

# Thriving at two and beyond

## Improving the uptake of funded early learning and childcare for two-year-olds in Scotland.

### Executive summary

High quality early learning and childcare that provides enriching early experiences has been found to be complementary to experiences at home and has the potential to enhance children's early development. This is particularly true for children living in poverty.

Two-year-olds living in poverty in Scotland have been entitled to a funded early learning and childcare place since 2015. Yet, nearly four years on, only a third of eligible families have taken up this place. Save the Children is concerned that many young children living in poverty are therefore missing out on the significant benefits that early learning and childcare can provide.

This briefing highlights the main barriers preventing families from taking up a place and how they could be overcome. The main challenges are identifying eligible families and the lack of parental awareness and understanding. Our analysis and recommendations draw on research and evidence, and the experience of parents currently making use of the funded entitlement.

The recommendations focus on enabling families to make use of the funded place for two-year-olds living in poverty. The briefing also highlights the importance of a continued focus on strengthening the quality of provision.

We welcome recognition from Scottish Government on the need to support improved uptake and the efforts being made by local authorities and partners on this. We believe further action could be taken to enable two-year-olds living in poverty to access the offer and ensure Scottish Government meets its ambition to nearly double the uptake.

### Recommendations

#### Scottish Government

- The Scottish Government to achieve its goal of doubling uptake by 2020.
- A cross-portfolio strategy to be developed; working with partners to increase parental awareness of the offer and using other entitlements for cross-promotion.
- National guidance and training developed and delivered for professionals, such as health visitors, to discuss the entitlement with families and support them with the registration process where necessary.
- Best practice in Scotland and beyond to be shared among local authorities.
- Scottish Government to support development of alternative models as part of the funded provision.
- Scottish Government to consider whether providing alternative models of provision could be supported by extending Section 49 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 to all eligible two-year-olds.
- A continued focus on a high-quality workforce, including ensuring the additional graduate commitment is delivered in full.

## Local Government

- Councils should continue to promote the entitlement locally, particularly on the benefits of the offer.
- Councils should clearly communicate to parents the mixed forms of provision and number of hours available.

## UK Government

- The UK Government and Scottish Government to work together to identify eligible families.

### 1. Introduction

We want all young children to be supported to reach their potential. Nurturing and stimulating support in the early years – at home and in childcare settings – is consistently associated with better outcomes for children. High quality early learning and childcare that provides enriching early experiences has been found to be complementary to experiences at home and has the potential to enhance children’s early development (and this impact endures into late teens).<sup>1</sup>

The benefits of early learning and childcare from age two have been found to particularly enhance outcomes for young children living in poverty and help overcome some of the disadvantage caused by low income. Children who have experienced poverty are more likely to fall behind in meeting early learning and development milestones. Children from the most deprived areas are more than twice as likely to have a developmental concern reported during their 27 – 30 month health review, compared to their better-off peers.<sup>2</sup> Quality early learning and childcare experiences can help reduce this gap and prevent it from widening further.

We want every child to be able to access the additional benefits that early learning and childcare provides, along with support for parents to engage in their children’s learning and development. That’s why we campaigned for part-time funded early learning and childcare places, already proposed for looked after children, to be extended to children from low income households from age two. We welcomed the introduction of these places in 2015.

### 2. The issue

Four years on, young children are now benefitting from this service - a third of eligible children are now taking up their part-time place. However, we are concerned that two-thirds of eligible two-year-olds are not currently taking up their entitlement<sup>3</sup> and that families who might want to take up this place are unable to do so. Children are missing out on the benefits of this service, which can help them meet their developmental milestones and thrive. We are particularly concerned that rising numbers of families might be experiencing barriers to access given that a third of families in Scotland, where the youngest child is one or under, are living in poverty and this is set to rise further.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> E. Melhuish and J. Gardiner (2018), [Study of Early Education and Development \(SEED\): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age four years](#)

