

Scotland's Blueprint for 2020 sets out early years and childcare plans ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A model for free early education and childcare that involves funding following the child and the Living Wage for private nursery staff are included in the plans.

The Scottish Government also intends to carry out a feasibility study for a parent-led Early Learning and Childcare Account, which was a recommendation by the National Day Nurseries Association.

The 2017-18 action plan to expand early learning and childcare in Scotland sets out plans for a raft of measures and is a response to the Government's consultation last October, which set out its vision to almost double the entitlement to free ELC to 1,140 hours a year by 2020.

The Government says its vision for early education and childcare, set out in A blueprint for 2020: the expansion of early learning and childcare in Scotland, is based around four guiding principles: quality, flexibility, accessibility, and affordability.

The development of a delivery model known as 'funding follows the child' is one of 31 steps planned for the next year to ensure the expansion to 1,140 hours of free childcare, which the government says will save parents an estimated annual £4,500 in childcare costs per child.

It will be underpinned by a new national standard for funded provider status, ensuring the highest quality of learning and care is available consistently, regardless of postcode.

Local authorities will continue to play a vital role as the guarantors of quality and enablers of choice, and the Scottish government will work in partnership with them to develop the details of the new model, it says.

Announcing the plans, Scotland's minister for childcare and early years Mark McDonald said, 'This Government is committed to delivering a bright future for Scotland's children. We know that every child and family is different, which is why we must focus on the individual and what works best for them. That means removing barriers to private and third sector providers delivering funded ELC and ensuring parents have genuine choice of provision across sectors.

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

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

Workforce

The government also intends to publish a Quality Action Plan in consultation with the sector by October, and include leadership development opportunities featuring 'prominently' to support professionals as they continue in or move into leadership roles.

The document states that the EU's Key Principles of a Quality Framework underlines the importance of well-qualified staff in pursuing quality in ELC.

The Education Scotland report Making the Difference: The impact of staff qualifications on children's learning in early years found that graduate-level qualifications, specifically the BA in Childhood Practice Award, were having a positive impact on children's learning in the early years.

The document says that the government's plans to expand ELC need to recognise that the graduate workforce is changing. The introduction of the BA Childhood practice in 2009 has increased the number of non-teacher graduates with specialist early years expertise and knowledge.

Around 1,200 students have graduated with this degree and the Scottish Social Services Council estimates that around 280 people complete graduate-level courses each year. Around 30-40 students also start postgraduate M.Ed Early years qualification offered by the University of Strathclyde and the University of Aberdeen.

The government will continue to invest in graduate and postgraduate level training specifically to promote early years education, including considering whether new direct entry undergraduate courses are required to support development of the workforce.

There will also be a fund that supports staff to support children with additional special needs or disabilities to cover funding for specialist training for ELC staff, as well as funding for equipment.

Childminders

Childminders will have a key role in delivering the expanded funded entitlement. A recurring theme in the consultation was that childminders should have more opportunities to access training, both formally and informally, from mandatory courses to best practice networks.

There will be a new standard of best practice for childminders, with extra funding for the Care Inspectorate to develop a new Learning and Development framework for childminders to launch in September.

Living wage for private nursery staff

A move to invest £50m to ensure that all staff working in private nurseries delivering the childcare pledge are paid the real living wage (as set by the Living Wage Foundation) was announced last weekend at the SNP spring conference in Aberdeen by the First Minister.

Speaking about the government's childcare policy, Nicola Sturgeon said, 'Rightly, when we talk about the childcare revolution, we focus on the benefits for children and parents. But there is another benefit. Delivering our pledge will involve the recruitment of thousands more people to work in our nurseries. We need to demonstrate how much we value this work.'

She said that while staff in public sector nurseries - as in other public sector services - are already paid the Living Wage, there are currently around 1,000 private nurseries offering free childcare policy, and currently around 80 per cent of the childcare staff who work in them that are not earning the Living Wage. 'That's 8,000 people in total. There are few more important jobs than caring for our youngest children,' she said.

Access to outdoor learning, exercise and play

The Blueprint document highlights the importance of children's access to high-quality outdoor play, including 2016 guidance from the Care Inspectorate, 'My World Outdoors', which aims 'to act as a catalyst to encourage further development of high-quality outdoor play. It says that both specialist and mainstream provision have improved children's outdoor play experience using their own outdoor area and the natural environment.

The government will also encourage providers to organise a 'Daily Mile' run or age-appropriate activity for all children and publish guidance in the autumn.

Sector response

Purnima Tanuku, chief executive of the National Day Nurseries Association, said, 'The commitment to early learning and childcare funding following the child is very welcome and responds to NDNA's long standing call for this change to give parents real choice.

'We are also pleased that the Scottish Government is moving forward NDNA's recommendation for a parent-led Early Learning and Childcare Account with a feasibility study and we are keen to work with the Government on the next steps towards making it a reality.

'We welcome the principle of a national standard for funded providers - though we would want to see the criteria for this to make sure that it offers a level playing field for all types of childcare provider - and the removal of barriers to the private, voluntary and third sector in delivering funded hours.

'This ambition, including the Scottish Living Wage for all childcare staff, must be backed by the right level of investment to make it happen and the costings announced as part of the budget later this year will be crucial.'

Children in Scotland chief executive Jackie Brock said, 'We welcome the focus on quality and support for the workforce in Mark McDonald's announcement today.

'Children in Scotland is keen that this contributes to a sense of momentum for expansion to 1140 free hours.

'But the emphasis must be on improving the quality of the experience for children, whatever their childcare setting.

'In combination with this, we need to see an ongoing commitment to affordability and flexibility whenever that is required by parents.

'We have strongly supported the development of a simpler and more transparent route through which all public or private money intended to pay for, or subsidise, childcare is channeled to providers.

'For that reason we were encouraged to hear today that 'funding will follow the child' - but will look for evidence to see that this principle is being borne out in the experiences of children, families, and providers.

'The Scottish Government's pledge of £2million towards improving access to nursery education for children with additional support needs

is a step in the right direction; we look forward to hearing more details about the form this will take.

‘On the issue of the current anomaly which means children born in August receive two years of free nursery provision but a child born in January gets just 15 months, we believe this expansion provides an opportunity for a smarter and more child-focused solution.’

‘By 2020, capacity should not be a credible reason for setting any boundaries around a child’s third birthday nursery start date.

‘A more important consideration should be the impact this would have on a child’s wellbeing and on their transition process to primary school.

‘Currently, funding is a factor in deciding a child’s access to two years of nursery. This is defined by the school year as opposed to their age.

‘We call on local authorities, their partners and the Scottish Government to set aside any marginal financial considerations in sticking to a rigid two-year entitlement and ensure that the date of transition to primary school is based wholly on the child’s best interests.’

-reprinted from Nursery World

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