

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 10 September 2025
13th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

PE2112: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland

Introduction

Petitioner Carole Erskine on behalf of Pregnant Then Screwed

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to commission an independent review of publicly-funded early learning and childcare in Scotland, in order to better understand and address the challenges families face when trying to secure and afford childcare.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2112>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 30 October 2024.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Scotland, Scottish Private Nursery Association (SPNA), the parent's group, Connect, COSLA, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Scotland, Scottish Private Nursery Association (SPNA), the parent's group, Connect, COSLA, Liam McArthur MSP and Monica Lennon MSP, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial response to the petition on 23 August 2024.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 3652 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

8. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

CPPP/S6/25/13/6

**Clerks to the Committee
September 2025**

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2112: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland.

Petitioner

Carole Erskine on behalf of Pregnant Then Screwed

Date Lodged

23 July 2024

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to commission an independent review of publicly-funded early learning and childcare in Scotland, in order to better understand and address the challenges families face when trying to secure and afford childcare.

Background information

The charity, Pregnant Then Screwed, conducted a survey looking at childcare in Scotland. Over 2600 parents responded, with 83.7% of parents saying their childcare costs are the same or more than their income. 71% of mothers, and 50% of fathers, say it doesn't make financial sense for them to work. Our survey also found that 4 in 10 women in Scotland who have terminated a pregnancy say the cost of childcare was the primary reason for their decision.

It is time for the Scottish Parliament to look in depth at the early learning and childcare system in Scotland. Until we have a good understanding of why our childcare system is failing families, we will never have effective solutions.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2112 on 30 October 2024

The Convener: PE2112, which was lodged by Carole Erskine on behalf of Pregnant Then Screwed, calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to commission an independent review of publicly funded early learning and childcare in Scotland, in order to better understand and address the challenges that families face when trying to secure and afford childcare.

The background to the petition provides details of the petitioner's survey that looked at childcare in Scotland, in which 83.7 per cent of parents said that their childcare costs are the same or more than their income, with 70 per cent of mothers and 50 per cent of fathers responding to say that it does not make financial sense for them to work. The SPICe briefing notes that, although data from surveys conducted by Coram Family and Childcare shows that childcare costs in Scotland are rising, they remain lower than the average prices that have been reported for England and Wales.

In its response to the petition, which is similar to the response that we received on the previous petition, the Scottish Government states that it is investing nearly £1 billion in high-quality early learning and childcare in 2024-25. The response goes on to highlight the funding follows the child approach for the delivery of the 1,140 hours ELC offer, which allows parents and carers to

“access their child's entitlement from any setting in the public, private or third sector ... who meets the National Standard, has a place available, and is willing to enter into a contract with their local authority. ”

The Scottish Government's response also refers to independent research that suggests that

“97% of parents with a three- to five-year-old were satisfied that they could access funded ELC in a way that meets their needs.”

It notes that an evaluation of the 1,140 hours entitlement is due to report in 2025.

We have also received two submissions from the petitioner, the first of which comments on the Scottish Government's response and draws our attention to a review of the early years sector in England, which was commissioned by the UK Labour Party before it entered government. The petitioner has called for a similar review to take place in Scotland. The second submission highlights the mostly negative experiences of the childcare system that parents have encountered, including issues around availability, council boundary changes, and the inflexibility of the current system to meet families' needs.

Submissions have also been received from the University of the West of Scotland, drawing our attention to research that it has undertaken on the challenges that are faced by mothers who are working in the performance arts and entertainment industry, and from our MSP colleague Tim Eagle in support of the petition's aim.

In the light of the information that we have received from the Scottish Government and SPICe, do colleagues have any suggestions on how we might proceed?

David Torrance: I wonder whether the committee would like to write to the National Day Nurseries Association, the Scottish Private Nursery Association, the parents group—Connect—and COSLA to seek views on the issues that have been raised by the petition. The committee could also write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, highlighting the submissions that the committee has received and the call that was raised in PE2111 to fund early learning and childcare from nine months old. The committee could seek an update on the work to develop new childcare offers, including details of any discussion that the Scottish Government has had with the UK Government on the issue, specifically the financial support that is available to families.

The Convener: Are members content with that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: That concludes our consideration of new petitions. Our next meeting will be on 13 November. We now move into private session to consider agenda items 4 and 5.

Annexe C: Written submissions

Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise written submission, 29 November 2024

PE2112/F: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland

Thank you for writing to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on 6 November 2024 in relation to PE2112: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland. I am responding as Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise as this falls under my portfolio.