<sup>2</sup> ISD Scotland (2019), [27 – 30 month review statistics](#)

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Government (2018), [Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland](#)

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government (2018), [Every child, every chance - Annex 2](#)

The Minister for Children and Young People has acknowledged that “there is scope to improve on existing levels of uptake so that more children and families can benefit from the offer”<sup>5</sup> and invested in understanding the barriers to uptake.<sup>6</sup> As part of the funding agreement with COSLA in 2018, the Minister promised a near doubling of uptake among eligible two-year-olds (to 64% or almost two thirds of eligible children).<sup>7</sup>

We welcome this commitment to improving uptake and ensuring that more young children will benefit as a next step. We also welcome the efforts of local authorities and partners across the country who are working hard to identify children who are eligible, raise awareness and help families access the service. However, in the year since the commitment was made uptake continues to be low and has shown limited signs of improvement.<sup>8</sup> Government did not publicly set a timescale for this goal to be achieved.

A progress report on the expansion of early learning and childcare from December 2018 shows local authorities exceeding their own forecasts for uptake of eligible two-year-old places.<sup>9</sup> While encouraging, without baseline data, or a comparison to the number of eligible children, it is difficult to tell what progress is being made against the national target to double uptake. The report also notes inconsistencies in the way some councils forecasted the figures. We look forward to seeing further progress in the update due in July.

**We are calling on Scottish Government to achieve its target of doubling uptake by August 2020 and to work with partners to take further action to support families who want to take up their place to do so.** In addition, considering issues with the way data are currently collected and published,<sup>10</sup> Government should make clear how the doubling of uptake will be definitively measured.

### **3. Barriers to uptake of the entitlement**

Studies from England suggest that the more disadvantaged a family, the less likely they are to take up early years provision.<sup>11</sup> There are several key reasons which explain the low uptake and therefore where action could be taken to improve uptake, explored in more detail below.

#### **Identifying eligible children**

As the two-year-old offer is not currently universal, eligible low-income families can be identified if they are in receipt of qualifying benefits, including Income Support, Jobseeker’s Allowance, and Child Tax Credit, transitioning to Universal Credit. It has been challenging for local authorities to easily identify the eligible population, because they are not in possession of the relevant data from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Without a

---

<sup>5</sup> Maree Todd (2018), [Ministerial statement on early learning and childcare](#)

<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [Drivers and barriers to uptake of early learning and childcare among two year olds](#)

<sup>7</sup> Maree Todd (2018), [Ministerial statement on early learning and childcare](#)

<sup>8</sup> Scottish Government (2018), [Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland](#)

<sup>9</sup> Scottish Government (2018), [Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Delivery Progress](#)

<sup>10</sup> Children can be counted twice as they might be registered for more than one setting. However, those children taking up their place through a childminder are not counted in the figures.

<sup>11</sup> S. Speight, E. Lloyd and R. Maisey (2010), [Towards universal early years provision: Analysis of take-up by disadvantaged families from recent annual childcare surveys](#)



record of eligible families, councils are unable to ensure all those entitled are made aware of the provision.

The Minister has written to the UK Government to ask for changes to Regulations, which would create the facilitation of a 'legal gateway' to facilitate data sharing between the DWP, HMRC, Scottish Government and local authorities.<sup>12</sup> In October 2016, the Scottish Government set out in its blueprint for the ELC expansion that "we will continue to explore options through UK legislation to enable the sharing of data by DWP and HMRC to allow local authorities to identify eligible families."<sup>13</sup> It is therefore disappointing that limited progress has been made on this action, which was due for completion by the end of March 2018, and seems to be causing similar issues across a number of policy areas.<sup>14</sup>

### **Recommendations:**

- The UK Government and Scottish Government should work together to share data between the DWP, HMRC and Scottish local authorities as a matter of priority, so that eligible two-year-olds can be identified and targeting of the offer can be improved.
- Until this is achieved, Scottish Government should explore how cross-promotion with other entitlements could boost uptake e.g. families who are eligible for Best Start Grant payments and might also be eligible for funded childcare (discussed in further detail below).
- Councils should continue to promote the entitlement locally and establish the best means to do so. Local agencies and services that work directly with families, including the DWP, should also play their part in communicating the offer.

