

Introduction

UNISON is the largest trade union in Scottish public services. We have a long history of campaigning for free at the point of use comprehensive childcare. Members are often working parents struggling to find and to pay for childcare and we represent early years practitioners who are the key workers in this sector delivering childcare and early years education mainly but not exclusively in the public sector. Members therefore have a unique perspective on this service meaning they can make a valuable contribution to the policymaking process UNISON Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to Public Petition PE1630: Eligibility for part-time funded nursery place following a child's third birthday

Evidence

UNISON believes that this petition reflects the frustration that many parents feel because the current childcare/early learning provision system is complex, difficult to navigate and extremely expensive. UNISON believes that the mixture of costly private and less flexible public provision is leading to confusion therefore the new service needs to be adequately funded and delivered by the public sector. The Scottish government needs to move quickly with the promised expansion of early learning and childcare. UNISON does not agree with the petitioner that the current system is "highly unfair". It is though underfunded and parents are struggling to find and to pay for a place that meets their needs.

The current system is patchy, complex and expensive. Parents in Scotland pay 27% of their household income on childcare, compared to the OECD average of 12%. It's no surprise therefore that those struggling to pay for and access childcare may react to what they perceive as others "getting more" than them. The government's target of 2020/21 means that many families face 3 more years of struggling.

It's not just the high cost of childcare that's a problem. Places are hard find. Until you know what specific childcare is available then it's impossible to say what hours you will be able to work and vice versa. This is hard for those hoping to negotiate changing working patterns returning to their job and almost impossible for those trying to find new work.

There is no one place to go to find out what's available: local authorities don't even have to keep a list of what childcare is available, what it costs or monitor what demand for care is in their areas. There is no statutory obligation to provide/organise childcare for under-threes except for those whose parents are in receipt of certain benefits or are "looked after". Many working parents are forced to use private sector nurseries because they cannot buy extra hours on top of their free hours in local authority nurseries.

The petition calls for the government to focus on a demand side approach (giving individuals money to buy from any provider) but the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) programme paper: *Creating and Anti-poverty Childcare System*¹ states that a shift to supply side funding for pre-school childcare services is the most effective route forward:

“International evidence and the best examples of high quality provision in the UK suggest that the most effective approach to funding pre-school childcare is supply side funding, where investment is made directly in service. This approach provides the means to offer universal access to services and effectively shape the quality, affordability and flexibility” (Executive Summary page 3)

“the case for supply funded childcare is simple: it is the most effective means of delivering reliable access to affordable, flexible and high quality childcare regardless of ability to pay” (Executive Summary page 3)

One of the many advantages of public sector provision is the ability to better co-ordinate childcare with other services, for example where an extended day nursery is co-located with a primary school on the same campus. This type of delivery means that parents only have to leave and collect their children (aged up to 12 years) from one place. This also improves the transition to formal education at 5 as they are already familiar with the school.

It is also clear that the private sector is struggling to meet the costs of decent wages and pensions for appropriately qualified staff. We cannot build a new childcare system based on low pay.

The private childcare sector is already struggling. The recent NESTA report *Innovation in Childcare* (Jill Ritter July 2016) states that “profit margins are tight for many providers”. So tight are they that the “innovation” NESTA offers as a route forward is to use unpaid volunteers including parents presumably to maintain profit margins.

UNISON does not believe that the current system is “unfair” in the sense that the petitioner indicates. Responses from our branches indicate that “free places” or funding starts in most local authority areas at the beginning of the first school term on or after a child’s third birthday. This does mean that some children will start closer to third birthday than others and as all schools start in August some children will have a longer period of “free” time in nursery than others. This would also be the case even if all children start exactly on their birthday.

UNISON does not agree that everyone getting exactly the same total number of “free hours” is the route to fairness. UNISON believes that it is fairer to look at the needs of the children. There already is needs based funding provision for 2 year olds to access the service and for children to stay in nursery for another year rather than

¹ JRF programme paper: *Creating and Anti-poverty Childcare System*
<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/creating-anti-poverty-childcare-system>

going to school when they are not ready. This seems to us to be fairer than having the same “childcare funding voucher” for each child.

The current consultation on childcare expansion may consider a “catchment” year and single start date in a similar way to schools. This could provide all children with the same time in nursery but it would mean that some children would be waiting till nearly three and a half to start and others starting at two and a half. Those working parents of 3 and half year old starts would then be paying for childcare for longer than many others before they qualify and may perceive that to be less fair than the current system.

Public services are used differently by different people and by the same people at different times of their lives. Our needs all differ. Fairness in service provision isn't giving everyone the same thing to take or leave its meeting people's needs. Even within education some pupils leave school after fourth year others after fifth or sixth. Some children have additional support needs whether they have disabilities, crises in their lives or just take longer to understand things than others. Children in nurseries and schools need support from different teams: educational psychologists, speech therapists and social workers. Some are very bright and need different more challenging work. Some subjects cost more to deliver than others: they require experiments, computers art materials musical instruments and specialist tuition others need books. So the amount spent on each child vary depending on the subjects they choose.

The same is true for a range of public services: we don't all get the same to spend of prescriptions, and we get what we need. There aren't a set number of GP visits: you go when you need to. You don't have a set of 999 calls a year, some people never use it most are happy if they don't have to.

Going forward UNISON believes that nursery times should be based on the needs of a child. This includes additional support needs, greater access to an early start in nursery or indeed starting formal schooling later if that's what meets their needs. UNISON believes that basing provision on need is fairer than giving the same “voucher” to all children. We therefore will continue to call for and work with the Scottish government to move quickly to set up the promised early years' service expansion to provide the best service for our children. This will reduce the financial pressure that many working families currently face and the barriers to work for those who are seeking to move into employment.

Conclusion

UNISON is the largest trade union in Scottish public services. We have a long history of campaigning for free at the point of use comprehensive childcare. Members are often working parents struggling to find and to pay for childcare and are the key workers in this sector delivering childcare and early years education mainly but not exclusively in the public sector. We therefore welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the committee.