

Pre-school nursery hours to increase in Scotland ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Plans to increase free pre-school childcare have been spelled out by the Scottish government.

The Children and Young People Bill will entitle three and four-year-olds to 600 hours of free early learning nursery education per year.

That is an increase from the 475 hours of nursery care children can currently receive each year without cost.

An extra £10m will be allocated to organisations working closely with children, young people and families.

Aileen Campbell, the minister for children and young people, said the funding was in addition to the £20m which had already been set aside over the next two years for prevention and early intervention.

She said the bill aimed to make Scotland "the best place in the world to grow up".

Under the bill, looked-after two-year-olds, and those with a kinship care order, will receive the same entitlement as three and four-year-olds.

The proposals aim to help children and make it easier for parents to work or go into education or training.

The bill was put out to public consultation last summer.

'More needed'

Children's charity Save the Children welcomed the bill, but said that more needed to be done to improve conditions for children living in poverty.

Policy manager Claire Telfer said: "There is much to welcome including the extension of free nursery hours for young children and we know families are absolutely crying out for this support.

"But we can't stop there. Save the Children want to see this support being offered to more families with young children, particularly two-year-olds living in poverty."

Children in Scotland, which represents more than 400 children's organisations, said the bill is anticipated to be one of the biggest pieces of legislation in the sector for more than a decade.

However, it also called for more support for younger children.

Chief Executive Jackie Brock said: "There are significant gaps in supporting improvement for all vulnerable pre-school children and children with additional support needs."

Quality first

The bill was discussed at First Minister's Questions.

Willie Rennie, leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, called the bill "timid", and asked Alex Salmond if he would "be bold and match England in its provision for two-year-olds".

Mr Salmond said extending provision further could lead to a "watering down" of the quality of childcare.

"As we look at comparisons elsewhere, let's be aware of the deficiencies of those systems," he said.

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