### **Parental awareness**

Qualitative research commissioned by the Scottish Government examined the drivers and barriers to the uptake of funded hours among families with eligible two-year-olds.<sup>15</sup> The study found that a fifth of all parents were not using the entitlement because of a lack of awareness of the offer. This was echoed in Scottish Government's more recent evaluation of progress on the ELC expansion.<sup>16</sup>

Since eligibility was expanded to families in receipt of qualifying benefits, the Scottish Government and local authorities have advertised the provision through a range of posters and leaflets, and on social media. Local authorities have also written to parents of two-year-olds who might be eligible and are working with a range of professional groups to promote the offer. It's difficult to tell what extent the promotion activity is having the desired impact. We are aware of instances where families have heard about the offer, they are not clear about the eligibility criteria. As one parent told us: *"There is that perception that it's only for kids that have social work involvement – I don't have social work involvement, but my child comes here."*

The same qualitative research indicated that the most effective way for families to find out about the provision was based on word of mouth from someone trusted, such as a relative, friend or

<sup>12</sup> Maree Todd (2018), [Letter from the Minister for Childcare and Early Years](#)

<sup>13</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland: Quality Action Plan](#)

<sup>14</sup> Shirley-Anne Sommerville (2019), [Letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People](#)

<sup>15</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [Drivers and barriers to uptake of early learning and childcare among two year olds](#)

<sup>16</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare: Evaluation Report](#)



professional, rather than through advertising alone. The Minister herself has noted that word of mouth has been one of the main ways in which families have found out about and made use of the provision.<sup>17</sup> This should continue to be supported and encouraged and reflects consistent findings from research that families living in poverty find out about services from trusted sources.

As noted in Audit Scotland's report, health visitors and family nurses can build positive relationships and play an important role in signposting other services and benefits to low-income families, such as the new Best Start Grant payments.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, those services and benefits should also drive uptake of early learning and childcare. One parent said: *"They [health visitors] could tell you any time from when they're one because they do the 12 month check up, and 18 months, so why is there not information for that? Because they know as soon as that child's two years old they're gonna be eligible."*

It is important to ensure that as more parents become aware of the offer, they are supported to apply. Nearly 10% of eligible parents who do not use funded ELC said that they did not know how to apply for funded childcare or found the process too difficult.<sup>19</sup> Those working with families should be able to support this and the process should be as simple as possible.

It has been encouraging to see the Scottish Government's Children and Young People Improvement Collaborative (CYPIC) developing an improvement package for local authorities aimed at increasing the uptake of eligible two-year-old places. The pack covers topics including raising parental awareness of the offer. This has initially been tested by the Scottish Borders Council with wider testing due. CYPIC is also currently taking nine local authorities through a nine-month practicum to identify and implement improvement aims to drive uptake. Best practice from this initiative should be shared not just among those taking part but across all local authorities.

There is currently a great deal of activity to promote awareness of the offer. This should be supported, and the best approaches should be shared between local areas. Scottish Government and local authorities should also look beyond Scotland to learn from examples of good practice. The Mayor of London, for instance, has recently announced funding for 11 organisations that are running innovative local projects to boost awareness of the two-year-old offer in England among families and communities.<sup>20</sup> This follows the publication of figures which show below average uptake across London.<sup>21</sup>

## **Recommendations:**

- In the development of its new parental communication strategy, Scottish Government should involve education, health, social security, and other relevant portfolios to raise awareness of the entitlement and drive uptake.
- The registration process should be made as straightforward as possible.
- National guidance and training for professionals should be developed and integrated with current pathways and workloads. Practitioners such as health visitors and family nurses

<sup>17</sup> Maree Todd (2018), [Ministerial statement on early learning and childcare](#)

<sup>18</sup> Audit Scotland (2018), [Early learning and childcare](#)

<sup>19</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare: Evaluation Report](#)

<sup>20</sup> Mayor of London, [London Early Years Campaign](#), [last accessed: 12 April 2019].

