



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# **Social Justice and Social Security Committee**

**Thursday 25 May 2023**

**Session 6**



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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**SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE**  
**13<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2023, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

\*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

\*Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab)

\*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

\*Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

\*Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Irene Audain (Scottish Out of School Care Network)

Jonathan Broadbery (National Day Nurseries Association)

Graeme McAlister (Scottish Childminding Association)

Matthew Sweeney (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Claire Menzies

**LOCATION**

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)



## Scottish Parliament

### Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Thursday 25 May 2023

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:15]*

#### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Collette Stevenson):** Good morning, and welcome to the 13th meeting in 2023 of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee. We have received no apologies for today's meeting.

Our first item of business is a decision on whether to take agenda items 4, 5, 6 and 7 in private. Do members agree to take those items in private?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Subordinate Legislation

### Council Tax (Discounts) (Scotland) Amendment (No 2) Order 2023

09:15

**The Convener:** Our next item of business is consideration of the Council Tax (Discounts) (Scotland) Amendment (No 2) Order 2023. The instrument makes amendments to the Council Tax (Discounts) (Scotland) Consolidation and Amendment Order 2003, to update the qualifying benefits that are listed in the order. Entitlement to one or more of those qualifying benefits is one condition that is used to determine whether a resident is disregarded for the purposes of a council tax discount. The order also clarifies how the changing entitlement to disregard—because of having an award of universal credit—is to be applied to the case of a person who is currently disregarded on the basis of universal credit.

The instrument is laid under the negative procedure, which means that its provisions will come into force unless the Parliament agrees to a motion to annul it. No motion to annul the instrument has been lodged.

As members have no comments to make on the instrument, I invite the committee to agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the regulations. Do members agree to note the instrument?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Child Poverty and Parental Employment

09:17

**The Convener:** Our next agenda item is an evidence session to inform our inquiry into addressing child poverty through parental employment. The inquiry is looking into how the Scottish Government is working with local authorities, employers and other partners at a local level to tackle child poverty through improving employability. Since summer 2022, the committee has gathered information from local employability partnerships, taken part in a focus group, undertaken visits to North Ayrshire and the Western Isles, and run a call for views.

Some clear themes have emerged from the work, and we will explore those in a series of evidence sessions over the coming weeks and in September. The first theme that we will look into is the availability of affordable and flexible childcare for parents, and policies that relate to those issues.

I welcome today's panel to the meeting. Joining us in the committee room, we have Graeme McAlister, the chief executive of the Scottish Childminding Association, and Matthew Sweeney, policy manager for children and young people at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Joining us remotely, we have Irene Audain, the chief executive officer of the Scottish Out of School Care Network; and Jonathan Broadbery, director of policy and communications at the National Day Nurseries Association.

Before we start, I have a few points to mention about the format of the meeting. Virtual witnesses and members, before you start to speak, please wait until I—or the member who is asking the question—say your name, and allow our broadcasting colleagues a few seconds to turn your microphone on. If you wish to come in on a question, you can also indicate with an R in the dialogue box in BlueJeans.

Please do not feel that you have to answer every question. If you have nothing new to add to what has been said by others, that is also okay. We have a lot to cover this morning, so I ask everyone to keep questions, answers and follow-up questions tight. Colleagues who are in the room should indicate to me or the clerk if they wish to come in or ask a supplementary question. Members who are joining us online should use the chat box or WhatsApp to do so.

I will invite members to ask questions in turn, as agreed in our pre-briefing. Our first theme is the impact of funded hours, and I call Paul O'Kane.

**Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab):** Good morning. I am keen to begin with what is quite a broad question about the impact of the 1,140 hours of funded childcare. What are the key lessons that have been learned from the expansion? Obviously, there will be a full report in the summer of 2024, but we are keen to get a sense of the lessons that have been learned thus far. Matthew Sweeney, would you like to start?

**Matthew Sweeney (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities):** We can already point to a number of things that show the success of the expansion to 1,140 hours. As you have said, a further report is coming, but we already have some good evidence on uptake, which has increased from 97 to 99 per cent, and on high parental satisfaction rates with regard to the quality and flexibility of the offers that have been provided. Some really strong evidence has come through.

As for the lessons that have come out of this, a lot of the planning for expansion to 1,140 hours focused on understanding need. A lot of consultation went on in every local authority to understand parents' needs, and that information informed the models. The funding-follows-the-child model involves a parent-led process, and that is something that we need to think about with any expansion.

It was important that we were able to work out the time, capacity and resource issues early on and that there was time to grow and expand in order to ensure that capacity met what was going to be an increased demand. Lastly, there was the importance of partnership working, not just between the Scottish Government and local government, but the on-going and increasing work involving local councils and their local partner providers.

**Paul O'Kane:** Do any of the other members of the panel want to make a broad comment on the key principles?

**Graeme McAlister (Scottish Childminding Association):** First, I want to say that our organisation is really supportive of ELC policy, particularly the intention of closing the attainment gap and the delivery of funded childcare to families.

However, we have some very serious concerns about the manner in which the expansion was implemented. There has been a series of unintended consequences. In the six years of ELC expansion, the childminding workforce has declined by 34 per cent, which means, in real terms, a loss of 1,926 childminding businesses and more than 11,000 childminding places for families. We undertake an annual audit for the Scottish Government that looks at where local

authorities are with regard to including childminders in ELC delivery and, in our latest workforce analysis, which was carried out last year, we projected that those trends are set almost to double by July 2026 unless we take urgent action.

That will have really serious implications not just for children, families, communities and parental choice, but for the Scottish Government's programme for government commitments to extend ELC down to one-year-olds and to develop a new system of school-age childcare. The reality is that, if providers continue to go under at their current rate, we might not have the providers to deliver those policy ambitions.

**Paul O'Kane:** That was very helpful.

We are particularly interested in the issue of employability and the extent to which the provision of 1,140 hours has taken people back into the workforce. We have some interim data on those going back to work, particularly on women—especially mothers—and, from some of the tables that we have been provided with, there is a bit of a sense of a drop-off in people returning to the workforce when their child turns three. There is also a slight increase in people going part-time—in other words, changing their working patterns to accommodate the childcare offer instead of the other way round. Have any of the panel members done any analysis, ahead of the summer 2024 report, to look at what the impact on three and four-year-olds has been?

**Jonathan Broadbery (National Day Nurseries Association):** I will go back to the original question, which was on the impact of the policy. In answer to the follow-up question, we have not done any work on that, but I can speak to that issue as well.

I echo what Graeme McAlister said, which is that our organisation and its members—private and voluntary nurseries—support the ambitions of the policy and plans. Children being able to access high-quality provision greatly improves their life chances.

There are two aspects to addressing poverty. The first is closing the attainment gap between those from disadvantaged families and their peers, and the second is supporting parents into work.

There are important lessons to learn from our members, who have a lot of experience in delivering the flexible childcare that families need. However, the original plans probably did not involve them enough.

There were estimates that private and voluntary settings would be used for about 20 per cent of funded places, but recent data shows that they are now used for probably 30 per cent of them.

However, the budget that has been allocated to those providers from local authorities is still based on the 20 per cent or 21 per cent estimate. That means that providers, including our members, are being expected to do more with less share of the budget allocation. There are important lessons in that area.

