

Response to A Blueprint for 2020: The expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland.

January 2017

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government consultation on the expansion of early learning and childcare in Scotland. We very much support the view that the main aim of early years education is not explicitly 'education' in the formal sense but the promotion of the health and wellbeing of every child.

We provide services in nurseries and primary schools across the country which take an attachment based approach to working with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families. Our attachment approach to child development supports children to arrive at the school gate ready to learn; helps parents build strong and healthy relationships with their children; and improves educational attainment and life chances for whole families. We also work in a number of local authority areas helping to build the capacity of the early years and teaching workforce to take a nurturing attachment based approach to their work with children and parents. We believe that this attachment approach to child development would be of great benefit to all early learning and childcare, and would like to see this rolled out as part of the expansion of provision in Scotland.

This response is drawn from our experience in nurseries and primary schools and focusses on the purpose, type and quality of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC).

General Comments

The expansion of ELC needs to be considered in the context of increasing levels of poverty and inequality for the children and families that we work with.

Our services tell us that many families on low incomes are under increasing pressure as a result of a freeze on working age benefits, reductions in tax credits and the increasing cost of energy and food.

More families are presenting in crisis and the demand for our services is increasing. For many parents this financial pressure has a significant impact on their ability to interact with their children in a positive way and ultimately how they form attachments at the very earliest stage of a child's life. This has a subsequent impact on early learning. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that children from higher-income households significantly outperform those from low income households at ages 3 and 5. By age 5, there is gap of 10 months in problem-solving development and 13 months in vocabulary. They also found that lower attainment in literacy and numeracy is linked to deprivation throughout primary school and that in terms of the attainment gap parental socio-economic background has more influence than the school attended¹.

The expansion of early learning and childcare in Scotland cannot then be viewed in isolation. Consideration needs to be given to the financial support available to those families on the lowest incomes. We support the Scottish Government's proposals to replace the Sure Start Maternity Grant with a Best Start Grant and welcome the fact that the amount to be paid will be increased, that payments will be made when a child is born, starts nursery and starts primary school. We would urge the Scottish Government to set the eligibility criteria at no less than that set for payment of the SSMG.

We would also urge the government to look at other ways in which low income families can be supported as part of the devolution of social security benefits.

If ELC is not considered in the context of families' financial and other circumstances, there is a danger that the benefits of an attachment-based, nurturing approach to child development will not be fully realised.

Question 1: *How do we ensure children are fully supported at the transition stages throughout their early-learner journey? What support should be provided to ensure that the ELC workforce and teachers have the skills, knowledge and capacity to support transitions?*

Our attachment-based approach helps children and families to develop resilience which helps to prepare them for the transition to school. Attachment also plays a key role in transitions within ELC settings.

¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014) Closing the attainment gap in Scottish education.

As noted above family income has a significant role to play in determining how well a child will learn in the early years. Beyond income there are a number of factors that need to be considered to ensure children are fully supported.

While we support the view that good quality, flexible childcare can support parental engagement in the labour market and make an important contribution to reducing poverty, it is also important that we develop systems and practices which are child-centered, especially for our youngest and most vulnerable children. This includes ensuring care and thought be given to the creation of appropriate spaces which support nurturing practice as well as limiting the number of changes of settings and staff in establishments, in order to promote predictable, secure attachment based approaches which are attuned to the developmental age and stage of the children being cared for.

We have a robust evidence base outlining the importance of the quality of provision which includes ensuring appropriate staffing ratios and ongoing workforce development to ensure that staff have the skills, knowledge and capacity to provide a child-centred approach. There is a need for a curriculum based on play and attachment, with robust training in place for all staff to ensure there is a shared understanding of the principles of child development and the best ways to deliver this. This should be the bedrock of any further expansion.

