

Childcare costs - not quality - must come down ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

New legislation aims to make Scotland 'the best place to grow up' but the details are lacking on how this can be done, says Jackie Brock

The Children and Young People Bill currently making its way through the Scottish Parliament has been hailed as many things. To some, it is a game-changing piece of legislation which will help realise the Scottish Government's stated ambition of making Scotland "the best place to grow up" by offering a helping hand and making welcome provisions for working families, vulnerable youngsters and children in care.

To others, the legal provisions in the bill, around children's rights for example, fall well short of these laudable and ambitious aspirations.

One of the most reported elements of the bill is the promise of 600 hours' state-funded early learning and childcare for every three and four-year-old and for "looked-after" two-year-olds - an increase from the 475-hour legal minimum currently provided to every three and four-year-old.

What has been less discussed, however, is how this will work in practice - how, for example, will the increased provision be delivered?

The bill requires local authorities to "have regard to the desirability" of ensuring flexible uptake options are offered to parents, but will this be sufficient to meet parents' needs? Will there be consistent delivery across all Scottish local authorities to end accusations of a "childcare lottery"?

In addition, the bill only extends the extra provision to two-year-olds with "looked-after" status - where the state has a direct role in his or her parenting - but we could see huge benefits, especially for our most deprived and vulnerable children and families, if the provision is also extended to two-year-olds who live in need or in our poorest communities.

Research into childcare provision in the UK published earlier this year identified increasing costs at a time when wages are stagnant, benefits are being cut and living costs are on the increase.

Further research by Children in Scotland and the Family and Childcare Trust, to be published later this summer, shows that while the costs of early education and care have stabilised, the costs of out-of-school care have risen.

It also reveals that, despite commitments in the Scottish Government's now four-year-old Early Years Framework, there are serious gaps in knowledge in some areas about what provision is currently available, as well as gaps in service provision.

If this fundamental information is unavailable to service planners and providers at present, is it going to be possible to deliver the transformational change set out in the bill?

Some providers are already raising concerns about how delivering the additional hours will work in practice when resources are stretched so thin.

In addition, estimated costs of the legislative changes rise to more than £108 million in 2016-17. These are large sums and, in these times of austerity, we hope that the Scottish Government is committed to providing these resources in full.

Finally, the bill makes no mention of out-of-school care, which is currently a non-statutory service. Out-of-school care for young children can be a costly headache for parents, particularly at times such as the summer holidays when children who ordinarily enjoy the structure of the school day are released from the classroom for a considerable length of time.

With limited services in many areas potentially vulnerable to cuts to help fund new legal obligations, and UK government proposals to end current support for children over five, parents in Scotland could face a potential "perfect storm" of fewer and more costly services but less financial support.

This situation can only worsen as the full effects of the current benefit changes - which we fear adversely impact on lone parents, poorer and disabled people - are realised.

In Scotland, we are fortunate that the national political debate is largely consensual when it comes to ensuring early learning and childcare.

The fact that politicians will put their party differences aside and agree to work together to ensure our children, and those of future generations, have the very best opportunities possible, is something that we, as a nation, should embrace and encourage.

We welcome the intentions of the bill as an important step to Scotland having world-class early education and care.

We know it plays a crucial role in the social development of children whilst providing a solid foundation for learning which supports educational attainment and enables parents to secure employment opportunities, remaining economically active and providing for their family.

The key to success, however, is ensuring local authorities are able to ensure that the welcome changes in the bill are turned into reality and that services offer genuine flexibility to meet parents' needs at an affordable cost.

It will be a huge disappointment to everyone involved if the full potential of the bill is not realised, and the opportunities and benefits of such potential landmark legislation are diminished by other counteractive policies.

For the time being at least, a priority for the debate must be how to best support low-income families by reducing the cost of childcare - without compromising quality.

- Jackie Brock is the chief executive of Children in Scotland

-reprinted from the Scotsman

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