<sup>21</sup> Mayor of London (2019), [Early Years in London](#)

should be equipped with the appropriate knowledge to discuss the entitlement with families, including support with the registration process.

- Peer-to-peer engagement on the benefits of the funded entitlement for parents and their children should be encouraged. This could be facilitated by supporting face-to-face and online interactions between families or disseminating case studies through promotional materials.
- Best practice from the Children and Young People Improvement Collaborative's improvement package and practicum should be shared with local authorities across Scotland, and other examples of good practice to drive parental awareness should be examined.

### **Understanding the benefits of the provision**

As the evidence demonstrates, an early learning and childcare place can bring huge benefits to children living in poverty. By removing structural barriers and increasing parental awareness, parents will be able to make more informed choices about the offer. However, there currently seems to be a lack of clarity about the purpose and benefits of the provision, particularly for early language development. This means parents are not able to make fully informed decisions about whether to make use of the entitlement.

An Ipsos MORI study commissioned by Scottish Government found that a large proportion of parents who use the funded entitlement did so because they felt it would be beneficial for their child's learning and development and were positive about the provision.<sup>22</sup> One parent we spoke to talked about the benefits she has seen for her child: *"She only started last September, and everybody can see the difference. [...] it's so good for her. So yeah, I have said to other people about it, and I would recommend it."*

This does not simply imply that all parents would take up the offer if they were aware of it. Further work must be done to inform parents of the advantages of early learning and childcare for their child. There is growing evidence of the cognitive and socio-emotional developmental benefits of early learning and childcare for children between the ages of two and three.<sup>23</sup> These must be communicated to eligible families in a clear and accessible manner. The Mayor of London's Early Years Campaign, for example, describes children attending childcare as "playing, learning, and making friends."<sup>24</sup> The Department for Education in England has also launched a campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of free childcare, with a focus on lower-income families.<sup>25</sup> In a series of case study videos, families discuss how the entitlement has supported them and their child. Even with such informative campaigns on the benefits of childcare, parents may still prefer not to take up the place for their two-year-old. What is of utmost importance is that families are able to make a choice with all the information at their disposal.

Lack of knowledge about the benefits of early learning and childcare is coupled with the concern of many parents that their child is not yet physically and emotionally equipped to enter a formal childcare setting, such as a nursery. Moreover, many parents report feeling anxious about their

---

<sup>22</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [Drivers and barriers to uptake of early learning and childcare among two year olds](#)

<sup>23</sup> E. Melhuish, J. Gardiner & S. Morris (2017), [Study of Early Education and Development \(SEED\): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to Age Three](#)

<sup>24</sup> Mayor of London, [London Early Years Campaign](#), [last accessed: 12 April 2019].

<sup>25</sup> Department for Education, [30 hours free childcare campaign](#), [last accessed: 3 June 2019].





child spending extended periods of time away from the family home in a new environment and with older children. In a Scottish Government survey, nearly a quarter of parents who didn't use the entitlement said it was because they felt their child was too young – the most commonly given reason.<sup>26</sup>

We know that the childcare expansion to 600 hours saw lower than anticipated uptake among eligible two-year-olds. The further increase in funded hours to 1,140 hours should therefore not act as a deterrent for families with eligible children. In a recent survey, 15% of parents surveyed with an eligible two-year-old said they would use some but not all of the additional hours, whilst 18% said they would not use any of the additional entitlement.<sup>27</sup> There should be clear communication to parents that part-time places can still be accessed and that the full entitlement does not need to be taken, particularly as concerns about two-year-olds spending extended periods of time away from home are prevalent.