I agree with Matthew Sweeney on the importance of partnership working. That has been crucial to addressing some of the challenges, but there are big challenges with the workforce that need to be considered before any further roll-out.

In answer to the question about employability, parents being able to access places is crucial, whether that is somewhere close to a work location or within the hours that suit them—they could possibly be working full time. An important point to note is that, once the 1,140 hours are spread over a full working year—not only term-time—that comes to just under 22.5 hours per week. That means that parents either still have to pay for additional hours outside the 1,140 hours or make informal arrangements.

Graeme McAllister made a point about childminders. There are important questions to be asked about blended places and how easy it is for parents who are going through the system to choose the providers that they want and the set-up that suits their working life and their needs.

**Paul O'Kane:** Do you want me to move on to question theme 2 and blend the two together, convener? It follows quite naturally.

**The Convener:** I am happy for you to do that.

**Paul O'Kane:** I thank Jonathan Broadbery for that response.

I want to find out about witnesses' reflections on the impact on one and two-year-olds, and then I will move on to speak about expansion—thanks to the convener's indulgence.

The uptake for the most vulnerable one and two-year-olds in our communities is only 52 per cent. That is a concerning figure, given the determination to support people back into work in our communities. Can witnesses reflect on where the 52 per cent figure has come from and why the uptake has been low? Also, Matthew Sweeney, can you say what councils are doing to encourage parents to take that offer up?

**Matthew Sweeney:** Thanks for those important questions. The first thing to say is that, for any targeted offer, there is always a challenge in getting to the right people at the right time, but the particular challenge that we have faced with the two-year-old offer has been because of data-sharing issues, which can be incredibly complex.

We have been working on that for some time, as have the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government. Essentially, councils do not have access to data on the exact people who are eligible for the offer for two-year-olds. Hopefully, that is in the process of being sorted, because legislation has gone through the UK Parliament that will enable a data-sharing gateway. Hopefully, we will be able to provide much more targeted support when we know where those people are, and that will ensure that we can access that information.

I suppose that councils have taken a number of approaches to what they can do, and work has been done between themselves and health visitors on some of those pathways. Similarly, some interesting work has been done. I know of one council that had a pop-up shop in one of its local shopping centres to get out into the community and do some of these things. It can be quite challenging to do them when you do not have a full data picture, but I hope that we are now making progress.

09:30

**Graeme McAlister:** The reasons are multifactorial. Data sharing has been a big issue but, in my experience, there has been a lot of stigma around the uptake among families of eligible two-year-olds. We deliver what are called community childminding services in different parts of the country. That is an early intervention initiative that supports families that might be one step away from crisis. In those cases, health visitors or social workers have noticed that issues that are going on at the parental level—addiction, mental ill-health, bereavement, terminal illness or whatever—have been impacting on one-year-olds and are causing attachment disorders.

In Aberdeen and Glasgow, we have what we call integrated services, and we seamlessly link the vulnerable families who are using those services with ELC. We are trying to use other feeder routes to work on the ground to bring those families in and provide them with as much support as we can. We are just trying to be creative around that.

**Paul O’Kane:** Before I go on to the next section, I should probably draw colleagues’ attention to my entry in the register of members’ interests as a former education convener at East Renfrewshire Council.

We are now looking towards expansion. The new First Minister has made statements about expansion of provision for one and two-year-olds. Matthew Sweeney referenced the programme for government, and I am keen to understand the challenges in that, particularly because it

commands a lot of support from across the Parliament. Often, the challenge in a lot of this is about getting the right amount of flexibility to allow parents to go back to work.

Flexibility brings with it a big cost, because we have to be able to provide a blended model or the physical space to accommodate lots of children and young people. Again, I am looking at Matthew Sweeney to speak from the local authority perspective, but I am also keen to hear from other providers about what will be required to allow expansion to the most flexible options for one and two-year-olds.

I have been speaking to people in local authorities who have told me that that could mean 10 new buildings, which means a huge capital cost. One and two-year-olds have different needs to those of three and four-year-olds. For example, they have to sleep if they are in all day. What modelling have you been doing on that?

**Matthew Sweeney:** That is an important question. I agree with a lot of the points that you raised about the difference between three and four-year-olds and one and two-year-olds and how that might require quite a few differences in approach to the policy.

You asked about modelling, but we have not yet been involved at that granular stage. We have been having a number of conversations and some initial political engagement with Scottish Government officials on the issue. It is important to think quite closely about coherence across the childcare offer, especially considering where we are with the 1,140 hours expansion and the hard work that went into going through the process of understanding parents’ needs and what the expansion would look like, then building local capacity to meet those demands. That is a long process and it can be quite challenging, as you touched on.

That requires us to have a lot of conversations about the time that this is going to take, capacity and what the resources are going to be. One element of that is funding, but a huge element of it is the workforce. Colleagues on the panel have touched on that and they will likely do so further.

We also need to think about the important question of where provision for one and two-year-olds fits within the broader offer to families across the public sector. Where does it fit with the health service and the interventions that it makes as well as the broader social work service? We also need to touch on some of the points that Graeme McAlister raised about community childminding and community support.

**Jonathan Broadbery:** We have been talking about expansion and you previously asked about lessons learned. There is a really important lesson

in the fact that private and voluntary providers and childminders are already doing an amazing amount of work in this space. They are very experienced and understand the needs of and facilities for children in that age group. They are already working with babies and one and two-year-olds. They are already delivering those services.

Around the time of the 1,140 hours expansion, a big plea was made for the Government to look at the existing infrastructure, but, unfortunately, that was not always taken into consideration. New nurseries were being built next to existing good provision and we saw some people being pushed out of their businesses because of the competition that was created by the new spaces that were being built. It is therefore not just a question of how many new nurseries we need to build but about what exists and how we can develop and work with existing private and voluntary providers. They understand the sleep needs of younger children and how their brains are developing. They also work with parents and deliver flexibility around their needs, where possible.

Coram did a study on the efficiency of childcare, and there is a lack of data among local authorities about provision for under-twos, provision in rural areas and provision for children with additional support needs.

A big piece of work needs to be done to understand what provision exists to make sure that any expansion plans do not damage existing good-quality provision. We saw a big focus on growing the local authority workforce, which was important. It was a big expansion but, again, it happened at the expense of existing settings. Entire staff teams were lost as local authorities recruited to the places that they had created, and that had a serious impact on the ability of existing settings to continue to deliver the places that they were already delivering and on their ability to continuously improve and develop their staff. If a senior management team was employed elsewhere, for example, existing settings then had to build up those staff. There was a really high turnover of staff, which is still affecting private and voluntary providers to this day.

**The Convener:** Thank you. I will bring in Graeme McAlister, as he has his hand up, and Gordon MacDonald will come in after that.

**Graeme McAlister:** I have a brief comment to echo what Jonathan Broadbery has been saying. From our point of view, the Scottish Government deserves credit, in a sense. It recognised early on that ELC for one-year-olds cannot be a simple roll-down of the existing offer to three and four-year-olds and that it must look very different and be much more nurturing.

