

Data: expansion of funded early years hours in Scotland ^[1]

Report shows how first year of flagship early years policy is working in practice

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EXCERPTS

A flagship Scottish government policy has sought to nearly double funded early learning and childcare (EYC) hours.

The increase from 600 to 1,140 hours - available to all children aged 3 and 4 and two-year-olds deemed to need it most - was initially due to be introduced in August 2020, but was delayed until August 2021 because of Covid.

Now, a joint report from the government and statisticians at local government body the Improvement Service shows the level of progress in the first year of implementing the policy.

The figures in the report, collated at the end of January, show:

- 111,574 children were accessing funded ELC.
- Of these children, 108,678 (97 per cent) were accessing more than 600 hours.
- 97,887 children (88 per cent) were accessing the full 1,140 hours of funded ELC.
- Compared with August 2021, every council reported an increase (of between 6 and 26 per cent) in numbers of 2- to 5-year-olds accessing funded ELC, which was "to be expected, as more children become eligible throughout the academic year".
- 20,684 more children were accessing 1,140 hours compared with August 2021.
- The number of 3- to 5-year-olds in funded places increased by 23 per cent.
- The number of two-year-olds in funded places rose from 5,966 to 6,913, up 16 per cent.

The report finds that local authorities had "successfully delivered the expansion of funded ELC in August 2021 to secure 1,140 hours funded ELC for all eligible children".

It adds that "the national picture shows continued high uptake of the expanded offer and success in resourcing the requisite capacity and workforce to support this".

However, it also notes the "variability at a local level" with some local authorities reporting higher uptake of the expanded funded hours than others.

Every council reported an increase in uptake in January 2022 compared to August 2021. This is to be expected as more children become eligible throughout the academic year.

The Scottish government's commitment to nearly double free nursery hours from 600 to 1,140 has been seen as a huge investment in the early years, with councils promised an additional £567 million in annual revenue funding by 2021-22 to deliver the expansion.

But in February, Tes Scotland wrote about the questions that remained about what impact the landmark early years policy would have, with one key piece of research even finding that the increased number of free hours could have a negative impact.

The government and Improvement Service report finds that the local authority ELC workforce is reported to have increased by 8,488 full-time equivalents (FTE) since 2016-17, including an increase of 549 FTE since August 2021 (from 17,515 to 18,064).

However, Tes Scotland has previously highlighted that the number of teachers working in the early years has fallen sharply: between 2010 and 2020 the number more than halved from 1,543 to 729. Last year, official figures showed there were 704 teachers working in the early years in Scotland.

According to the Scottish government, families receiving the full allocation of funded early years hours will save as much as £4,900 per year.

Children's minister Clare Haughey said today: "It's fantastic to see so many families accessing funded ELC and making significant savings - particularly at a time when so many are struggling with cost-of-living increases.

"As well as saving families money, funded ELC brings real benefits for children."

Ms Haughey added: "Providing access to free, high-quality early learning and childcare enriches children's early years and provides them with skills and confidence for starting school and beyond. It also supports parents' ability to work, train or study."

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