

We're on track to deliver a transformation in childcare provision

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EXCERPTS

I want to ensure that every single child in Scotland gets the very best start in life.

I feel very strongly that no child's future should be limited by their background and as First Minister I have made it clear it is a priority of the SNP government to transform the life chances of children and give every young person the best start.

We know that the earliest years of a child's life are crucial to their later development. What happens in the first few years of a child's life will have a lasting impact on their health, education and employment opportunities later in life.

So to effect real change, early intervention is absolutely crucial. That is why we are making an unprecedented level of investment in policies designed to support children and their families - from the very early stages of pregnancy right through to early years education and beyond. From the Family Nurse Partnership, health supplements for pregnant mothers and the new Baby Box, all our policies are designed to provide help when it is needed most.

Perhaps the most ambitious of all our policies is our planned expansion of free early learning and childcare.

In 2012 we committed to expanding free childcare provision for all three and four year olds and eligible two year olds from 475 hours to 600 hours a year. We are now going even further - by 2020, the SNP government will provide every single three, four and eligible two year old with 1,140 hours a year of high-quality nursery education.

The reason we are doing this is simple: it is widely accepted that universally accessible and high quality early learning and childcare helps to provide children with skills and confidence that they then carry into school education, and it is therefore crucial for raising attainment.

But as well as transforming the chances of children, this policy will also lift a huge financial burden from families. The full entitlement will save families over £4,500 per child per year, enabling parents to work, train and study without worrying about substantial childcare costs.

It will also provide more flexibility, offering a greater choice of high-quality providers. As they develop their plans for expansion, it is important that local authorities engage with parents and communities to better tailor provision to their needs.

Lack of flexibility has long been a concern for parents and while there is still a lot of work to do I'm pleased we are already seeing an improvement, with more nursery provision available before, during and after school hours as well as during school holidays.

The good news is that we are on track to deliver the 1,140 hours by August 2020.

We want our expansion plans for early learning and childcare to be built on a foundation of fairness and equity, not only for the children benefiting, but for the staff delivering high quality learning as well. There are few more important jobs than caring for and educating our youngest children, so we must invest in the workforce.

We estimate that around 11,000 additional workers will be required by 2020 – a huge boost for the economy – and the investment to achieve this is already well underway.

This year alone we will invest £52 million to support workforce expansion and the upskilling of the existing workforce.

Our investment will support an increase in the number of apprenticeship starts of 10 per cent year on year, provide an additional 1,700 HNC and graduate places, and increase capacity on courses at colleges and universities.

We estimate that the combined effects of this action will have supported over 2,000 additional practitioners in 2017-18 alone.

From induction through to continuous professional learning, we will ensure early years' professionals are supported and equipped with the skills and resources they need to deliver the best possible outcomes for children. We will also guarantee that the Living Wage is paid to all staff by 2020.

Where a child learns has a huge impact on their development, so we must also provide inspiring physical environments for learning. That is

why we are investing £150 million in facilities and plan to support 600 new early learning and childcare centres.

Of course, the expansion cannot be delivered by national government alone. It needs partnership and that is why we are working closely with local authorities. Total public investment aimed at delivering early learning and childcare is expected to reach at least £840 million per year by 2020 and we are committed to working with councils and other partners, including parents, to deliver the policy.

Our focus on improving the early years' experience of our children should not be underestimated. I recognise that our plans are ambitious - and with ambition will always come challenge. But we should be determined to be nothing less than ambitious for our youngsters. There is nothing more important than giving children the best possible opportunities in life and we are proud to be delivering a level of commitment that will transform early learning and childcare and help give all young people the excellent start we want them to have.

This article originally appeared in the Evening Times.

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Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: universal ^[4]

accessibility ^[5]

affordability ^[6]

early childhood education and care ^[7]

quality ^[8]

investment ^[9]

government ^[10]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/18/03/we%E2%80%99re-track-deliver-transformation-childcare-provision> [2]

<https://www.snp.org/we-re-on-track-to-deliver-a-transformation-in-childcare-provision/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/universal> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability> [7] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/early-childhood-education-and-care> [8]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [9] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/investment> [10]

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