Keeping children in Scotland out of poverty is the First Minister's top priority and will remain the focus of this Government as we deliver and develop our childcare offer over the remainder of this Parliament.

The Scottish Government has made difficult choices in order to prioritise investment of almost £1 billion a year in delivering 1140 hours of high quality, funded early learning and childcare to eligible children. Scotland remains the only part of the UK that already offers 1140 hours per year of funded ELC to all 3 and 4-year-olds and around a quarter of 2-year-olds regardless of whether their parents are working or not because we are committed to promoting equality for all Scotland's children, putting their interests first. If eligible families paid for this themselves, it would cost them more than £5,500 per eligible child per year.

Over the remainder of this Parliament the Scottish Government is focused on progressing the ambitious childcare policies and commitments we have already made, within the very challenging financial circumstances we are facing as a result of budget decisions made by the UK Government. We will draw on the learning from the 1140 evaluation due in 2025 and continue to review other key sources of information about what families want and need to inform our work but are not currently planning to commission a further external review.

We remain committed to reaching more younger children with funded ELC that need it most, and the [2024 Programme for Government \(PFG\) set out that this year we will work with local authorities on a National Improvement Project](#) to maximise uptake of our existing offer for eligible two-year-olds to ensure that as many children as possible benefit from the current offer.

In addition, we are progressing our early adopter community (EAC) work in six local authorities, backed by £16 million in 2024/25 and 2025/26. This place-based, people-centred work will help Scottish Government and our local partners to understand what it takes to deliver local childcare systems that support families with children from the early years to the end of primary school, and the difference this can make in ending child poverty.

Grant offer letters for these projects have now been issued and in this current year, the EACs will focus on engagement with families with younger children for the first time to understand more about their needs and what approaches could deliver the greatest impact for families with children of different ages.

Small-scale delivery of early learning and childcare will also be established across some of the EACs. These tests of change will be a leading source of evidence and insights about the role childcare can play in supporting families most at risk of living in poverty.

The engagement and targeted delivery that takes place for younger children in our six EACs will be a key element of our developing evidence base to inform future expansion. We know that needs of younger children can be different from those of older children, and it is important that we take the time to better understand this through the work we have planned over the coming year.

For families with school age children, the evidence base from the Early Adopter Communities sits alongside learning from other targeted delivery of childcare and activities services. These currently also include Access to Childcare Fund projects and the Scottish Football Association 'Extra Time' programme. Through all these projects, we are supporting over 4500 school age children and their families to access affordable before, after school and holiday clubs.

These targeted services are aligned with wider supports to ensure that parents and carers can sustain or enter employment, and through this delivery we are evidencing how more affordable and accessible school age childcare contributes to positive outcomes for families. We are also considering what work is needed at the national level to support sustainable local delivery. An important part of this picture is understanding how families take up and use existing financial supports for childcare such as Tax-Free Childcare and the childcare element of Universal Credit.

I have written to my counterpart in the UK Government, Stephen Morgan MP, seeking a meeting about childcare and other key issues within his portfolio. Scottish Government Ministers have also written to the UK Government about the employer NICs changes, which are likely to have a significant impact on the childcare sector – and are awaiting a reply.

I would also note that Scottish Government officials are in regular contact with officials in relevant departments in the UK Government to discuss matters relating to up-take of Universal Credit, Tax Free Childcare, and other childcare policy issues.

Yours sincerely,

Natalie Don-Innes MSP

Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise

National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Scotland written submission, 5 December 2024

PE2112/G: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland

National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) is the national charity representing private, voluntary and independent (PVI) children's nurseries across the UK. We are

the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. NDNA Scotland is the national representative body for PVI nurseries in Scotland with eight networks covering 21 local authority areas.

NDNA provides information, training and advice that support nurseries and their 250,000 employees to deliver world-class early learning and childcare. Working closely with local and national government, we advise and campaign on the cost, choice and quality of childcare to benefit children, nurseries, families and the economy. NDNA Scotland support 334 PVI nurseries across Scotland.

We support Pregnant then Screwed in their petition to urge the Scottish Government to commission an independent review of publicly-funded early learning and childcare in Scotland, in order to better understand and address the challenges families face when trying to secure and afford childcare.

According to a Scottish Government survey (Scot Govt, 2022) 98% of Parents were accessing some form of funded childcare, and 73% of parents with a 3- to 5-year-old and 52% of those with a 2 year old using funded childcare. This survey does appear to show that parents find the 1140 hours policy useful to them which shows that it has been a success in terms of meeting the needs of parents returning to work, going into training and having financial support. However, this report also shows that 23% of parents were not taking up the full 1140 hours funded childcare as they could not get the sessions that they wanted at their preferred settings.