Childminding already has a great deal of experience in that area. I will be honest: when my colleague mentioned capital build projects, it made me shudder a little because, in the most recent ELC audit that we carried out last year, we found that only four out of 32 local authorities in Scotland had undertaken impact assessments of their local expansion plans on childminding businesses. Too many of them have gone down the capital build route without looking at what other provision already exists. I therefore largely echo Jonathan Broadbery's plea to look at existing provision. There is extensive experience out there. We do not want to rush into things and damage other providers that are out there at the moment.

**Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP):** Just to expand on what Paul O'Kane was talking about earlier, I am keen to understand whether the focus in the policy is correct. The policy's main aims are to improve children's outcomes, to close the poverty-related attainment gap and to support parents into work, study or training. We are looking at extending the hours to one and two-year-olds and to school-age children outwith school hours, and we are also looking at single parents and, indeed, all families, working families and so on. Is the focus correct? If not, where should the policy focus initially?

**Matthew Sweeney:** COSLA has not taken an official position on this, because we are not at that stage in the discussion. I come back to the point that, right from the start of the 1,140 hours provision, there have been three outcomes—meeting the needs of the child, closing the attainment gap and providing support for parents. However, that last one was not specifically about employability but about whatever we could do to support parents, whether it be training, studying or volunteering. There was general support for parents and then a broader look at family support.

Perhaps it is just because of the stage of policy formation that we are at, but I am not clear what the specific policy intention is with regard to one and two-year-olds, or school-age childcare. I imagine that there might well be differences in emphasis and focus between those two policies, and they will really determine how much we will want to do and how much we will want to design a policy that is based on some of those things. For example, there was investment in quality as part of the provision for three and four-year-olds, because of the focus on improving attainment gaps for children and young people.

If there is a broader focus on flexibility and parental employability, we might be looking at quite a different offer. I am not clear in my mind what the real outcome is that we are looking for from the further expansion.

**The Convener:** Before I bring Gordon MacDonald back in, Irene Audain has indicated that she would like to comment.

**Irene Audain (Scottish Out of School Care Network):** Thank you for inviting me to the meeting. I just want to make a few points about the expansion of ELC, quality and the policy focus.

There are some things that we need to be very careful about here. Of course I think that the policy is right to focus on the six priority groups who need childcare the most and the children who would most benefit from good-quality childcare. However, with the expansion of ELC, we lost a lot of qualified staff in school-age childcare, because it cannot compete with the full-time hours and the better pay and conditions of local authority nurseries and early learning settings. I know that this issue will come up later, so I will not go into it too much just now, but it has led to a workforce crisis in our sector. That must be dealt with before we expand the sector much more, because we do not actually have the staff to do the work.

In our recent survey of parents and carers on access to school-age childcare, one parent commented that she had taken on work because early learning and childcare had been available but that, now that her child was of school age, she did not have any childcare and that, as a result of the juggling and stress that it was causing, she wished that she had not taken up the job in the first place. She needed the job and she was going to stay in it, but there were lots of such comments from parents who responded to the survey.

I know that the survey has been shared with the committee—do read all the comments, as they are very heartfelt and come from parents who are desperate for school-age child care. The expansion of ELC has led to the expectation that childcare will be available when children are of school age, and quite a lot of parents have talked about the shock of not finding any childcare or not knowing whether it will be available, the long waiting lists and so on.

Another parent commented that they could not get childcare, even though they were a taxpayer, while other families were able to get free childcare. We must be careful that we do not create a divide; instead, we must ensure that the children who go to services that are well subsidised are not stigmatised because they are seen as services for poor kids and that parents are not resentful because other parents are getting free childcare while they are not. The expansion has to benefit everybody in some way or it will foster those kinds of division in society.

09:45

**Jonathan Broadbery:** Your question about focus is very important, because there is always a tension between the learning and education part of early learning and childcare and the childcare element that parents need. It is important to get to the nub of that, because, if you focus solely on providing places for parents, you will end up with a bit of a numbers game, and the importance of the child will be forgotten.

As an organisation, we and our members put children at the heart of what we do. High-quality early learning and childcare benefits children; indeed, we think that early intervention is as close as we have to a silver bullet in relation to its impact on life chances, as it means that more expensive and costly interventions later in life can be mitigated or avoided. That cuts across all the priority areas in relation to children with learning difficulties, additional support needs and disabilities. Those early interventions in the first five years of life can have huge impacts that last a lifetime.

We believe that quality is essential. It is important that any expansion plans, while offering the places that parents need, do not undermine providers, whether they be local authority, private or voluntary providers, childminders or out-of-school care. After all, this is not just about play; we are talking about children's personal, social and emotional development and laying the foundations of learning, which will have an impact all the way through primary and secondary education. If we do not get it right in those first five years, when 90 per cent of brain development happens, there will be long-term consequences. That is the plea that we are making.

We know that caring for family members is second or third on the list of reasons for people, especially women, not being in work, and that issue has been growing recently, according to Office for National Statistics data. Moreover, although there has been a lot of focus on getting older people back into the workforce and helping the long-term sick do the same, the fact is that childcare, whether it be early years or school age, can have a big impact on parental employability. That said, we always come back to the point that this cannot happen at the cost of children's experiences or the skills and qualities of the staff who work in those sectors.

**The Convener:** Before I bring Gordon MacDonald back in, I call Jeremy Balfour, who has a supplementary question.

**Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):** I want to pick up on the issue of more rural areas. On our visit to the Western Isles, we were told that only one childminder covered the whole island. In seeking

this expansion, how do we ensure that we do not leave those who live in rural island communities behind? Can you point the committee towards any good models in that respect?

**The Convener:** Graeme McAlister, would you like to come in on that?

**Graeme McAlister:** I am very happy to, because it is a subject close to our heart. I have spoken at length about the decline in the childminding workforce, but the issue is more pronounced in rural communities. They are really struggling to recruit childminders, and parents are having to travel 40 or 50 miles to access childcare, with all the additional travel costs.

We recognised early on that there were already pronounced inequalities in remote and rural areas. One of the real risks with the programme for government is that, if you layer on ELC for one-year-olds and school-age childcare, you will have three statutory entitlements. If some providers are already struggling to provide funded entitlement for 1,140 hours, the gap in those communities is going to widen if people cannot then access ELC for one-year-olds and school-age childcare.

Around 18 months ago, we took a lead on this by convening a national meeting that brought in local authorities and other partners and creating what we call the Scottish rural childminding partnership. The partnership is truly ambitious; it is made up of 15 organisations, and its aim is to recruit 100 childminders in remote and rural areas where they are most needed. We have obtained funding for it from Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise.

There have been so many pressures on childcare providers—first during the pandemic and now with the cost of living crisis—that many are just focusing on the here and now and are thinking about whether they have to make cuts. People are not looking ahead and thinking about the workforce that they will need. The approach that we took was all about our looking ahead and thinking about what we need to ensure that we have the infrastructure to deliver the programme for government.

In that respect, there was really good synergy between our organisation and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, which recognised that we were trying to join the dots between the different policy agendas. Until now, quite a low value has been attached to childcare and early years, but it plays a huge role in job creation and community and economic development by enabling parents to work and to stay in work. We have to get it right.

