

Scottish Parliament Social Justice & Social Security Committee

Inquiry into Addressing Child Poverty through Parental Employment

Written submission – Early Years Scotland 2 Stay Play and Learn (2SPL)

Eligible 2's

Early Years Scotland 2 Stay Play and Learn (2SPL) provides early learning and childcare funded sessions for eligible two-year-old children to attend with their parent/carer. These sessions are available within venues across Glasgow. The unique nature of our 2SPL service provides opportunities for intergenerational learning which enables parents to learn new ways of supporting their child's care and learning needs, leading to skills for learning and life. One of the main barriers to families taking up a place in this service and benefitting from the funded entitlement has, without a doubt, been the eligibility criteria – a number of families have been refused funding as their annual earnings have been 'just over' the financial threshold. While there is provision within the national policy for Local Authorities to be able to exercise discretion in these cases, and allow for funding to be released, constraints on their budgets have meant that, more often than not, EYS has had to fight to secure a place for families with an extremely high level of need. We are in a unique position in that we see, on a daily basis, just how difficult things are for families as we continue to feel the after-effects of COVID and the pressures of the acute cost of living crisis. There is a real danger that families who are 'poor, but not poor enough' will fall through the cracks and their children will miss out on vital access to funded ELC as a result of the criteria.

The majority of the parents impacted by these decisions are in-work and feel that they are being punished for doing so, particularly when their financial circumstances only just exceed that which is set out in the eligibility criteria. The system as it stands is actually stopping parents from expanding their working hours, as they do not want their children to lose out, and are aware that the main criteria is financial and not level of need.

As well as this, there are issues with access to funded entitlement for eligible 2's whose parents have care experience. In these circumstances there is no means-testing – parents' financial status is irrelevant as their children are automatically eligible. The Village is an accessible, independent online community which provides knowledge and support to care experienced parents and parents-to-be. The information and help available helps to improve confidence and outcomes for parents and their child. Early Years Scotland is part of this important partnership.

It became clear through this work that there is a real lack of awareness for care experienced parents around this entitlement. Families involved in the Village from

three separate local authorities who had two-year-old children were keen to benefit from the policy, as at that time they were paying for private nursery spaces, which took up a large part of their income. The parents contacted the relevant department in order to claim their entitlement, the savings from which would make a significant impact on their household budgets. They were, however, met with unnecessary barriers to uptake, such as a lack of awareness on the part of the person at the Council, or the presumption that there was still some form of financial threshold applicable. Some parents noted that they would feel more comfortable if the process was less stigmatising and, in fact, some described it as a retraumatising experience as they had to disclose their care experience and "tell their story". Some told us that they had to repeat this to several staff members. Conversely, it is also important to note that some parents described their application experience positively, which demonstrates inconsistency of approach throughout Scotland. Further consideration of local authorities' approach to awareness-raising of entitlement of this policy found that while information is available on each local authority website, it is inconsistent and, in some cases, incorrect.

With regards to employability within this category, EYS has found that many of the parents accessing our services are simply not in a position to be able to enter or re-enter the workforce. While childcare is an issue, there are also barriers such as lack of confidence and a perceived lack of skills. It is important to put in place more programmes which offer support and assistance to those families, and in particular women, who want to get into, or back into, education or employment. EYS has been working closely with our families around a range of topics such as income maximisation, support with application forms, CVs and letters, which has been very well received. This type of support needs to be more readily available, encompassing assistance and guidance from colleagues in health, employability and a range of third sector organisations.

Expansion of the 1140 hours offering to 1 and 2-year-olds

Engagement with ELC settings – including nurseries in both the public and private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors, childminders, parent and toddler groups, playgroups etc – has found that the expansion to 1140 hours, while delayed by a year because of COVID, has taken a toll on the sector. PVI settings and childminders in particular face ongoing sustainability challenges, as indicated in the publication of the Scottish Government's Financial Sustainability Health Check of the Childcare Sector¹.

The variability of the funded rate paid to members nationally in particular is extremely concerning for the ongoing sustainability of the sector. Until this is addressed, it will continue to create a pervasive gulf and an ever-increasing gap between the PVI and local authority sector. At present the workforce overall has the same role, and the same guidance², policies, practice, and legislation, however, has a significant

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/financial-sustainability-health-check-childcare-sector-analysis-evidence/>

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/funding-follows-child-national-standard-early-learning-childcare-providers-interim-guidance-update-requirements-early-learning-childcare-settings-local-authorities-august-2022/>

difference in the wage scales provided nationally. The continued loss of highly qualified and experienced staff from the PVI sector settings to local authorities or indeed other sectors entirely, which offer higher pay, and often improved terms and conditions, is also an ongoing and very significant issue. The National Standard, which underpins funded ELC, has the importance of high-quality provision at its very heart – this ensures that children are given the best possible start in life and that, fundamentally, their rights are realised from the earliest stage.

In our 2021 Holyrood manifesto, EYS also called for the creation of a National Pay Scale to ensure that the (predominantly female) workforce delivering early years provision are paid a fair and equitable wage, which is based on qualifications, skills, and experience, and not subject to the type of setting that they work in. The benefits of this financial recognition may also counter the established and pervasive gender imbalance in the sector.

The sector is, at present, facing significant challenges with the expansion to 1140 hours of funded ELC as it is. As a result, there are genuine and very real concerns amongst providers as to how they will be able to implement further expansion effectively. Concerns over their sustainability are, of course, high on their agendas, however nothing is as important as the anxiety they feel over being able to provide a high-quality early years' experience with fewer staff, with less experience, and challenges around supporting the workforce with professional learning and development in order to further their skills and knowledge to the ultimate benefit of the children.

In simple terms, the proposed aims of expanding this offering to the 1-and-2-year-olds with the highest levels of need may not be met and Scotland's youngest children will lose out as a result. The introduction of this offer could therefore place further capacity pressures on an already stretched sector.