The Care Inspectorate has noted that some local authorities are now commissioning a wide range of services for two-year-olds, rather than just extending in-house provision.<sup>28</sup> Given some parents' concern about their child entering a large nursery setting with groups of other, older children, families should be made aware of the range of services available. Beyond nurseries, services (including childminders) and family centres could form part of the provision. Some local authorities have been offering a blended model where children receive their funded entitlement from two different providers, for instance a nursery and childminder. This could help to make the provision more appealing to parents as they can choose services which best suit their needs, so local authorities should ensure families are aware of the range of options on offer.

In some areas, there has also been more mixed two-year-old provision with eligible two-year-olds in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings alongside paying families or allowing paid for two-year-olds to use local authority settings. This has helped to encourage more socially mixed groups, reduce stigma and ease concerns about two-year-olds in settings largely dominated by older children.

Other models have also proved popular among families but are only offered where there is alternative funding. Models like 'Stay, Play and Learn sessions' show promise, enabling parents to attend a service with their child and helping to counter parents' concerns that they are spending too much time apart.<sup>29</sup> These models also enable parents to become familiar and build trust with the staff and setting, whilst building parental skills and confidence which can lead to an improved focus on learning at home, itself a key driver of children's early learning outcomes. The additional hours offered through the childcare expansion provide an opportunity for more creative and direct support for parents to support their child's learning and development at home, alongside a nursery place for the child. This could be delivered in partnership with professional groups who are skilled in working with families, for example community learning and development, providing role-modelling, tips and activities for home.

---

<sup>26</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare: Evaluation Report 2017](#)

<sup>27</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare: Evaluation Report 2017](#)

<sup>28</sup> Care Inspectorate (2016), [Scotland's early learning and childcare – an initial overview of the expansion of provision during 2014/15](#)

<sup>29</sup> Early Years Scotland, [Working with Children and Families](#), [last accessed: 24 January 2019].



Scottish Government should consider whether providing alternative models of provision, such as Stay, Play and Learn sessions, could be supported by extending Section 49 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 to all eligible two-year-olds. At present, these powers only apply to looked after children but have the potential to also enable low-income families get the support they need. We believe that it is worth considering whether this power could help support the desired outcomes to support children's early learning and development.

### **Recommendations:**

- There should be clear communication about the expansion to 1,140 hours – parents should feel empowered to take up a part-time place and as much or as little of the entitlement as they would like. It should also be made clear that mixed forms of provision are available, for instance attending a nursery session and alternative models where parents are present.
- Scottish Government should support development of alternative models such as 'Stay, Play and Learn' to form part of the funded provision.
- Further promotion should be carried out through a number of channels (as listed above) to make clear the benefits of the offer to parents and their child, and therefore encourage eligible families to take up their places.
- Scottish Government should consider whether providing alternative models of provision could be supported by extending Section 49 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 to all eligible two-year-olds.

### **Quality of provision**

This briefing has focused on uptake of the two-year old offer for low-income families. Improving the uptake of eligible two-year-olds alone will not necessarily secure improve outcomes for children and help to close the poverty-related gap in early learning and development. This must be accompanied by a drive to continue to strengthen quality across settings. Research shows that the higher the quality of provision, the greater the impact on children's cognitive development and outcomes.<sup>30</sup>

Save the Children has been calling for the quality of provision to be strengthened through the childcare expansion. There has been a welcome commitment to quality by Scottish Government, who identified it as the "golden thread" running through plans for the expansion and subsequently developed a further action plan focused on quality.<sup>31</sup>

Local authorities are currently the main provider of the funded entitlement for eligible two-year-olds. Inspections have shown, however, that not all provision is of the highest possible quality. A 2017 Care Inspectorate report revealed that the care provided for two-year-olds could be improved in a fifth of early learning and childcare settings.<sup>32</sup> The findings showed that the size of groups of children, and the skills, knowledge and experience of staff were the two most significant factors, which affected the standard of quality. The near doubling of the entitlement by Scottish Government should therefore be used as an opportunity to ensure quality is embedded in the provision.