The pilot project is going really well, and we are testing what we are calling a supported model of childminder recruitment. We have been running a demographically targeted campaign and, as of last

week, we have more than 40 new businesses, some of which have been established in areas that have never had a childminder or where employability teams have previously struggled to recruit. The approach has attracted interest from other local authorities, and we now have a larger pilot project with Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and East Renfrewshire to test the model in urban areas.

We need to put a lot of time, energy and investment into this, and we are working behind the scenes to get the model rolled out nationally as soon as possible. The feedback from those rural communities is that what we are doing is providing them with a lifeline. We have heard examples of parents who were having to take their children to work with them, which is completely unacceptable. As Irene Audain mentioned, there are real concerns about school-age childcare and childminding, and we run the risk of not having all the providers that we need. It is a major concern at this time.

**The Convener:** I will bring in Gordon MacDonald again, and then we will move on to the next theme, with questions from Katy Clark.

**Gordon MacDonald:** You have made a lot of really good points. I was particularly struck by Jonathan Broadbery's comment about child development and how we need to get this right for children in their first few years. The Scottish Government has said that it would like a partnership approach to expanding ELC, but are your organisations happy with their involvement in the development of the childcare policy?

**Graeme McAlister:** It has been a mixed experience. The Scottish Government has been very inclusive, but with a national policy that is dependent on local implementation, there will always be a challenge. Understandably, the Scottish Government wants to respect local autonomy, decision making and accountability, but that means that there is variation in what is done. That is the problem: some local authorities have been absolutely supportive and inclusive of childminding, while others have been completely the opposite. There is widespread variation around Scotland.

Local authorities have also had a conflict of interest. They are responsible for overseeing ELC expansion locally, but they are also local service providers in their own right. Some authorities manage that well, but some do not, with many childminders being squeezed out and still just getting scraps out of the 1,140 hours provision. As regular reports or audits have shown, local authorities are not providing parents with equitable opportunities to access different forms of childcare.

On the one hand, the approach has been positive, with the Scottish Government trying to be as inclusive as possible; on the other hand, though, there are limits to the Scottish Government's influence in that respect. We really need local authorities to recognise their responsibility. We are not criticising all of them; as I have said, there are some examples of really good practice, which is why the Scottish Government recently commissioned us to develop a set of good practice principles for local authorities working with childminders. We recently completed the draft of that, and it is going out for consultation over the summer, but we really need the buy-in from local authorities to work with us on that.

**The Convener:** Thank you, Graeme. I invite Irene Audain to comment.

**Irene Audain:** We have a very good partnership with the school-age childcare team. It is a little bit frustrating, because we work closely with the team and know that a great deal of work is being done behind the scenes. We operate as a sort of critical friend, and one of the things that we have had to pass on to the team relates to communications and the fact that no one knows about all the wonderful work that they are doing. We have to get that information out there. I cannot even tell you what the work is, because it is not in the public domain.

Since last October, there have been three Government news releases, and the new First Minister has announced £15 million for the pilots and early adopters services for expanding school-age child care. Just a couple of weeks ago, £4.5 million was announced to improve the school estate so that school-age childcare and holiday clubs can be offered on it. It is hoped that, in the coming years, the funding will be used not just for the school estate but for community venues that provide childcare.

I would just like to say that, during the pandemic, we worked very closely with the whole children and families team, and I saw people working long hours and very hard. I commend the civil servants for that work.

**Matthew Sweeney:** I slightly disagree with Graeme McAlister's point about local authorities having a conflict of interest. What drives different models are the needs of parents in different areas; local authorities have a statutory duty to consult locally with parents and set up models to meet those needs. It is really important to understand that it is that, and not some kind of competition, that drives a lot of local authority decisions and their models.

Partnership working is crucial in how we deliver any childcare offer, considering the range of

people that need to be involved. As I said at the start of the meeting, that is part of the success that we have had so far with the 1,140 hours of funded childcare.

I am also quite conscious of the Scottish Government's stated intention to reset the relationship between the Scottish Government and local government. Some of that is about making sure that the Government involves local authorities really early on in policy making. That will be very important in any further expansion of childcare.

In some ways, the experience so far has been mixed. Some of the different policy commitments with regard to expansion are at different stages, and we have had some concerns around certain funding decisions—Irene Audain mentioned some of those in relation to the consultation. It is quite challenging to think about what capital changes you want to make now when you are not sure what the final model for school-age childcare will be. That can also cause some challenges for local authorities, as bid fund processes can take a lot of time and be quite challenging, too. There are a few things that we would be keen to continue to work on and improve.

The issue came up in discussion between COSLA's children and young people spokesperson and the Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise at their first meeting, and I am sure that it is something that we will return to. There is a strong area of agreement around the outcome, but we need to really understand how it will work in practice.

**Jonathan Broadbery:** I just want to pick up on a few things that Graeme McAlister and Matthew Sweeney have said.

We recognised quite early on in the initial expansion of the 1,140 hours offer that partnership working was going to be crucial both at a national and at a local level. Initially, we agreed a series of principles with COSLA, and we are delighted that other organisations in representative bodies across local authorities and within the sector have signed up to them, too. I agree with Graeme McAlister that those relationships vary from local authority to local authority. They are based on respect and communication and all the principles that we would expect good partnership working to involve, and some local authorities and some providers get that while others do not. It is a tricky area of policy, because of all the inherent tensions.

Partnership working is absolutely vital, and efforts in that respect need to be redoubled. I agree with what has been said about the Scottish Government working well in partnership with representative organisations like ours, but, again at a local level, those relationships can sometimes

break down quite dramatically. We are always looking for solutions. I go back to the point that everything that we do should be about the children's best interests and what works for families.

There are lots of areas where issues could arise—for example, cross-border children and the issue of staff in one sector being recruited to another, which was touched on earlier. It is therefore really important that, as we move forward with expansion plans, the partnership approach gets more time and investment to ensure that all the hurdles that will come up can be dealt with.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much. I call Katy Clark.

10:00

**Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab):** The Scottish Government has said that it is planning to focus provision for one and two-year-olds on those who need it most. As you will know, the expansion of school-age childcare is also focused on those on low incomes. What do you think of eligibility criteria and the impact on child poverty? What can we do to maximise the impact on child poverty?

**The Convener:** Would any of the witnesses like to respond to that? Are you posing that question to a particular person, Katy?

**Katy Clark:** I think that Matthew Sweeney wants to come in.

**Matthew Sweeney:** I come back to an earlier question about the eligibility provision for two-year-olds. That eligibility model already exists and is probably understood in the system. That includes a range of aspects of eligibility, such as income, links to social security and a level of discretion that local authorities have with regard to children whom they would see as benefiting. We could look at that model. However, at the same time, it is fundamentally important that data sharing in place and that the data is accessible, because whenever you put in eligibility criteria, you have to make sure that there is access and that people are aware of what they can access and are entitled to.

**Katy Clark:** Do the witnesses have any specific proposals with regard to eligibility criteria that focus on tackling and reducing child poverty? Obviously there are advantages and disadvantages to focusing on some issues, particularly low incomes. There are arguments, which I think Irene Audain was putting forward earlier, for focusing more generally on all working parents, both those currently in work and those who are not. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of prioritising

groups? Is it better to have a more universal approach?

