and families and developing relationships with families in advance of ELC placements being taken up.

How can we support higher take-up rates amongst eligible two year olds, and other groups less likely to access entitlement?

We have found that there are barriers in relation to accessing funded ELC places in local authority nurseries for eligible children who often are not able to take up a place when they turn 2, despite meeting the eligibility criteria, and instead have to wait for the next scheduled intake – often many months later. As this is often not the case in private nurseries or other ELC settings, such arrangements only highlight the inflexible and inconsistent approach to provision from one ELC provider to another, as well as between local authorities.

⁸ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00457025.pdf>

Parents of eligible 2-year-olds have also expressed frustration at only learning of their entitlement to funded ELC through friends or family, often long after the child has turned 2. As a result, we believe it is essential that the Scottish Government, in partnership with local authorities, embarks on a Scotland-wide communications exercise ensuring clear and relevant information is provided to all parents in an accessible way, outlining both eligibility to provision and how that provision can be accessed by parents.

How can the broader system for promoting, accessing, and registering for a place in an ELC setting be improved? Please give examples of any innovative and accessible systems currently in place.

It is our experience that the bureaucracy around individual local authority systems and processes for administering the application and allocation of eligible 2 and 3-year-old places prevents relevant and significant information, in relation to individual family circumstances, from being captured and shared appropriately with ELC providers. Parents are required to make an application to local authority central offices to allow assessment of eligibility with additional agencies in relation to welfare entitlements. Upon confirmation of eligibility, the relevant department then allocate a place for the child at a particular ELC setting, based on availability. As a result of such impersonal and bureaucratic systems, there is often limited information around individual families' circumstances made available to the ELC provider, which prevents any planning or preparation around individual transitional support for each individual child. As previously highlighted, we believe a fundamental focus of ELC provision must be awareness of individual circumstances, personal relationships and clear communication. Therefore, the development of better and more personalised systems of application and allocation of ELC placements, directly to and in communication with an individual ELC setting, would allow greater understanding of individual family circumstances and the needs of each individual child, in order that they can be better planned for and met.

Do parents and carers face any barriers in accessing support with the costs of ELC provision (beyond the funded entitlement)? What more can we do to ensure additional hours are affordable?

We have found that often transport costs for getting children to and from a nursery or family centre can be expensive, particularly for families who live a significant distance from that nursery or family centre and are reliant on public transport. We feel more consideration must be given to the distance some families need to travel for their children to attend their ELC placement, when places are allocated. Parents have also highlighted the provision of snacks and meals in some ELC settings are often expensive, as are the costs of trips and outings, presenting parents with additional hidden costs. Therefore, consideration must be given as to how provision of snacks, meals, trips and outings can be included within funded ELC arrangements, or ensure costs are limited so as not to be prohibitive for families whose household budgets are already stretched.

In order to ensure additional hours of non-funded ELC provision are affordable for low-income families, we believe a cap on ELC costs would support those families for whom the current costs of additional ELC provision are unaffordable. Such caps exist in both Norway and the Netherlands and are limited to a proportion of household income (typically between 15 and 20%) after housing costs⁹. It is our opinion that the provision of such a system of capping costs for low-income families would provide a fair solution for such families, allowing them to access the necessary additional ELC that they may require.

⁹ <http://www.cwrc.ac.uk/documents/CostsofchildcareJuly2013.pdf>

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