

Bronwen Cohen: Children's needs must become a bigger priority

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EXCERPTS:

WITH elections over, it's time for local authorities to deliver on their promises, and address the ongoing problems of Scotland's youngest children.

Scotland isn't alone in needing to do better for our youngest citizens. But our research shows only seven of 27 EU countries provide fewer formal services for under threes.

There are no universal early childhood education and care services for the youngest children and even 3- and 4-year-olds only have a part-time education entitlement, not the full time places the European Commission recommends.

Without universal services children under three have a very unequal experience, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds three times less likely to access formal services than their advantaged counterparts. Parents pay high fees for childcare - if it's available - meaning some children benefit from meeting, playing and learning with others, while others don't.

Lack of affordable childcare is one reason why children under three are more likely to live in poverty than any other population group. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that a quarter of children referred to the Children's Hearings System are now aged four and under, and the proportion is increasing.

We know what the biggest problem is - a divided system that only acknowledges educational needs at the age of three, and then with limited hours, whilst care for under threes is regarded as largely a private matter.

Last week Children in Scotland wrote to the First Minister urging him to legislate for all children to have an entitlement to services from the end of maternity leave and to follow the European Commission's suggestion of using their Structural Funds to develop early childhood education and care services and the workforce.

A bold and ambitious approach to rectifying Scotland's deficit in services would not only benefit children and families but also the communities in which they live.

Making use of European funds and the promised early years legislation could give Scotland the smarter system our families, youngest citizens and economy deserve.

-reprinted from the Scotsman

Region: Europe [2]

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