**Matthew Sweeney:** That is a really interesting question. In my previous answer I touched on the inherent challenge of ensuring that everyone who is eligible for an offer is able to access it and is aware of it. That will happen with any targeted offer, and I think that a universal approach takes away some of those challenges and some of the stigma issues.

However, our members are focused on the financial climate that we are working in. Last year, before the budget, local authorities had £1 billion-worth of pressures. The question is: what scale of investment would be required for a universal offer? If we are talking about a universal offer for all one and two-year-olds as well as a school-age childcare offer, that will be particularly expensive, so what will be the trade-off? Given some of the challenges that we are facing in running some existing services, that is a really important question. What would be the investment priority? As you have said, there are advantages and disadvantages in all the approaches.

**Katy Clark:** Given that there is probably a limited amount of money, decisions will have to be taken. Are the witnesses of the view that it is right for the Scottish Government to target things in the way that it is doing? Is it making the right decisions, or would you criticise its approach or say that the issue needs to be looked at again?

**The Convener:** Irene Audain, would you like to come in?

**Irene Audain:** Earlier, I made a point about the potential for stigma and how services have to be developed carefully.

I think that it is the right priority. Some studies that were done some time ago—maybe 10 years ago—showed that children from the lowest income families who accessed school-age childcare and activities such as sports clubs and other activity sessions saw a huge difference in their attainment in the basics and in their social skills. However, the children who would benefit the most from such services are from the lowest-income families, who are less likely to be in employment and so are less likely to be using school-age childcare.

As Jonathan Broadbery has already said, we are talking about the needs of the children and supporting their development and everyday wellbeing. Many of the children who have come in to subsidised services over the years had never been on a trip to the seaside, for example, or visited a museum or art gallery, or learned a sport or had the equipment to play sports. School-age childcare therefore has lots of benefits for children themselves.

All families who need childcare also want their children to thrive in it. Many in our sector complain that they are treated as if they are babysitters instead of the qualified professionals that they are. We are therefore talking about improving the quality and accessibility of the service. If it is not accessible to a whole range of families, there is a danger of stigmatised provision.

I really like the fact that there are universal free school meals for primary school children in Scotland, because that works. I do not have the figures but I am sure that we could find them. I am sure that that has increased the take-up among children from all backgrounds, which is important. When I was a child, those of us who got free school meals had a different coloured ticket just to make sure that they knew that this was a kid who was getting a free school meal. I hope that none of that stigmatisation happens now. I know that there are plans to extend free school meals to secondary school-age children in the future.

I am saying that there needs to be a universal offer while we are targeting the children who need it the most. Improvements have to be made so that everyone will buy in, if you like.

**Jonathan Broadbery:** It is an interesting question, and the fact that people have struggled to provide a definitive answer shows that it is an area that will need a lot of work, consultation, engagement and thought as the policy develops. If we approach it conceptually and at the highest level, universal offers are always better because they get rid of stigma. They also increase awareness, so we do not have to go out to find those groups and everybody knows what they are entitled to.

As Matthew Sweeney highlighted, however, we have to deal with the reality that the financial position of Governments, local authorities and providers means that there is not the capacity to deliver a universal offer. It would take a lot of money to make the service absolutely universal for all one and two-year-olds.

There are important lessons to learn from the initial expansion, which talked about vulnerable two-year-olds. We now talk about eligible two-year olds just to reduce the stigma a little bit. Families do not necessarily like to think of themselves as vulnerable, even though agencies might use that term as a useful classification.

There are lessons to be learned from elsewhere, as well. There are different barriers for different groups; for example, if English is an additional language in an ethnic minority family, it can be a barrier to accessing services. There are also cultural elements to that. For some groups, there is not necessarily a stigma about being eligible for the places, but people are expected to

look after their own children and do not want to be seen as handing them over or passing them off to childcare settings.

I come back to the importance of the first five years of life. There is work to be done to explain that we are saying not that parents are not the primary educators of their children, because they absolutely are—all learning starts with parents—but that children benefit from accessing high-quality early learning and childcare when there are qualified and experienced professionals working with them.

We touched briefly on disability when we spoke about children with additional support needs. That is a core thing to get right. Post-pandemic, we have seen a lot more issues with speech and language and a lot more issues with personal and social development. There may be an underreported and underrepresented issue happening in the younger cohort of children. That is another issue that might not come to the fore until those children start going to school, which is unfortunate. I come back to Irene Audain's point that the early years settings should be seen not just as childcare, but as places where a lot of important work happens.

In answer to the question, children from disadvantaged families absolutely have the most to gain from these policies, and, in an area where resources are tight and limited, we appreciate that there has to be a focus on that. However, that creates barriers and stigma, so it is important to address that.

I have an interesting thought to throw out, and I am not saying that this is a solution, but when local authorities were rolling out the 1,140 hours originally, a lot of different approaches were tried in different areas. Some local authorities said that they would initially offer the full hours to all parents from lower-income backgrounds, and then they would expand the offer to others. Other areas said that they would offer a half-way house between 600 hours and the 1,140 hours by offering 900 hours. Local authorities have considered staging different offers, so there is potentially something to look at there. If we cannot do everything for everyone, we should consider eligibility for the universal offer and what might be deliverable.

**The Convener:** Graeme McAlister wants to come in, but I am conscious of time. Could you please be as tight as possible with your answer, Graeme?

**Graeme McAlister:** I will try to be concise. In an ideal world, of course we would favour a universal offer, but we are realistic and we are pragmatists, and we believe that the right thing is to focus on targeted provision.

The six child poverty criteria are well established in Scotland, so, rather than focusing on that, we are currently looking more at parental employability and its role in reducing child poverty. I mentioned the recruitment work that we started in rural areas; we are now piloting that in urban areas. We have had to be really creative with the source of funding for that, because local authorities do not have flexibility in their ELC budgets for recruitment, so they have brought in employability teams that are using parental employability funding. It is potentially a really good fit, because the main entry point to childminding is predominantly someone female, aged 30 to 39, who has started their own family and makes an informed choice to take care of their own children but needs to earn an income.

There is a really good fit between parental employability funding and childminding, and that could be targeted to areas where there is currently very low provision. However, doing that is not without challenge, because, although it is a national funding stream, there is also variation because each local authority has its own eligibility criteria. We hope to try to capture learning on criteria and parental employability funding.

**Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** Some of my questions have already been answered, but I want to ask a few further questions on the topic of eligibility. How can we avoid income thresholds becoming a disincentive for parents to increase their earnings? Do you have any views on that specifically?

10:15

**Matthew Sweeney:** In the interests of time, I will not add a huge amount. There is always a challenge around any income threshold. We have annual challenges in terms of uprating them and how we make sure that, at the end of the day, we are still looking at the same target group. For me, there is something about that in the more general work that we are doing around the creation of a fair work economy more broadly and what the role of employers is in some of that, not only in the remuneration that they provide but, more generally, in the support that they provide around childcare and a more flexible approach to working hours. Obviously, the pandemic has impacted so much of that, so it is about trying to understand what that role could be. It is really important to look at that sort of issue.

