

## **PE1630/E**

### **Voice Scotland submission of 16 March 2017**

As the only education-specialist and non-striking trade union in Scotland that represents the Early Years Sector, Voice Scotland have a unique perspective on the demands and challenges of delivering a successful, effective and joined up education system for Scotland's young people.

Voice Scotland are grateful to be given the opportunity to comment upon this petition. The issues around early years expansion and entitlement are not straightforward. The issue raised by the Petitioner is a very real one and, given the adverse impact of varied lengths of access to early years education upon efforts to close the attainment gap, efforts to try and secure a more equitable arrangement for all children must be a priority. This could also bring the approach to early years education in line with school education where, regardless of what month a child is born in, they will all be given equal entitlement to a school education all the way through to their departure at the age of 16, 17 or 18 depending on their choices in the senior stage of secondary education.

But trying to accommodate children into nursery in a more equitable way is always going to be a challenge logistically. The nearest local authorities can get to equal provision varies depending on availability of places which in turn is dependent on Councils having the staff and premises in place to accept children. Additionally, Councils have often used partner providers to help fill the gap created by the 600 hours expansion with varying degrees of success. The different pay and conditions of service of local authority early years staff and private sector nurseries staff is significant and that only compounds the problem of delivering consistent quality of early years experiences for children. Voice Scotland has argued for some time that the Scottish Government need to put in place a national framework of pay and conditions for early years workers regardless of their place of employment to ensure consistent quality of provision. That is even more important if the Scottish Government are serious about narrowing the attainment gap which is already apparent in 3 year olds.

Children already start primary school at different ages depending on their birthdays. The flexibility in the length of schooling they receive is then evened out at the other end when they leave depending on their ambitions and plans beyond school. But that is not possible between starting nursery and starting primary if the same policy is followed. That is what leads to the problem of some children receiving more nursery time than others. So while it makes sense to adopt a similar approach to starting nursery, it has its limitations. If all children were entitled to 6 terms worth of nursery provision, for example, then it means transition from nursery to primary would see more consistent development levels as the children enter primary.

As noted within our recent response to Scottish Government's Consultation "A blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland", our organisation is broadly supportive of the Upstart Campaign and consideration of a degree of flexibility within the system as to when children commence formal schooling. An alternative solution worth revisiting, therefore, might be moving to a position where schools have more than one intake per year into primary one

depending not only on the child's birthday but on other factors such as the amount of time spent in nursery. For example, it may be that more than one entry point into school would best support some pupils. So re-introducing January or Easter intakes into primary one might allow a more natural flow for children through the early years of their education. This approach would also better address the fact that children do not develop uniformly and could help to better ensure that children commence schooling when they as an individual are in fact ready to do so.

But there is a resource issue around all this which requires to be addressed. Nurseries need qualified early years workers in sufficient numbers and given sufficient planning and reporting time to make a difference. When Councils cut that time to a minimum then the quality of care suffers and the children's nursery experience is seriously compromised. It also calls into question the national drive for a highly qualified workforce if early years workers are not then provided with the required non-contact time to adequately plan high quality activities for the children.

Whilst there will always be operational and administrative challenges for local authorities in relation to the issue raised by the Petitioner, current plans to further expand early years services do provide a good opportunity to examine this particular issue in more detail and the potential options for resolving it in a practicable way.