

## Early Years Scotland

Early Years Scotland is the country's leading national organisation for pre-birth to 5. We are committed to providing the best start in life for every child and while our remit is broad, our focus is always on the professionals and families who care for our youngest children.

There are four strands to our work:

➤ *Working directly with children and families*

We offer a two-generational, play-based approach via our Stay Play and Learn services. During these sessions – which take place for babies up to children in Primary 1, across communities and within 6 prisons in Scotland – our highly-skilled, qualified Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) engage with young children and their families to strengthen and improve confidence, attachment, interactions, shared learning and attainment, ultimately working to close the poverty-related attainment gap. Over the last year we have had the pleasure and privilege of working with over 7,500 children and families throughout Scotland.

➤ *Membership Services*

As a membership organisation, we are able to offer a wide range of support services and membership benefits which are designed to assist the professionals who work for, and on behalf of, Scotland's youngest children. EYS also supports the establishment, running and sustainment of Parent and Toddler Groups within local communities. Membership of our organisation brings about a range of benefits, including access to a dedicated helpline, sample policies, inspection support and professional learning opportunities. At present, EYS has 1722 members.

➤ *Professional Learning*

EYS delivers a range of learning opportunities for ELC providers, colleges, universities, local authorities and other partners. We have invested in the establishment of an expert, dedicated online learning platform and professional learning team who design, develop and deliver affordable, accessible, relevant high-quality professional learning opportunities. Our focus of Professional Learning this period has been on developing a model across our platform of delivery modes that meets the needs of the sector in the changing working environment. The Professional Learning landscape continues to be challenging but by taking account of feedback from participants and looking at adaptability in our approach we continue to develop and offer high quality sessions at flexible times to suit our Early Years colleagues.

➤ *Policy and Advocacy*

EYS represents not only the voices of the ELC sector, but also the children and families we work with, in as robust a manner as possible. We are committed to ensuring that we remain connected and fully engaged with all developments in policy, practice and legislation which are relevant to those we work with and for, and the voices of our members, as well as our children and families, are front and centre of this work. One of the key aspects of our work is, therefore, informing, influencing,

supporting, and challenging policy decisions at all levels, in order to ensure Scotland's children, have the very best start in life.

### The implementation of 1140 hours

EYS has always supported the Scottish Government's flagship policy of the expansion of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) to 1140 hours for all 3–5-year-olds and eligible 2-year-olds. The expansion of funded ELC is undoubtedly a positive step in ensuring that all children in Scotland are given the best start in life, and an engaged, positive, and robust early years experience has the potential to fulfil this ambitious yet important policy objective.

Access to more ELC has been of benefit to parents, who have been able to use their additional hours to seek pathways back into education and employment. For those who are not quite ready to undertake that journey yet, there have been opportunities to undertake softer skill courses, which are improving their knowledge and confidence which, in turn, is preparing them for taking the next step. This is something that EYS can vouch for with the parents who attend our Stay Play and Learn services for eligible 2s – they have more than appreciated the opportunity to leave their children for short periods of time to start computer courses, driving lessons, English language lessons and a host of other positive undertakings. This has also benefitted their parenting skills, as they begin to feel more confident within themselves which has had nothing but positive returns for their children, who have been looked after and nurtured in a safe, welcoming environment by skilled and experienced ELC staff while their parents begin a new journey.

This is something that EYS called for greater support on in our [manifesto for the Scottish Parliament elections](#) in 2021. While the focus of our work has always been on the family as a whole, the need for this has become more apparent as we slowly exit the pandemic. As an organisation, family engagement has become an integral part of our service delivery, and this has been nurtured and facilitated by our early years practitioners. As well as designing activities and experiences which enable children to engage in a broad range of play and learning, they ensure a safe, confidential space for parents to talk openly about any issues they may be having, signposting to other services and support where relevant.

While there is no doubt that the intentions behind expansion to 1140 hours were extremely worthwhile, and there have been demonstrable positives as a result of its implementation, the reality of delivery for much of the sector has been far from ideal.

The biggest challenge facing the ELC sector is, without doubt, sustainability. This is particularly the case for our colleagues in the private, voluntary, and Independent (PVI) part of the sector, who are still, without question, feeling the impact of the pandemic. They endured a significant period of time where parents either paid no fees, or a significantly reduced rate of fees. Although staff costs make up a large proportion of organisational running costs, they do not cover the likes of heating, electricity, business rates etc so, when the businesses had no income, especially over an extended period, it became more difficult to pay these. Similarly, many

providers took on additional staff in preparation for the expansion to 1140 hours, which placed a further strain on resources.