Parents also reported being dissatisfied with flexibility to match funded hours to their own working patterns to minimise the cost of top-up childcare. The Scottish Government report highlights that the majority of parents are happy with ELC however, there are still issues around flexibility, affordability, and access to places that Scottish Government need to address (Scot Govt, 2022).

The parents' campaign group, Pregnant then Screwed, Scotland say that "the major issue for many families in Scotland, and across the UK, is the accessibility and affordability of childcare. The increase in funded hours has been hugely beneficial to many parents but there still remains huge issues over costs, particularly for under 3s, and there is a growing problem with accessibility" (Pregnant then Screwed, Scotland, 2024).

The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) reported in 2023 that 22% found it difficult to access childcare in their area, with the situation being more acute in rural areas. One respondent said "So many rural schools in Aberdeenshire miles away from nursery provision so I have to drive to two disparate places and no after school provision". Their survey also revealed that 16% were unable to access funded hours due to a lack of flexibility in provision with one respondent saying, "The 30 hours does not fully cover the cost of year-round (private) nursery, and council nurseries offer term time only".

When it comes to affordability the SWBG survey showed that 30% of women did not find childcare costs manageable, this increased to 47% for single parents, 38% for women from ethnic minorities and 36% for disabled women. 74% of women said that increase in household costs were making childcare costs more difficult. The report

concludes stating that there is a long-standing problem of lack of flexibility and affordability of childcare which has been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis and is putting family finances under pressure.

NDNA Scotland are aware that throughout the UK nursery settings are closing down due to sustainability issues. Scotland is no different, as nurseries close, parental access to funded places becomes more difficult. Parents are beginning to find it difficult to find suitable places to match their childcare needs. While it is generally accepted that the aims of the 1140 hours policy are good and will benefit children and families, there is still concern for nurseries that the delivery of the policy is leading to closures due to unsustainable funding and workforce pressures.

NDNA Scotland members tell us that:

1. Sustainable funding rates do not cover the cost of delivering funded places
2. Increasing financial pressures from payment of the Real Living Wage and National Insurance Contributions
3. Local Authorities have recruited their experienced staff leaving them with either no or inexperienced staff – [NDNA reported that a SSSC report in 2023 found that the staff turnover rate is 29% in private nurseries](#), 21% in voluntary settings and 11% in public sector nurseries with 26% of managers leaving private sector settings go on to work at a practitioner level in public settings
4. Recruitment and retention is extremely difficult because PVI settings cannot compete with local authority pay and conditions of service due to unsustainable funding rates
5. Many local authorities make it challenging for settings to have cross border or blended places
6. Parents can't always get the nursery of their choice – despite the policy being provider neutral
7. Provision of Additional Support Needs and support for nurseries is sporadic across Scotland

NDNA Scotland continue to urge the Scottish Government to address these issues, particularly before any further expansion to one- and two-year-olds takes place, which could potentially further exacerbate costs and availability for parents. Without addressing these fundamental challenges costs will continue to rise for the element of childcare that is parent funded. The current model of funding is unsustainable and must be addressed going forward as this is often at the heart of many of the challenges the sector is facing.

Scottish Private Nursery Association written submission, 9 December 2024

PE2112/H: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland

I am writing to express my strong support for the petition calling for action to address the critical issues surrounding affordable childcare in Scotland. Access to affordable and quality childcare is not just a family concern but a societal and economic priority. It is vital for enabling working parents and students to achieve their professional and educational goals while ensuring their children receive high-quality care and education.

The failure of some local councils to pass the full funding for 1140 hours of free childcare onto providers is placing immense strain on nurseries. These nurseries are left with no choice but to increase their fees to cover the shortfall. Compounded by the rising costs associated with increases in the National Minimum Wage, National Insurance contributions, and upcoming statutory sick pay changes, many nurseries are struggling to remain viable.

This has a cascading effect on families, especially those from lower-income households, who are already grappling with the cost-of-living crisis. Increased nursery fees risk excluding these families from access to affordable childcare, forcing many parents to reduce their working hours or abandon their jobs altogether. Similarly, students relying on childcare support to complete their studies face insurmountable barriers to progressing their education and improving their futures.

Ensuring that providers receive adequate funding for the 1140 hours entitlement is essential. This would enable nurseries to manage operational costs without overburdening families. Without urgent intervention, the continued financial pressure on nurseries could lead to closures, further reducing the availability of childcare and increasing the crisis.