**Miles Briggs:** If no one else wants to add to that, I will go back to some of the responses that we received from our call for evidence. In the responses, there was an ask for universal free provision. Jonathan Broadbery, you have touched on capacity issues and resources. Do you think that universal free provision is currently feasible

for under-threes and school-aged children, or are you all on the same page with regard to wanting to see that targeted support, which I think you have all touched on?

**The Convener:** Graeme McAlister would like to come in, and then I will bring in Jonathan Broadbery.

**Graeme McAlister:** I will make a small clarification of our position. As I said, we are pragmatic and, at this point in time, I think that it is the right judgment call to go with targeted provision. That does not mean that we should lose sight of trying to get it to universal, if we can make that happen. It is important that we try to do that.

**Jonathan Broadbery:** Thank you for the question, Miles. I echo what Graeme McAlister said. What is good for children and parental employability is more support with childcare, because that brings down the cost for parents, but it has to be done in a way that is sustainable. At the moment, the sector is facing a workforce crisis. Settings have had to close because they have not been able to recruit the manager that they need. It is a legal requirement to have a graduate trained manager in place. If the setting cannot find that person—which comes back to an earlier question on rural pressures as well—it does not matter how many other qualified staff there are, the whole setting has to close, because it is not sustainable to stay open without a manager.

The previous expansion saw the local authority workforce grow by more than 8,500. A similar growth was needed in the private and voluntary settings, but a lot of that local authority recruitment was drawn from existing settings. Our members had to go back to the drawing board and recruit and train staff. Time and again, we heard the story, “I train up my staff and then they are recruited to a local authority setting where they can afford to pay them better, because they’re better resourced.” Addressing the workforce crisis is absolutely crucial because, if we barrel into delivery and try to offer that universal provision to everybody everywhere, there will just not be enough professionals in the sector to deliver it.

We need a longer-term workforce strategy in order to really excite and enthuse kids who are in school now about the possibilities of working in childcare. We need to tell them that working in childcare is not just babysitting and is not just something that people can try doing if they do not make it academically. Actually, people who work in that sector are making a difference that lasts a lifetime—that is a big part of our campaign when we promote the sector.

We also have to look at the fact that, traditionally, the workforce is predominantly female and white. We need to look at how we draw in

people who have maybe not thought about working in that sector before, by working with ethnic minority communities, working to bring more men into childcare, and getting a better representation of older people by bringing them back into the childcare workforce.

We have done some really good work in Wales, through our childcare works programme, to help people who have been long-term unemployed but who have good life skills from raising families and being parents or grandparents. We give them the fundamental skills and knowledge to work with children and we bring them into the workforce. We must look at all options, because the work cannot be done just with the existing workforce.

**The Convener:** Miles Briggs, do you have any further questions?

**Miles Briggs:** I have no more questions on this issue, but I may come back in later.

**The Convener:** We move to theme 4, which is the childcare workforce. We have some questions from James Dornan, who is joining us online.

**James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):** I will move on to the thorny subjects of expansion, recruitment, retention and salaries. Given the reported problems in recruitment and retention, how feasible is it to expand childcare provision at this time? That is what is going to happen, so how can the issues be addressed? Perhaps Matthew Sweeney could answer first.

**Matthew Sweeney:** That is a really good question. Jonathan Broadbery flagged up some of the concerns about the workforce as it stands. We have just come through an expansion in childcare that required a bigger workforce and caused some disruption.

We need to think about planning, time and resources and about building a pipeline for expansion so that we have people coming through schools, colleges and universities who want to be part of the sector. We must ensure that it is an attractive place to come to. The pressures that exist for private and voluntary providers also apply to local authorities, which are trying to recruit staff across a number of roles.

We must also think about the whole fair work agenda. There is a lot of focus in adult social care on what we can do to increase pay, which is absolutely necessary because of the pressures that we are facing there, but that will have an impact on the workforce that might be available for childcare. We must think about all those things in the round. That takes us back to the question of how much investment may be available for all the different types of expansion when there are already questions about how to pay the present workforce. It is difficult to manage all the things

that might need huge amounts of resource. There are difficult choices to make about the order in which we do things.

**James Dornan:** Some people are saying that they will have to close their businesses; others are saying that they cannot keep staff if they cannot pay them the living wage. How do we square that circle? I would like to hear from Matthew Sweeney and then from others.

**Matthew Sweeney:** That goes back to what I touched on in my answer a moment ago. There is a challenge because of the competition that exists. We talk a lot about competition inside the childcare sector, but we need to look at what is happening in the broader economy and at what the cost of living crisis has meant for wages. A number of private businesses have raised wages.

The challenge that we face in childcare is that the commitment, funding and guidance that we have had so far have been about the real living wage and we have to think about how that ties in with competition inside and outwith childcare. If there is an ambition to go further and faster in adult social care, that might incentivise people to go into that workforce, rather than into childcare. That will lead to a trade-off, and we need to know where the resources will come from to address that.

**James Dornan:** Would anyone else like to come in?

**The Convener:** I have a list of people who are online and would like to come in. I will start with Irene Audain and then bring in Graeme McAlister. Jonathan Broadbery has also indicated that he would like to come in.

**Irene Audain:** The school-age childcare workforce is very part time and low paid. We shared the results of our workforce survey with the committee. One of the issues is the amount of regulation. Although their work relates to older children with different needs and is much more about play and leisure, rather than the educational element of early years work, the school-age childcare workforce has to register with the Scottish Social Services Council and obtain the same qualifications as the early learning and childcare workforce.

Of course, we want to see at least the living wage in the sector. However, when you introduce the real living wage for your lowest-paid workers, the pay of others who are more experienced and more senior has to go up beyond that, and that is currently unaffordable for most services. It would therefore have to be subsidised in some way, as providers could not increase the fees that they charge to parents.

Parents in the UK pay for more childcare than those in any other country across Europe, yet the staff are very low paid. Our staff in school-age childcare earn below the real living wage. They are also on part-time hours, so many of them are also accessing universal credit. If you are on universal credit and working part-time hours, you are put under pressure to increase your hours. That is another reason why we are losing staff not only to early learning and childcare—some are going off to work in big supermarkets, because they can get a part-time job there and be under less pressure to increase their hours.

We have been having this discussion in relation to the general childcare workforce, but particularly the school-age childcare workforce, and our solution is that we need to widen the range of skills, experience and qualifications that is accepted in order for a person to register with the Scottish Social Services Council. The Care Inspectorate also has a role, as it judges whether you have the right mix of staff with the right mix of skills. If you have too many staff who are simply support workers and not enough with relevant experience, that will downgrade the quality of the service, which is fair enough. However, at the moment, our services—and many other childcare services—are still reeling from the effects of the pandemic and have lost staff. I have experienced managers who are going back to work on the floor, not only to make up the staff to child ratios but because they are having to model and teach completely unskilled new staff. Some of the trainees that they get sometimes do not know how to use a toaster or a kettle. A lot of basic skills have to be taught to bring people into the workforce. If we want to expand all childcare, we need to expand who we bring to work in childcare.

I also add to the points that were made earlier and note that the workforce has to be far more diverse. We need more men in childcare as well as more people from different cultural backgrounds and more people with disabilities and so on. We have to reflect the whole of our society.

