

Meeting Scotland's childcare challenge: The report of the commission for childcare reform ^[1]

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Full report PDF ^[2]

Executive summary

We define childcare to include early learning and childcare for pre-school children of all ages 0-5, and out of school and holiday care for school-age children. Our report relates to forms of registered childcare provision.

We have visited a variety of provision, engaged with many different people and organizations, and looked at a wide range of evidence and international experience.

We have come to a number of conclusions:

- High quality childcare is good for children, families and the economy.
- Substantial progress has been made, and we sense a real commitment across all political parties to make further improvements in provision and affordability.
- Scotland now needs an ambitious long-term vision for childcare that meets the needs and aspirations of children, families and the economy.
- Many families currently find it hard to access affordable, high-quality, flexible services.
- A series of practical actions are required to address problems within the existing system, as well as to lay the foundations for the future.

Our long-term vision is that:

- Every child up to the age of 12 (and in some cases beyond 12) is entitled to up to 50 hours of high quality childcare and education per week throughout the year;
- Within that entitlement, both primary schooling and the 15 hours per week in term time (the '600 hours' of early learning and childcare per year for eligible children) is free at the point of delivery;
- The balance of the 50 hours is accessible and affordable for all families; and
- The 50 hours is provided using arrangements that enable parents to work or study.

That vision is ambitious. At a time of reducing public spending, it is both exciting and challenging to consider how to achieve such a bold outcome, and we recognise that it would take a number of years to deliver all of our recommendations. But we believe it is both necessary and possible to do so.

Two important themes underlie our report: quality and equality.

The quality of childcare is critical for children because their wellbeing and development depends on it. It is also critical for their parents and employers who need to rely on a high-quality system to feel assured, engaged and productive in their economic and other activities while others care for their children.

The primary factor that determines quality is the staff who work with children in the childcare setting. Prof Iram Siraj recently published a report on workforce issues commissioned by the Scottish Government, and we have therefore made no recommendations in that area. We support the broad thrust of her recommendations. We note the potential consequences of her report for the cost of provision.

There is a well-established system of inspection and regulation to provide assurance on quality. Prof Siraj makes some recommendations for improving that system which we endorse.

We believe that childcare can be a powerful means of advancing Scotland's equality and anti-poverty ambitions. When childcare is of high-quality and affordable for all, it enables female labour market participation and enables all parents to work or study if they wish. When high-quality childcare is only accessible to, and affordable by, relatively well-off families, it can exacerbate poverty and other inequalities. We understand too that high-quality childcare must be understood as part of a wider set of supports to families and communities and

should not be seen in isolation. Our proposals are intended to enhance equalities and help reduce poverty. We hope they will be assessed against that test.

We believe there are six major issues that need addressed to resolve current problems and to lay the foundations for the future.

Affordability

The cost of paid for childcare is expensive for all working families.¹ It is also a barrier to work and study for those unable to access highly paid work and unable to call on friends and family to provide informal childcare.

The costs paid by parents in the form of fees are complex. The tax and benefits systems interact to provide erratic support for childcare that helps some families much more than others, for no obvious policy reason.

For the foreseeable future, there will be limits on the amount of public money that can be found to meet childcare costs. We welcome the commitments by both the Scottish and UK governments to increase financial support for families through increasing direct provision; the childcare element of universal credit; and tax free childcare. However, we note that eligibility rules mean that the total value of support packages will vary considerably across families.

Availability

Many parents find it hard to access childcare that meets the needs of their child and matches their work and study patterns.

Funding mechanisms

State funding of childcare (through direct funding of services and the tax and benefits systems) is complicated, confusing, unfair and lacking transparency.

Many of the problems relate to the interaction between the tax and benefits systems, family income and childcare costs, and we suspect apply across the UK. However, there are two specific issues affecting many working parents that it is within the power of Scottish Government and local authorities to resolve.

- First, that there are not enough providers of all day childcare who receive local authority funding for the 600 hours of free early learning and childcare, so some working parents end up paying the full cost of the 600 hours.
- Second, where that funding is provided, providers claim it is inadequate and that they have to pass on part of the costs to parents.

We are aware that the funding and commissioning arrangements are complex. We believe that key players are acting in good faith. However, it is clear that some working parents are paying for some or all of the cost of the 600 hours that should be free at the point of delivery.

We suspect that the way the 600 hours of childcare is organised and paid for leads to inefficiencies in the use of public funds as well as failing to meet the needs of many working parents.

A lack of robust, comprehensive, agreed data on childcare is making it harder to agree a way forward.

Focus on early learning for pre-school children at the expense of broader childcare provision

The local authority focus has been on securing the delivery of 15 hours per week in term time for a particular group of pre-school children. Now that this has been achieved, attention needs to shift to meeting the needs of working parents who require childcare for children of all ages, all year round.

The Scottish Government commitment to invest the resources needed to provide up to 30 hours per week of free early learning and childcare to eligible pre-school children in term time (1,140 hours per year) is welcome. However, if local authorities are simply set the task of delivering 30 hours for three and four year olds in term time, experience suggests they will do exactly that, but not take steps to ensure the 30 hours is available as part of full-time childcare provision.

If that happens, many parents will still not be able to access affordable full time childcare, all year round, for those children who need it.

Range of views on the needs of very young children

We heard strongly held and often conflicting views on whether or not very young children should be in childcare, and whether or not that childcare should be subsidised. We respect all the views we heard and recognise that families will make different choices.

We believe that the state should make it easier for families to make that choice by not requiring the financial support it provides to depend on whether parents 12 of the very youngest children are at work, or whether they use registered childcare.

Need to take responsibility for fixing the practical problems

No single person or organisation has taken responsibility for taking the practical actions required to ensure families have access to the affordable, high quality childcare they need. That is not surprising since the issues described in this report make clear that there are complex and difficult issues to be addressed requiring the involvement of Scottish and UK Governments, local authorities, providers, parents and employers. However, strong leadership is required to address the challenging issues identified above.

Related link: [New group to be established to help reform childcare in Scotland](#) ^[3]

Region: [Europe](#) ^[4]

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