

MSPs debate flexibility of Scotland's free child care system ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Thousands of children in Scotland are missing out on free nursery places, the Scottish Conservative Party has told a debate at Holyrood.

Tory MSP Liz Smith believes many parents have not been able to secure the flexible care they need.

The Scottish government offers three and four-year-olds 600 hours of funded nursery provision per year.

Acting Minister for Children and Young People, Fiona McLeod, said she was consulting on the issue of flexibility.

Ms Smith, who is the Conservatives' education spokeswoman, insisted that only some of the children entitled to free childcare in Scotland were actually getting it.

In her motion, the MSP highlighted the recent survey by the Family and Childcare Trust, which stated that fewer than one in six councils in Scotland had enough childcare capacity to meet the needs of working parents.

Ms Smith told the Holyrood chamber: "We can never be content until all parents can access their entitlement.

"Additional hours are no use unless they can be properly accessed."

She added: "The real issue for parents is the restriction of choice, because we know in East Dunbartonshire, in East Lothian and in Glasgow they have all restricted the number of places they can fund in partnership [non-local authority] nurseries."

Ms Smith claimed that fact had led to many parents having to move their children from one nursery to another if they could no longer get a funded place at that existing nursery.

'Increase in flexibility'

The minister Ms McLeod said the government had set itself a challenging time scale when it committed to extending free nursery hours.

She explained: "I think we have to look at this debate in the context of those additional hours, additional children and additional flexibility and in that context say that it was reasonable to expect that an increase in flexibility and choice will be achieved in a phased and sustainable basis on a year by year growth."

Ms McLeod emphasised that the Scottish government had fully funded the "groundbreaking policy" with a £329m investment over the first two years of its implementation.

Addressing MSPs, she said: "I know local authorities are already consulting with and engaging parents and families to ensure that design and delivery of provision will be flexible enough to meet local parents' demands and in fact on my travels I have already heard of local authorities providing extended hours following the consultations."

The debate also heard from Labour MSP Cara Hilton who said that for parents who worked full-time, accessing a free space "that's only available for 3 hours and 10 minutes a day, for 38 weeks a year, simply isn't always an option".

She went on to question how many children were unable to benefit from 600 hours free nursery care because they attended a private nursery that did not allocate funded places.

Ms Hilton said: "The answer is that while we can speculate, no-one actually knows and that's because despite 600 hours being a universal right for every child in Scotland, there is no effective national oversight or scrutiny to ensure this flagship policy is being delivered and to ensure the act is being fulfilled."

She added that Labour wanted to see a full audit on how the policy was being delivered for "every child".

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