

Bronwen Cohen: SNP's pledge on childcare doesn't go far enough^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Alex Salmond reminded us at the weekend of his government's pledge to develop childcare "to match the best in Europe", and confirmed his intention to legislate to extend the entitlement to nursery education of three- and four-year-olds to 600 hours a year or 15.7 hours a week.

However, this pledge misses a fundamental point - the need to start treating education and care as one service. In the early years, care and education are indivisible. Treating them separately has led to considerable inequality in accessing services, contributes to high costs to parents for childcare and means that some families cannot make use of their child's entitlement to pre-school education.

In Scotland, pre-school provision stands at 475 hours, which equates to 12.5 hours a week per child, with an aspiration to move to 510 hours that only two local authorities have matched so far. In England, the entitlement is for 570 hours a week from next month. The new pledge to increase entitlement in Scotland to more than 600 hours appears to leapfrog one part of English policy but does little to help working parents trying to negotiate between childcare and pre-school providers.

The First Minister has also made a promise to the 2,000 or so looked-after two-year-olds in Scotland, some of whom will already be in foster care. Valuable as this may be for this small group of children, it is markedly less generous than what is being offered in England and Wales. England is investing in 260,000 childcare places for 40 per cent of two-year-olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, while the Welsh Flying Start programme, providing for some 18,000 under-threes, will be doubling over the next five years to reach more than 36,000.

This week saw the first meeting of a European working group on childcare on which Scotland is the only UK nation to be represented. Taking inspiration from the successful integrated strategies adopted in a number of European countries will hopefully incentivise Scotland's political leaders to look again at developing a unique system of education and care in this country.

-reprinted from the Scotsman

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