<sup>30</sup> GUS (2014), [Characteristics of pre-school provision and their association with child outcomes](#)

<sup>31</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [Quality Action Plan](#)

<sup>32</sup> Care Inspectorate (2017), [Scotland's Early Learning and Childcare – Report on the progress of expanded provision during 2015-16](#)



## Workforce

Research indicates there are several key drivers of quality in early learning and childcare. One of the most significant is the quality of the workforce, particularly linked to level of educational qualifications, knowledge and experience. Studies have shown that the better the quality of the workforce, the higher the quality of provision, particularly for children aged between two and a half and compulsory school age.<sup>33</sup>

Scottish Government has recognised the importance of a high-quality workforce. As the entitlement is promoted and the number of hours expand, local authority staff are increasingly working with eligible two-year-olds. The workforce does not have the same level of experience working with this age group. The Scottish Government's Quality Action Plan recognises this, stating that "recent reports by the Care Inspectorate (2017) and Education Scotland (2017) have highlighted the need to strengthen CPL [continuous professional learning], particularly for those working with eligible two-year-olds."<sup>34</sup> The plan commits to creating and delivering an online national programme of continuous professional learning that will be available to all early learning and childcare providers and will be centrally co-ordinated and funded. This programme must include CPL with a focus on supporting staff to meet the needs of eligible two-year olds.

The Plan also commits to strengthening the content of Building the Ambition, which provides national practice guidance to support staff in providing high quality early learning and childcare.<sup>35</sup> The commitment includes providing more guidance on supporting eligible two-year olds with their transition to the setting and minimising the risk of stigmatisation. While this is welcome, progress on this guidance must be prioritised to ensure children benefit as soon as possible.

Eligible two-year-olds are likely to benefit from the commitment to 435 additional graduate-level practitioners in settings in the most disadvantaged areas. A progress report at the end of November 2018 indicated that only 325 full time equivalent additional graduates were in post. Scottish Government should support local authorities to overcome any barriers to recruitment, so that this commitment is fully met soon.<sup>36</sup> Children experiencing poverty do not always live in the most deprived areas so while the additional graduate commitment is welcome, there must also be a focus on ensuring a high-quality workforce is in place across Scotland.

### **Recommendations:**

- There should be faster progress on ensuring a high-quality workforce equipped with the right skills and knowledge to support eligible two-year-olds.
- Scottish Government should ensure the additional graduate commitment is delivered in full as soon as possible.

### **Conclusion**

All children, and particularly those living in poverty, stand to benefit from attending high quality early learning and childcare. Yet the very children that could benefit most from the provision are

---

<sup>33</sup> B. Janta, J. van Belle & K. Stewart (2016), [Quality and impact of Centre-based Early Childhood Education and Care](#)

<sup>34</sup> Scottish Government (2017), [A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland: Quality Action Plan](#)

<sup>35</sup> Scottish Government (2014), [Building the Ambition](#)

<sup>36</sup> Scottish Government (2018), [Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Delivery Progress Report](#)



missing out, with two thirds of eligible two-year-olds not accessing their funded place. Despite laudable aims by Scottish Government to nearly double the uptake, it is not yet clear that there is sufficient action to deliver on this promise.

As this briefing sets out, there are a number of reasons which might explain the low uptake, including issues with identifying eligible children, low parental awareness and limited understanding of the offer. Scottish Government and partners must take additional steps to drive uptake, as well as strengthen the quality of provision, so that two-year-olds can overcome early disadvantages and thrive. Lack of progress in this area will jeopardise Scottish Government's overarching ambition to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

### **Further information**

Please get in touch if you would like further information.

Contact Francesca de Munnich - Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns Officer  
0131 527 8205  
[F.deMunnich@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:F.deMunnich@savethechildren.org.uk)