I urge policymakers to recognise the fundamental role that childcare plays in Scotland's economic and social fabric. Prioritising adequate funding for providers is not merely an expenditure but an investment in the well-being of children, the empowerment of families, and the future prosperity of our communities.

This approach aligns with the Scottish Government's commitment to children and young people, as well as its dedication to building a successful economy.

By addressing these challenges and ensuring that the full funding for the 1140 hours entitlement reaches providers, we can secure a brighter and more equitable future for Scotland's families and children.

Thank you for considering this matter with the urgency it deserves.

Connect written submission, 12 December 2024

PE2112/I: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland

In 2021 Connect conducted a survey of parents to gather their experiences of receiving their entitlement to 1140 hours of early learning and childcare, and I have included our summary and calls to action below which we believe are relevant to this petition, particularly regarding further research into how this is being realised for families.

The full survey report can be found here:

- [Connect parent/carer Early Learning and Children \(1140 hours\) Survey Report](#)

Just under one fifth of respondents say their needs are not being met by the early learning and childcare provision being offered to them. In some areas, the range and type of provision is not very varied or flexible in terms of meeting parents' and children's needs. From comments made by respondents, parental choice seems to be limited or non-existent. Connect would like to see more in-depth research to investigate to what extent the Scottish Government ambition of parental choice in early learning and childcare has been realised. Some models offered result in many funded hours being unused because they make no practical sense for families. We would welcome Audit Scotland or Scottish Government looking into this. It is imperative that provision is child-centred – families must not be forced to take excessively long hours if they don't feel it is right for their child.

Where centres pressure parents not to take up their full entitlement (e.g. by collecting children early or dropping them off late), this is clearly not acceptable and the reasons behind this (staffing, costs?) must be addressed. From the point where this policy was consulted on, Connect was concerned that families would be compelled to take up all 1140 hours when their preference was for fewer hours. This has been happening. Some local authority settings do allow informal flexibility where families take up less than their funded hours. However, the centres retain the full funding from Scottish Government. Open discussion about this needs to take place as there is a conflict between inbuilt centre costs and allowing families flexibility. Of particular concern is the fact that 23% of respondents said they were not kept informed about their child's learning or did not know if they were being kept informed. This has to change.

COSLA written submission, 16 December 2024

PE2112/J: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland

Thank you for your letter seeking COSLA's view on PE2112: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland and I would like to apologise for the delay in our response.

Last year, [COSLA published 'Getting in Early- Local Government's Role in Delivering Early Learning and Childcare'](#), which set out an overview of the role of Local Government in ELC and the key successes of the 1140 Hours expansion. Whilst I would encourage the Committee to read 'Getting in Early' in full, I would particularly highlight that we have seen continued increases in uptake of the offer of Early Learning and Childcare as well as highlighting the very high levels of parent/carer satisfaction in the Scottish Government's survey of 8,000 parents, including 97% satisfied with quality, 88% satisfied with flexibility and 97% content with accessibility of provision. This was also reflected in the ['Early learning and childcare expansion to 1140 hours: interim evaluation report'](#), published in August 2024 - which forms part of a wider evaluation strategy.

We believe the positive story around uptake, quality and flexibility, reflects the approach that is set out in [the joint COSLA/Scottish Government 'Funding Follows the Child' document](#). This sees councils consult parents and carers every two years on local ELC needs, preparing a corresponding ELC local delivery plan, and that children can access high quality funded ELC with the provider of their choice if that provider meets the criteria set out in the National Standard, has a space available, is able to offer the funded hours in line with local ELC delivery plans and has or is willing to enter into a contract with the local authority.

There also remains a range of ongoing work that Local Government is undertaking with our partners across the ELC system, including working with the Scottish Government to implement the findings of last year's '[Sustainable Rates Review](#)', support improved uptake of the 2-year-old targeted ELC offer and more effectively monitor outcomes. It is worthwhile noting that this is against a backdrop of councils facing significant financial challenges and broader demand pressures, [as set out in our Invest Locally In Scotland's Future resources](#), resulting in fewer resources to support the delivery of funded ELC.

I would note that the petition and the broader responses received by the Committee also mentioned further expansion of the ELC offer in Scotland. A number of councils are working with the Scottish Government to pilot new approaches to childcare as 'Early Adopter Communities'. COSLA is committed to working with the Scottish Government and partners across the ELC sector to consider any further expansion of childcare, noting the need for times and resources to build capacity to deliver a new offer.