Getting It Right for Every Child already provides a framework for a 'whole system' approach to service provision for children that is flexible and responsive, seeking to offer the right help at the right time from the right people. This means that regardless of the role that any individual organisation plays in supporting children there is already shared language, values and practice which recognises that better outcomes are secured by services working together with children and families at the centre. To sustain this, consideration should be given to how ELC organisations can best work together and with partners to strengthen their collective contribution to family wellbeing, including nurturing links to colleagues in health, housing, third sector and social work. This builds on existing good practice and reduces the risk of fragmented service delivery over critical transitions at key stages within the child and family's journey.

The development of Early Learning and Childcare should take place within the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) framework of a child centred, joined up, early intervention approach in our culture, systems and practice.

Criticisms of the current early learning and childcare provision include the cost of services and the lack of flexible and wraparound care, especially for families who work outwith the 'school-day'.

Question 2: *What support is required to ensure that the ELC workforce have the skills, knowledge and capacity to deliver high quality provision for two year olds? How can the ELC sector best meet the specific learning, developmental and environmental needs of two year olds? What approach should be taken on the transition for these children when they turn three?*

The sector can best support the needs of two year olds by ensuring that the entire workforce has an increased knowledge and understanding of brain development. It is important to ensure that the key messages of neuroscience are embedded in everyday practice to improve parent-child attachment. Staff need to have the confidence to deliver these messages.

It is essential that the expansion of ELC is accompanied by a programme to build the skills, knowledge and capacity of the workforce. A programme of learning should be based on the principles of nurture and attachment. Barnardo's Scotland works in nurseries and schools to help build the capacity of staff to take this type of approach to early learning. Our experience is that given the opportunity staff respond positively to the support we provide. For example, the role of our Nurture Facilitators in nurseries is to embed an attachment based approach in partnership with staff and the nursery. In our experience it is vital that staff have the knowledge and skills to:

- create a nurturing environment where children can thrive
- increase parental engagement including participating in family learning sessions
- build connections between the nursery and the home.

We know that workforce development is maximised through continuous learning and through opportunities to share practice. At the same time each early years establishment is different. In our experience it is important to use tested models such as Action Learning sets, Focus Groups, and on-site practice development activities to support nurseries in a way that suits their own needs and the children and families they work with.

Additional Comments

It is important that changes made to the system of ELC are not undermined or hampered by the requirements of the UK tax and benefits system. We would support the Scottish Childcare Commission's recommendation that there is a need to simplify the tax and benefits systems and how they complement free provision to make the funding of childcare seem simpler and more rational to families². This should involve ensuring that the children of parents who are subject to conditionality on their benefits are not penalised.

For example, changes introduced by the UK Government in April 2014 mean that lone parents with a youngest child aged 3 or 4 may be required to attend courses, volunteer or undertake other mandatory work-related activity if they receive IS solely on the basis of being a lone parent, are in receipt of Universal Credit, or are in the ESA Work-Related Activity Group.

Our services tell us that lone parents in particular are directly in need of need support at the point they have to fulfil the requirements of their jobseekers agreement. Lone parents tell us that Job Centre plus offices are no place for a child.

We have been told that as there is a lack of affordable childcare, people going to the job centre had to take their children with them. People report that they and their children are treated impatiently by job centre staff, that staff are "annoyed" that children were there in the first place and of there being no essential facilities:

"There are no toilets in the job centre. You can be waiting a long time and when you have a 3 or 4 year old with you it is difficult just to get them to sit still. I was told that there were no toilets and that if my child needed to go, there were toilets in the pub across the road" (lone parent).

In general, service users report that their experience in the job centre is intimidating, unpleasant, and crucially unhelpful when they are genuinely seeking support and training to get back to work. They have to take their children with them to interviews and to public libraries to fill in online forms to meet the requirements of their agreement. For some parents this means they can have 2-3 children with them who are 5 and under.

Whilst we recognise that there is a limit to what the Scottish Government can do in this situation we would urge them to explore

² Commission for Childcare Reform (2015) Meeting Scotland's Childcare Challenge; The Report of the Commission for Childcare Reform

all options to ensure that the operation of benefits do not undermine the changes they bring forward as a result of this consultation.

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