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Education, Children and Young People Committee

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14 August 2024

Dear Committee Members

Publication of Early Learning and Childcare Expansion: Interim Evaluation Report

I am writing to notify the Committee of the publication of an Interim Evaluation Report on the ELC Expansion on 14 August 2024.

Background

The Committee is already aware of the Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy for the ELC Expansion, published by the Scottish Government's Chief Social Researcher in October 2022. The evaluation strategy is outcomes-based, with a primary focus on measuring outcomes for children, parents and carers, and families. It outlines that in order to achieve its high-level outcomes, the ELC expansion programme needs to realise intermediate outcomes of maximising take up of expanded ELC, especially among families who will benefit most. Further, to achieve its outcomes, expanded ELC needs to be high quality, sufficiently flexible and accessible and to increase access to affordable ELC. Finally, expanded ELC services need to support parental confidence and capacity.

The main data source for the evaluation of the ELC expansion programme is the Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare (SSELC), which has been commissioned externally. This is a major, multi-year study which takes a 'before and after' approach, that allows exploration of outcomes as policy initiatives are implemented. The study has been designed to evaluate whether the ELC expansion programme has achieved its objectives by measuring outcomes for children and parents receiving the previous funded entitlement (to 600 hours) and comparing them with those who received the increased entitlement (1140 hours). Fieldwork is still underway, with findings expected in late 2025.

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Interim Evaluation

The main evaluation outputs set out in the Strategy were an Interim Report in 2024 and a Final Evaluation Report in late 2025. The Final Evaluation Report will present findings from analysis of all the research and data relating to the ELC expansion. As fieldwork is still underway (through the Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare) it is too early to draw conclusions on the impact of the expansion on the high-level outcomes.

The Interim Evaluation Report therefore focuses on evaluating the ‘intermediate outcomes’ of accessibility, affordability, quality and flexibility. It provides an evidence-based picture of how things stood in the initial period after the full statutory implementation of the expansion, and how that compares to the preceding years. It also considers existing data on trends in outcomes for pre-school age children and findings from research with parents on perceptions of the impact of the expansion.

The Report draws together mainly published data from the ELC Census, Care Inspectorate statistics, Scottish Social Services Council statistics, Improvement Service reports, the Scottish Household Survey and surveys of parents about ELC. Most of the data is not new, however this is the first time it has been drawn together in this way to provide a holistic view of progress. I have provided a brief summary of key findings below, however I would encourage the Committee to take the time to read the full report, which is available [here](#).

Findings

The interim report draws evidence from a range of sources and finds promising signs that the expansion is delivering accessibility, affordability, flexibility and quality. In particular:

- 90% of children accessing funded ELC are using the full entitlement of 1140 hours;
- In 2022, 63% of families with a child aged two to five and not yet at school stated that they had no childcare costs, an increase from 50% in 2018;
- The proportion of settings providing funded ELC operating outside school hours and/or during school holidays increased from 50% in 2016 to 64% in 2022, although the report includes new analysis showing wide variation at local authority level;
- In 2022, 88% of parents with a 3 to 5 year old were satisfied with the flexibility they have been offered to use their funded hours in a way that meets their family’s needs;
- Around 90% of settings delivering funded ELC are achieving gradings of ‘good’ or better across all four key questions in Care Inspectorate quality evaluations.

While these findings are encouraging and reflect the significant work undertaken by local authorities and ELC providers across Scotland to prepare for and then implement the ELC expansion in August 2021, the report also highlights some variation in the experience of families across Scotland when accessing funded ELC, along with the significant changes the childcare sector and workforce have experienced over the course of the expansion.

It is clear that there is more to do to achieve our ambition of a diverse, thriving and sustainable childcare sector where children and families are able to access high quality, flexible funded ELC that supports improved outcomes and works for their family circumstances. The Committee should be assured that I am alive to the issues raised by this Report and ongoing concerns raised by childcare sector representatives and remain fully committed to working with the sector and our partners in local government to further improve funded ELC delivery and safeguard Scotland’s childcare sector.

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Yours Sincerely,

NATALIE DON-INNES
Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise

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