

# Joined-up services are the key to our children's future <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Who would dispute the need to do more for our young children?

Not only are they at greater risk of poverty than any other major population group, but all the available evidence tells us -- to borrow from MP Frank Field's report to Prime Minister David Cameron -- that "children's life chances are most heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of life".

Improved access to services must form part of the equation, and universal access to nurseries and pre-schools is a vital component. Scotland's current early-years system is full of holes, dominated by a pronounced conceptual split between "childcare" for working parents -- for which they pay more than six times as much as those in Sweden -- and "education", offered as an entitlement for a limited number of hours for children under three. Those working in childcare hold different qualifications, are paid differently and have different employment conditions from those working in education.

In many Scottish local authorities, children have to wait until they are three and a half before they can take up their free pre-school entitlement. We have a long way to go to improve even the most basic access, but how should we proceed?

Targeting is back in vogue. The Chancellor's announcement that child benefit will be withdrawn from higher-rate tax-paying households (and frozen for three years) is taken further by Field, who recommends no longer automatically increasing benefits for children but transferring them into more support during pregnancy and into high-quality childcare, focused primarily on disadvantaged families.

The evidence from the two-year European Commission/Scottish Government Working for Inclusion programme, led by Children in Scotland and recently discussed in the European Parliament, suggests the need for a different approach. Universal, not targeted, services are key.

Child poverty seems to be lower, and children seem to fare better, in countries that have fully integrated early education and childcare systems, plus high levels of universal entitlement to these services, along with generous benefit systems.

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Scotland desperately needs early childhood education and care services to enhance the lives of our youngest children. Investment now would bring immediate benefits, with all families accessing non-stigmatising, positive support that would also help them into employment. Improved local job opportunities in early childhood care and education would help galvanise fragmented communities.

Mr Field may be right to suggest that what he terms the Foundation Years should be seen as an equal part of a new tripartite education system leading to the school years and further education. But it is hoped that Scotland does not follow the path he maps out of paying for services through reduced benefits -- and limiting state support for services to the "most deprived", whom, he suggests -- wrongly -- can be easily tracked through increased data-sharing.

Instead, Scotland should seek to ensure that devolutionary arrangements allow us to keep our child benefit system intact and allow direct investment in services, establishing a national goal to offer all children the right to a place in a service from the age of one at a cost to parents that is capped.

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- reprinted from Herald Scotland

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** child development <sup>[3]</sup>

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