**James Dornan:** It seems that Irene is saying that the suitability check should still be done for her staff but that there should be a lower threshold in relation to some of the other aspects—what she would call the non-requirement parts—of the job. Is that right?

**Irene Audain:** Yes.

**James Dornan:** Thank you very much. I just wanted to clarify that.

**Graeme McAlister:** I will try to be concise, but what I am about to say is quite complex in terms of the interconnected components. The two biggest risks to the childminding workforce at the moment

are the real living wage and duplicated quality assurance.

10:30

Until recently, we did not have accurate data on the number of childminders in Scotland who could pay themselves the real living wage. We did a large-scale survey last autumn, which confirmed that only 13 per cent of childminders in Scotland could pay themselves the real living wage at the new rate of £10.90—that is appalling.

Most childminders come into childminding not because it is a high-income profession but because they want to make a difference. What is most rewarding to them is seeing children grow and develop in response to their care. That is why they do the job.

The problem is that the real living wage and ELC are complementary but almost competing policy agendas. We entirely support increasing the value of pay, but, at the moment, the requirements around the real living wage threaten to derail ELC expansion. That means that, because of the funding formula that we have for ELC in Scotland, private providers and childminders are not able to pay themselves the real living wage. The rates that they receive for delivering ELC are not sustainable, which makes you question whether we need a subsidy for that.

There is a real risk for childminders, because a requirement in the national standard says that, if you want to deliver funded ELC, you have to pay your staff the real living wage. There has been a loophole up until now, because the majority of childminders are sole workers; people think that it does not matter if you do not pay yourself the real living wage, because it is only for your assistants. The real living wage is crippling the businesses of childminders who have assistants. Larger childminding businesses in rural areas are at risk of collapse because the business owners cannot afford to take a wage themselves but have to pay staff the real living wage. There are lots of anomalies that we need to work around.

Irene Audain mentioned layering registration and duplicated quality assurance. During the past six years of ELC expansion, there has been a massive growth in quality assurance. We are supportive of quality assurance, but it needs to be proportionate and joined up, and at the moment it is not. An individual childminder undergoes three forms of quality assurance for the Care Inspectorate, Education Scotland and local authorities. The majority of our workforce is now working an extra four to seven hours a week unpaid, just to keep on top of the paperwork. That is not sustainable.

We have to apply those lessons before we look at expansion. It is entirely admirable that our First Minister wants to accelerate ELC for one-year-olds, but we need to learn the lessons from 1,140 hours first.

**The Convener:** I will bring in Jonathan Broadbery. I remind everyone to try to be as concise and succinct as possible.

**Jonathan Broadbery:** Thank you convener. I take that on board.

I echo what Irene Audain and Graeme McAlister said about sustainable rates. In many instances, they are sustainable in name only. Some local authorities are struggling to provide any increase to the rates that they pay providers, and a lot of debates on that are happening right now.

Providers face rising costs, and inflation has only just gone below 10 per cent. Wage inflation is probably higher than that; it is probably around 14 per cent. To pick up on Irene's point, we have a rising floor with the real living wage, which is great and really important for those low-paid staff, but sustainable rates are creating a glass ceiling, so there is no headroom to pay the managers, room leaders and higher-qualified and more experienced staff that you need.

As a result, staff are leaving for other sectors such as supermarkets. They also leave for local authority settings, where they can get better pay. There is a budget differential between what local authorities will pay to providers and the costs that local authorities have to put into their own settings. Children and staff are not getting a fair cut of funding, which puts additional pressure on private and voluntary providers. Until we address that, we will not address the workforce crisis.

There is other evidence in there, and I want to highlight the volume of managers and senior practitioners who have gone on to local authorities, and the fact that we have a higher proportion in the private and voluntary sector who are practising under SSSC but with conditions. They are having to work towards another qualification while they are doing their day job, because more experienced staff have had to be replaced. Until we address the funding challenges and the sustainable rates, that will be a problem for addressing the workforce crisis.

**The Convener:** I am now going to bring in Marie McNair to move on to theme 5, which is on children who need additional support.

**Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** Before I move on to my theme, I have a question for Irene Audain. In your written submission, you highlight the fact that workers have been lost because of the conditionality

regime in universal credit. You have touched on that already, but would you like to expand on it?

**Irene Audain:** I have not got all the information in front of me, but staff in school-age childcare work part time. Sometimes, a practitioner or a support worker might work 16 or 15 hours a week, and a manager works an average of 30 hours in term time. If you are paid below the real living wage or the national minimum wage, it is part of the conditions of receiving universal credit support that you are actively looking to increase your hours.

People who work in school-age childcare love their job. In our survey, one of the things that they all said was that they love working with the children and seeing them develop over the years. Someone might work with a child from when they are four and a half years old until they go to secondary school, which is a long time to be involved in a child's life. Those people are being pushed out because of the conditionality in universal credit. Even if someone really enjoys working in school-age childcare, if they have the prospect of a much better full-time paid job in early learning and childcare and they have the qualifications to do that job because the staff have the same qualifications, they will decide on behalf of themselves and their families to go and earn more money and have a more secure job.

All those forces are reducing our workforce and it is impossible to recruit. I know that that is partly because there are staffing shortages everywhere in wider society, including in care, social care and childcare in general, but it is quite acute in our service. Frankly, those shortages are closing down some services or stopping the expansion of services that have space to expand or are allowed to expand because of their registration numbers. That has a knock-on effect on the parents who are desperate for school-age childcare, and that experience is shown in the survey that I have shared with the committee. I do not want to take up too much of the committee's time on that.

Universal credit conditions are not good for part-time workers, who are mainly women and often single parents. They are basically workers who are in poverty, and we have to address that. I know that the universal credit conditions are down to the UK Government and are not under the power of the Scottish Government.

I want to hark back to the threshold between when people get help and when they do not get help with free childcare. We need to make sure that people know about the support that they can get for childcare costs if they are on universal credit, or the tax-free childcare that they can get if they are a much higher earner. In our survey, although three-quarters of respondents did know about either or both of those benefits, one quarter

of parents did not know about that help with childcare costs. I would rather that that funding was not used in a complicated system of parents claiming help; I would rather it was used to fund childcare, which would make it much more affordable for everybody. Again, however, that is not within the Scottish Government's power. It is UK Government policy. That was a bit of additional opinion there.

**Marie McNair:** Thanks, Irene. It is really terrible to hear that information, but thank you for that.

A strong theme in the evidence that the committee received concerned the challenges of accessing childcare for children with additional support needs. A recent survey of parents found that the availability of suitable early learning and childcare for children with additional support needs had improved, but a third of parents said that they still had difficulties in finding suitable childcare. What can be done to improve that provision further, and what are the challenges with regard to delivering further expansion?

**Graeme McAlister:** First, over the past five to 10 years, we have found that there has been quite a significant increase in the number of childminders who are supporting families with additional support needs. Childminding is unique in the sense that there is continuity care almost from birth through to the age of 12, or 16 in the case of additional support needs. Parents are increasingly starting to access childminding for additional support needs because there are smaller adult-to-child ratios—you get more one-on-one care. Conversely, that puts financial pressure on a childminder's business model, because, if they are giving more time to a child with complex needs, they might have to reduce the number of children in their setting.

