

An independent review of the Scottish early learning and childcare (ELC) workforce and out of school care (OSC) workforce ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Full report PDF ^[2] (see associated documents)

Executive summary

The purpose of this Review is laid out in the Terms of Reference. It is: 'to identify and make recommendations on how the skills, qualifications and training of staff working within the early learning and childcare and out of school care sectors, from birth to age 14, can contribute to improved outcomes for children, help to reduce social inequality and close the attainment gap, based on the evidence gathered in the course of the Review and wider research evidence.' (p2)

The Early Learning and Childcare workforce (ELC) and Out of School Care (OSC) workforce have long been recognised as diverse and disparate. In Scotland they include private providers, Gaelic medium settings, local authority schools and settings, voluntary groups and childminders (Scottish Government, 2014a). Within such diverse provision there are major differences in work environments, qualifications, recruitment, retention and staff progression routes.

The Scottish Government has recognised that these workforces are vital for the healthy development and wellbeing of children, and a great deal of work has already been completed in supporting aspects of professional identity, making relevant qualifications available and accessible, and ensuring the rights of the child (Scottish Government, 2014 a,b,c,d).

Most people within these workforces are skilled and dedicated, and Scotland has been proactive in ensuring this. The responses to this Review suggest, however, that it would be possible to enhance the workforces' abilities in providing consistently more high quality experiences for the children and young people with whom they work. Strengthening the workforces in this way will support Scotland's aspiration for 'Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up' (Scottish Government, 2015). It will also support and develop the skills of their youngest and most vulnerable children, reduce the effects of poverty and disadvantage, and improve children's outcomes generally (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2012).

The OECD (2012), in a report designed to act as a guide for countries when considering improvement in the quality of their Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, suggested that it is important to consider five main policy levers.

These are:

- Setting out goals and regulations
- Designing and implementing curriculum and standards
- Improving qualifications and working conditions
- Engaging communities and families
- Advancing data collection, research and monitoring

This Review has considered each of these levers, and has adapted aspects from them so that they better reflect the services, policies and provision within Scotland.

It includes:

- A consideration of the relevant international and Scottish literature relating to supporting children's learning
- A description of the Scottish policy context including discussions regarding current goals, indicators and outcome measures
- An outline of the relevant curricula and guidance frameworks and registration processes
- A consideration of standards and monitoring processes
- An analysis of the qualifications, professional development and working conditions within the workforces

This Review is informed by:

- Evidence gathered during focus groups and discussions with practitioners and key stakeholder institutions and bodies
- Visits made to schools and ELC and OSC settings
- Information gathered through two online consultations
- Meetings with the Early Years Division and other Government officials
- Consultation with the Core Reference Group of stakeholders

In addition, it has considered, and built upon, previous research, developments and policies both within and beyond Scotland. These provide an evidence base against which comparisons have been made of current Scottish processes and practices related to the workforces.

The full complement of recommendations can be found in Table 1 towards the end of this section. Before turning, however, to the recommendations, please note the principles which underpinned the Review and the major themes which emerged during it.

The principle of children's entitlement to high quality education and care, and the role of ELC and OSC workforces in supporting and enhancing children's outcomes, was fundamental to the Review. This principle underpins all the recommendations – including those linked to policy development, qualifications, inspection and registration processes, recruitment and career progression. The importance of this principle was discussed within meetings and focus groups, and within the hub responses. It was made explicit during discussions about both effective practice and how qualifications, professional development, standards and monitoring procedures should work to ensure that the ELC and OSC workforces have the skills necessary to support and enhance children's learning and development.

The Growing Up In Scotland: Characteristics of pre-school provision and their association with child outcomes (Scottish Government 2014c) report identified the characteristics associated with child outcomes within the Care Inspectorate's theme of Care and Support. It concluded that as it was possible to identify these characteristics it must also be possible to make improvements here. That report suggested that: 'attending high quality pre-school provision will benefit children in terms of their vocabulary ability which may, in turn, help reduce known socioeconomic inequalities in this and other developmental 11 outcomes. However, it will not by itself eradicate these inequalities. As well as early childhood education and care, children's exposure to learning at home is important in helping them achieve better outcomes. Yet with almost universal attendance at statutory pre-school provision amongst eligible children in Scotland, these settings undoubtedly present an important opportunity to make a significant and long term difference to many children's lives.' (Scottish Government 2014c p7).

Developing high quality ELC and OSC workforces hinges on building effective workforces through their qualifications and professional development processes. Scotland has made some innovative and thoughtful developments here. It has instigated a roles and responsibilities framework with a suite of associated qualifications; and it has recognised the need for a coherent and integrated approach to the initial, further, work-based and ongoing qualifications and professional development for all staff.

This Review, however, points to concern amongst the workforces and key stakeholder institutions regarding the content of some qualifications and professional development. The content needs to be evidence-based and to reflect the specific needs of the workforces for whom they are designed. The qualifications need to include, at the appropriate levels, the skills, experiences and knowledge deemed particularly important to support children and young people's learning and development – as well as family support for early learning.

Further findings from this Review suggest that Scotland could extend and broaden the degree level qualifications, especially initial degrees on offer to the workforces, together with developing further opportunities for learning at postgraduate level.

Many responses to the Review related to the equity of access to high quality ELC and OSC provision. The distribution patterns of highly qualified staff and high quality provision vary across Scotland (Scottish Government, 2014c). This suggests that work remains to be done to ensure that high quality settings are available and accessible to all – particularly for families living within areas of disadvantage or very rural districts.

There are consistent reports that local authority nurseries (in particular, those that maintained a traditional nursery school model) provide a higher standard of quality than settings in partnership with local authorities. In addition, there are reports that some qualifications (and providers of those qualifications) are more 'fit for purpose' than others, and that some staff work under different conditions and requirements to others (HMIE, 2007a, 2009; Education Scotland, 2012a; Scottish Government, 2014c). Some of these differences appear to be linked to geographical location, with particular concerns for rural areas and areas of disadvantage. Strengthening the integration of services, standards, registration processes and professional development opportunities could serve to reduce some of these inequalities.

The equity of working conditions, including adequate and better remuneration and opportunities for advancement and recognition for all, was commonly discussed during the Review. Although there appears to have been some improvements here, related to the introduction of the new BA Childhood Practice, this continues to warrant attention to ensure that all staff are suitably remunerated and given opportunities for career advancement. Clear links between the status of the workforces and their pay, conditions and career prospects were strongly indicated by all concerned in the Review.

The Scottish Government has already made some major investments within the ELC and OSC workforces. It continues to see the sector as one which could support its policy direction of reducing poverty and the effects of disadvantage, and of supporting the country's future economic growth. The Review highlights the importance of promoting quality through both professional development and the further integration of all ELC and OSC services by local authorities. Further, the Review urges increasing public understanding and goodwill through promoting communication about the importance of Scottish policies and practices that enhance and support children's learning and development.

The entitlement to free ELC is likely to grow and to include younger and more vulnerable children. It is, therefore, imperative that provision is of the highest possible quality and suitable to meet the needs of younger and vulnerable children. This is in the children's best interests, but will also strengthen Scotland's future and ensure a cost-benefit balance. Given the scope, ambition and direction of ELC and OSC, there is a strong probability that the workforce will need to be developed substantially in size and quality. The first recommendation, therefore, seeks to ensure that workforce reform is fit for purpose and achievable, and calls for the development of a strategic group to oversee a 15 year vision and development plan.

Related link: £1 million to develop early years workforce [3]

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