In the context of strong feedback from families, a clear evaluation strategy and with wide ranging work ongoing to further strengthen ELC provision, we would be cautious about launching an independent review - noting that it would likely create uncertainty for parents/carers, providers and local authorities and has the potential to disrupt work that is underway.

Liam McArthur MSP written submission, 24 February 2025

PE2112/K: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland

I am writing to you with reference to petition PE2112: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland, which is currently under consideration.

As I understand, the petition was created by the organisation Pregnant then Screwed (PTS), who have conducted research into the financial implications of childcare for families in Scotland, finding that for an overwhelming majority, the cost of childcare meets or surpasses their total income, making working financially unviable. PTS are calling for a national inquiry into the state of early learning and childcare provision in Scotland to better understand how we can address issues of accessibility.

I know that accessibility to Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) is a problem of particular significance in my own constituency, where I have received large volumes of casework correspondence from families who are faced with considerable difficulties in arranging childcare. Many have communicated to me that it would make no financial sense for them to return to work, whilst those who do wish to make a return to work find that there are no available nursery spaces, and provision of childminding facilities is similarly scarce.

A lot of these issues, which I know are also being experienced to varying degrees across the country, are further exacerbated for those living in island communities. Many nurseries in Orkney are restricted in their capacity to offer childcare support, often as a consequence of issues around staff recruitment and retention.

A national inquiry into the cost and availability of childcare as proposed by this petition might provide a valuable opportunity to identify these key areas of difficulty for childcare providers and parents, and to review the current approach, which evidently is not working for families.

I would be grateful if the Committee could keep me updated on its work with regards to this petition, and if it might consider the points made in reference to my own constituency and island communities more broadly.

Monica Lennon MSP written submission, 14 August 2025

PE2112/L: Conduct an independent review of childcare costs and availability in Scotland

I welcome petition PE2112 submitted by the charity Pregnant then Screwed and offer some supportive comments.

An independent review of publicly funded early learning and childcare in Scotland is necessary to better understand and address the challenges families face when trying to secure and afford childcare.

The issues raised in the petition are familiar to me as an MSP for Central Scotland.

Across Scotland, countless mothers, fathers, and guardians are struggling to find affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare. For new parents, the transition back to work is often fraught with anxiety, not due to a lack of will or capability, but because the system fails to support them. The cost of childcare is frequently prohibitive, and availability is patchy at best.

Healthy children begin with good care. The early years are critical for emotional, cognitive, and physical development. When parents are forced to choose between financial stability and adequate care for their children, we all lose. The consequences ripple outward: children miss out on formative experiences, parents, particularly women, are pushed out of the workforce, and communities suffer from the strain.

The impact on women is especially stark, as this petition demonstrates. Despite progress in gender equality, the burden of childcare continues to fall disproportionately on mothers. Many women are forced to reduce their hours,

abandon career progression, or leave the workforce entirely, not because they lack ambition or talent, but because the system makes it nearly impossible to do otherwise. Being a mother should not be the kiss of death for a woman's career. Yet for too many, it is.

The petition's ask to commission an independent review of publicly-funded early learning and childcare in Scotland is reasonable. Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure good and evidence-based policy making is prioritised in the childcare sector.

The expansion of funded childcare in Scotland is welcome but we risk wasting millions of pounds in public funding if we allocate resources into a system that many report is failing. Expanding the system without identifying where the cracks are, risks placing further strain on childcare providers whilst at the same time risking public money for little benefit.

The Scottish Women's Convention 'Childcare in Scotland Survey 2024' showed that 51.5% of women stated that organising childcare had negatively impacted their mental health. This clearly shows that existing childcare provision is not responding to the needs of parents, as is. Furthermore, it is well established that there is a postcode lottery in regard to childcare, with many families paying a premium due to lack of availability and a lack of any childcare whatsoever in some areas, particularly rural communities.

The Scottish Government's response to this petition is, in my opinion, inadequate. Ministers cannot be allowed to mark their own homework and call it evaluation. The response to this petition has not identified why there are problems with early learning and childcare in Scotland. It does not explain why childcare in many parts of Scotland is both unaffordable and inaccessible for parents.

Independent and honest evaluation is invaluable to the policy-making process. Ministers should jump on this opportunity to launch a serious inquiry into childcare in Scotland, before pledging millions of pounds. This will in the long run, enable better policy making decisions and benefit both parents and children.

An independent review is not a bureaucratic exercise, it is a moral and economic imperative. We need transparency, data, and above all, action. Scotland cannot afford to sideline its families or sacrifice the potential of its women. I urge the committee to support this petition and to prioritise the needs of families who are too often left behind.