

Scottish child care needs 'radical action'

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EXCERPTS

Every youngster up to the age of 12 should be entitled to up to 50 hours a week of free or subsidised childcare in Scotland, a report has suggested.

The proposal formed part of a call for "radical action" by the Commission for Childcare Reform.

It called for "genuine collaboration" between Holyrood and Westminster to improve the availability and affordability of childcare.

Its series of recommendations followed a 15-month consultation.

The commission was set up by the Childcare Alliance, a collaboration between the charity Children in Scotland and the Scottish Council for Development and Industry (SCDI).

The recommendations include:

Families should have access to up to 50 hours of free or subsidised childcare a week throughout the year.

The net costs to parents should be on a "sliding-scale" according to income.

A child account should be established for each child to show where all money used to pay for childcare is spent.

The Scottish government, UK government and local authorities should commission a "fundamental review" of childcare funding.

While childcare provision is devolved to Holyrood, the commission said the current "complicated" funding system meant Westminster also had responsibility.

It has written to both First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and Scottish Secretary David Mundell to argue that the time is right for change.

Currently, all three and four-year-olds, and some two year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds, are entitled to up to 16 hours of funded childcare a week.

The SNP has pledged to increase this to 30 hours if it wins the Holyrood election next May.

But the commission's report said some working parents had to "pay part of the cost of what is supposed to be free" and it said a "fundamental review of the provision and payment for the 600 hours is required".

Under its "ambitious" plan, the commission proposed that every child up to the age of 12 should receive "up to 50 hours of high quality childcare and education per week throughout the year".

Pre-school children would continue to receive 600 hours of free care a year, while the balance of the 50 hours a week should be "accessible and affordable for all families"

The report suggested: "The net cost to parents should be on a sliding scale that takes account of income to ensure affordability for all families.

"In the long term, we believe that no family should spend more than 10% of net household income on the costs of their 50 hours childcare entitlement. Depending on their circumstances, some families may need support to reduce costs below 10% of their net household income."

Children in Scotland chief executive Jackie Brock said far too many families were finding that, instead of working for them, the childcare settlement was making their lives more difficult and less secure.

She added: "The current mix of provision and support is incoherent and piecemeal, too often resulting in stress, financial problems and the hampering of progress in careers and education.

"The only realistic route to correcting this is for Holyrood and Westminster to collaborate, bringing forward the commission's calls and working together and policy and legislation to create the change families deserve."

A spokesman for the Scottish government welcomed the report's recommendations, which he said would be carefully considered.

'Further powers'

He added: "However, as the report highlights we are not able to implement some of these recommendations under current constitutional arrangements because the powers currently sit with the UK government.

"We look forward to engaging in dialogue with them to determine what further powers can be devolved to Scotland to help us ensure that our children get the best possible start in life."

A UK government spokesman said: "There is no doubt that affordable, quality childcare is an essential requirement for working families and we will carefully consider the recommendations that apply to the UK government.

"Childcare is a priority area where the UK and Scottish government will have to work in partnership, equally, thanks to devolution, Scottish government ministers have the ability and control to shape the childcare system in Scotland.

"With substantial tax raising powers on the way to the Scottish Parliament, there will be scope to make greater decisions on childcare spending in Scotland, whilst continuing to benefit from sharing the risks and resources with the rest of the UK."

Labour's education spokesman Iain Gray said the report should be a "wake-up call" to the SNP, which he said he focused solely on free hours in pre-school at the expense of affordable, all age, all year wrap around childcare.

Conservative young people spokeswoman Liz Smith said parents should be given more control over how child care money is spent.

And Liberal Democrat education spokesman Liam McArthur said the Scottish government should work with local authorities to ensure childcare provision met demand, while Scottish Green MSP Alison Johnstone said current childcare provision was "patchy and inflexible".

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