PVI settings' reserves have been significantly diminished because of the pandemic, and they are struggling to build these back up. This is compounded by the variable funded rate levels paid to partner providers delivering the 1140 funded hours, which varies greatly between Local Authorities (LAs) and which is – as far as we appreciate, lower than the rate paid to support and fund Local Authority ELC settings. This is ultimately making things very difficult for PVI settings to be sustainable, never mind thrive and compounds feeling of inequity across the ELC sector. EYS is currently raising these issues with Scottish Government and COSLA to strive to find positive solutions to the benefit of the sector.

There are also significant issues with regards to the difference in wages and terms and conditions between LA ELC settings and PVI settings. There is an ongoing increase of staff leaving the PVI sector into LA, because the pay is better, and it's deemed to be a more secure working environment in terms of T's and C's and trade union representation. There is no doubt that this is also having an impact on the quality of the care and learning provided by the sector, as experienced, hard-working staff feel they have no choice but to leave a setting which they are happy in, but which does not provide the financial security they need, and this is being exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis that everyone is experiencing at present. What is even more unfortunate is that some PVI staff are leaving ELC altogether and taking delivery jobs, or working in supermarkets, because the pay is better, and they report that they are not subject to the same levels of scrutiny, or under the same stress, as they were working in ELC. They also feel they have little to no support, apart from sectoral representative organisations such as membership organisations like EYS.

Playgroups and parent and toddler groups are also experiencing high levels of challenge, as they work with limited funds and also had no income for an extended period of time during the pandemic. AGMs were often unable to take place, meaning the groups couldn't recruit new committee members for when things returned to "normal". This is the usual time of the year when these things happen, due to children leaving for school, and places on committees requiring to be re-filled by departing parents. There are real and genuine concerns that areas of our sector could be decimated if they are not appropriately supported during this time. Playgroups have consistently provided important and positive experiences for children in their earliest years. In rural areas in particular they are invaluable, often serving as the only form of ELC available, given the unique geography of many parts of Scotland. If there are no playgroups, then there are even fewer options for children and families to access that which they are entitled to.

There have also been well-documented issues with the uptake of funded entitlement for eligible 2-year-olds. While this can be partly attributed to the lack of communication between HMRC in the UK Government and the Scottish Government with regards to sharing information about entitlement, this is not the only barrier faced. Families with high levels of need have been refused a funded place due to

being marginally over the financial threshold for entitlement. While the Scottish Government's policy makes clear that "*local authorities have a discretionary power to offer funded places to a wider range of children, depending on individual need*", it does not always seem to be the case at a local level, from our evidence base of parent reports. EYS has also heard evidence that children who are eligible due to having a care experienced parent are also facing barriers, such as being unaware they are entitled to a funded place, being told that they do not qualify as they are over the income threshold, regardless of the fact that care experience provides automatic entitlement, or general difficulties with their local authority, who have perhaps not had to deal with this type of request before. EYS is somewhat concerned that parents/carers are still facing these issues, especially since if they were to be rectified, the uptake amongst eligible 2-year-olds may be higher as a result. EYS is keen to support ways to reduce these barriers nationally and is working in partnership with Scottish Government to address them, as well as focusing on this within our recently funded Promise project.

Thinking ahead, therefore, to the proposals to further expand eligibility to 1 and 2-year-olds, it is important that this is undertaken in full consultation with the sector, and that the different types and variety of ELC provision available across the PVI sector, are actively considered as part of this proposal. This expansion cannot simply be a 'drop-down' of what is currently available, given both the barriers faced by families currently and the overall capacity of the sector to meet their needs – we have heard first-hand from our members about their concerns around being able to deliver further funded hours, given the pressure they are under at present in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is essential that when considering the provision of funded ELC for more children at a younger age, that services alongside nursery and childminder provision are also considered. EYS' Stay Play and Learn (SPL) model supports the child and the parent/carer together and helps to enrich and enhance parents' awareness and understanding of their children's learning and development, thereby increasing their levels of confidence, knowledge, skills, motivation, and communication. SPL also supports parents' understanding of the importance of play and learning and helps them to recognise and make the most of everyday learning opportunities. We know from research, such as the Growing up in Scotland longitudinal studies, regarding the importance of the home learning environment, so services like SPL supports early intervention and capacity building for parents and builds social capital in local communities.

This model of 1-to-1 bespoke support in EYS SPL, has worked extremely well over the last decade, and continues to do so, to the benefit of both children and their families together, supporting intergenerational approaches. It would be remiss not to consider this model to be part of the funded entitlement, as a means of extended funded provision, however only if such an expansion is deemed to be financially viable and sustainable by all of those who are funded to provide it.