We are finding that childminders are increasingly specialising in that provision. We are certainly experiencing greater demand for training. However, again, a lot of it comes back to informing parents about their entitlement, including more generally, as we heard when we were talking about ELC. Many parents are not fully informed about what they can access. From our point of view, yes, you can say that parents are informed, but unless they fully understand, they cannot make an informed decision, and that is a problem. We are still finding barriers because local authorities, unfortunately, in some cases, are not informing parents about what they can access. There is still a tendency for parents to go for the local authority nursery rather than asking whether there is a more suitable setting.

**Matthew Sweeney:** I want to give the context of the much wider considerations that we have with regard to additional support needs. Over the past five to 10 years, we have seen a substantial

increase in that and changes to how it works. We have tried—including through our joint work on the Angela Morgan review of additional support for learning—to look at how provision is working just now. Work was primarily focused on schools, but it obviously has implications for ELC. On the back of that, the Scottish Government and COSLA now have a joint action plan and a joint implementation group that looks at these issues around additional support needs provision and how we can improve. ELC members have recently been brought in to bolster that group.

With additional support needs, that can mean very different things, depending on each child. We need to be really thoughtful about that and about the range of professionals involved, because it is not just about the ELC setting itself but the wider support that comes from across the public sector and how we support each family. Having that co-ordination is crucial.

**Jonathan Broadbery:** I will make a quick plea that these places are delivered and deliverable within private and voluntary settings. It is important to work with the provision that is already there in terms of both identification and responding to children with additional support needs. Again, that comes back to the workforce in terms of both the number of people who offer that additional support and the experience and training that practitioners have in order to meet those needs.

**The Convener:** Thanks. We will now move on to theme 6, which is delivery models. I will reach out to each of you and ask: how should the partner provider model develop as funded childcare is due to expand? I will bring Matthew Sweeney in first.

**Matthew Sweeney:** A really important thing that has come up throughout the evidence session is that parental interests and needs have been so key in the provision of the 1,140 hours, and it seems difficult to think of a world in which that is not part of the future expansion. In that sense, we will always need a mix of provision, and we will always need that joint working and the ability for partners in the private and voluntary sectors and childminders to take part.

Work is already going on to look at the process that we have around partnership, both in the review of the funding-follows-the-child approach and the national standard, which represent our guidance around the partner provider model, and in a review of the rates process. We will learn lessons from the work that we are doing now.

It also comes back to some of the difficult questions that we have had so far about prioritisation and where resources go if the real call from the sector is around increasing salaries beyond the real living wage as part of that provision, and about the funding being there to do

so. That increase has a cost, and the question is what the trade-off will be in order to be able to provide it. It is a really interesting challenge for us to think about in that context.

10:45

**The Convener:** I will bring in Graeme McAlister on the potential for childminders to provide a funded wraparound service alongside schools.

**Graeme McAlister:** There is tremendous potential in the sense that roughly 50 per cent of the children in childminding settings are of school and childcare age and a childminder already does, and has extensive experience of delivering, that service. Childminding is a flexible form of childcare in the sense that childminders are based in their community.

Looking at the independent research that Ipsos MORI has conducted for the Scottish Government and others, parents are reporting that, in addition to feeling that childminding services are child led, they get flexibility from a childminder that they do not get elsewhere. The service goes way beyond nursery hours. The childminder service goes above and beyond providing professional support to parents—those parents who use it actually view it as family support and not just childcare.

In relation to delivery models—again, to give credit to the Scottish Government—as Matthew Sweeney has said, a lot of work is under way. The Scottish Government has engaged us to do some pilot work looking at what delivery models might look like for childminding, both for ELC and for school-age childcare.

The main lesson to take from the 1,140 hours is that we need to recognise the distinct forms of childcare out there and not make the mistake of thinking that it is one delivery model and applying it to different providers who will deliver it very differently.

**The Convener:** Miles Briggs has a supplementary question.

**Miles Briggs:** In relation to other models around the world, have we missed an opportunity to look at, for example, the national health service? I know people here, in my region and in Edinburgh, who have not gone back to work because the childcare offering is just not effective for them due to the time that it takes to cross the city and the lack of flexibility, sometimes, in NHS shift patterns.

Do we need to look at public services? Since we are trying to achieve a few outcomes—not only providing the opportunity for childcare but also getting people to come back to work in our public services, with the workforce challenges there—why have we not looked at the NHS providing that

in-house opportunity to actually cater for real-life experiences?

Does anyone want to tackle this question?

**Graeme McAlister:** Would you like me to respond?

**Miles Briggs:** Sure.

**Graeme McAlister:** We are in what I would call a creative space where we are considering all solutions in the sector. Our colleagues from the Care and Learning Alliance, who are not here today, are currently looking at piloting a shared model in the Highlands and considering how you could deliver adult social care and childcare in a similar setting given the challenges in rural areas.

It is interesting that, during Covid, childminding stayed open more than any other form of childcare, which was due to the small number of children in our settings and the reduced risk of infection—there was very high usage by NHS professionals because of that flexibility. A lot comes back to that flexibility that those professionals can get in their local community, which they cannot get in other areas.

We need to look at how we can creatively respond to the demands in other sectors and professions in which the hours one works to are 24/7, not 9 to 3.

**Miles Briggs:** Does anyone else want to add anything?

**Irene Audain:** There are some NHS crèche provisions on site, but for school-age childcare we suggest that places be purchased for parents, with the employer paying in to purchase places in the local services, which actually helps with the financial viability of local services.

A few parents in our survey are NHS consultants. One of them told us that, although they had access to school-age childcare a couple of evenings a week, they also had to use a mix of teenage babysitters and juggling different hours. They know that that is not the best for their children, and they would prefer that school-age childcare place to be available for them.

I would certainly recommend subsidising places for employers such as the NHS.

**Irene Audain:** I want to make another point, which I do not think was covered, in relation to delivery models. A committee paper that I was sent earlier states that, for many parents, the challenge is finding work that fits with school hours. The paper then asks what the potential is for closer integration between school and school age childcare—for example, provision on school premises and provision that is managed by the school.

I point out that there are maybe three of four services that are actually managed by a school. More than half of school-age childcare services are in school premises; however, they are not managed by the school. To be honest, how do parents know that, unless the service makes it quite clear that there is a voluntary management committee or that it is a private service, and so on?

There will be a lot of investment in the coming years. When that happens—although that investment is further down the line—one thing that registered school-age childcare services are very nervous about is the question of whether schools will just take that money to run their own clubs and then displace the existing sector. I assure you that that is not the policy direction that we see so far. Headteachers have enough on their shoulders—they have many responsibilities already—and for them to then also be the ultimate manager of the school-age childcare service might be a step too far.

**The Convener:** Thanks. That concludes our session. Irene, I add a welcome to your cat, who joined us on screen and was a welcome addition to the evidence session.

I thank the witnesses for the evidence that they have given today. In two weeks' time, we will hold a further evidence session on childcare, with a focus on the delivery of services.

We now move into private session to consider the remaining items on the agenda.

10:52

*Meeting continued in private until 11:09.*



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