

Scottish parents call on all parties to tackle 'broken childcare system'^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A prominent parent-led campaign group is calling for Scotland's political parties to fix their 'broken childcare system' before promising to double the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds and vulnerable two-year-olds.

Ahead of the Scottish parliamentary elections on 5 May, Fair Funding For Our Kids (FFFOK) has written to all political parties saying that manifesto promises to extend the free entitlement are premature – and demanding recognition that the 'childcare landscape is chaotic and confusing for many families'.

All parties are supporting an extension to the free entitlement to 30 hours per week by 2021, with the SNP pledging an additional £500 million a year by 2021, and to create 600 new early learning and childcare centres with 20,000 more qualified staff.

FFFOK has been campaigning since summer 2014 and now has new leaders who include parents Carolyn Roberts and Katherine Sangster.

They believe the key issue is that funding for local authority childcare – including the free entitlement – is not ring-fenced within each council's capital budget from parliament. This means delivery of the entitlement can be widely different from one local authority to the next.

The group's letter to each party says, 'Our childcare system is not system at all: it is an incoherent collection of policies and structures, built up over two or three decades.'

Ms Roberts told Nursery World, 'Essentially it's a very piecemeal arrangement of different systems. The promises made at Holyrood are great but there is no acknowledgement that this isn't really working. My daughter's nursery in Glasgow has places for 35 three to five-year-olds but the council is only funding 18 places. So the nursery gave the eldest children the places and the youngest didn't get any. So many parents were forced to move or not get free hours at all. The whole system is precarious and not about stability at all.'

The group also warns there is a lack of resources, in staff, administration and funding, to deliver any further extension.

One point they highlight is that capital funding for councils from the SNP is set to drop by £10.5 million next year according to Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICE) figures – a cut of 57 per cent.

A council to council perspective

Sharon Fairley owns Little Flyers nursery group, operating seven childcare settings in Edinburgh and West Lothian.

She told Nursery World that it was now harder for private nurseries to gain partnership nursery status. 'Council-funded settings are normally nursery schools, attached to primary schools, offering sessional care, which is not ideal for working parents. And each council sets their own criteria for partnership. I believe they are taking private nurseries out of partnership is because there are empty places available in some council nurseries.'

The response from West Lothian and Edinburgh councils confirmed both a widely different level of partnership working with private nurseries, and a clear commitment to expanding their own state provision.

West Lothian Council said they work in partnership with eight private nurseries who join via a tender system and operate a total of 56 state nurseries.

They also spoke about recent expansion to offer full day provision in some of their nurseries and the important role childminders and playgroups have in providing wraparound care in West Lothian.

The council spokesman said, 'We currently have approximately 4,700 physical places at our own nurseries and approximately 360 at partner private nurseries, of which around 4,000 are occupied.'

'West Lothian introduced full day provision across two days at four nurseries recently, which has proved very popular. It has consistently attracted applications from those who previously chose private provision. Following on from this success, we will extend full day provision to nine establishments in 2016/17, covering the main communities in West Lothian.

'We are looking forward to further developments in Early Learning and Childcare (ELC), including potential further expansion, so that we can deliver the three to 18-year-old curriculum in a seamless manner.'

Edinburgh council has a much higher percentage of partnership. Of the 11,074 children claiming the free entitlement, 4,246 have places at the 114 partnership nurseries. A minority of these children – 294 – have a split placement across more than one setting.

Education convener, councillor Paul Godzik, said, 'The council has sufficient capacity for children to access their 600 hours of early learning and childcare, and we are in the process of expanding and improving our nursery estate to meet future demand. The vast majority of our children under five receive their 600 hours of free childcare from council nursery classes and schools, and in our partner nurseries. In contrast to many local authorities we work very flexibly with our partner nurseries who play a vital role in meeting the demand for early years and childcare across the city.'

The council also confirmed plans for new buildings to be taken forward and opened in early 2017 at Longstone Primary School, Davidson's Main Primary School, Corstorphine Primary School, and Granton Early Years Centre. There will also be a new nursery class at Leith Primary School and a new nursery as part of a new build at St Johns Primary School.

An SNP spokesperson said, 'We will pilot a range of different childcare approaches to determine what works best for children and families, with a view to rolling out best practice around the country to improve the availability of high quality and flexible childcare.

'We are also committed to implementing legislation we passed in government that requires local authorities to consult parents locally so they know what people's childcare needs are and also ensure they provide childcare flexibly in order to meet those needs.'

-reprinted from Nursery World

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