

Expansion of funded early learning and childcare to 1140 hours: 2018-2025 national outcomes evaluation'

Introduction

UNISON members work in a variety of roles to deliver early learning and childcare (ELC) to Scotland's youngest children. The Scottish Government has published 'Expansion of funded early learning and childcare to 1140 hours: 2018-2025 national outcomes evaluation', an evaluation of the expansion of funded childcare for 3 and 4 year olds (and eligible 2 year olds) from 600 to 1140 hours.

The evaluation found that the expansion has been positive for parental employment, but did not find that the expansion of hours made a significant difference in outcomes for children, nor in closing the poverty-related child development gap. The expansion has brought a significant increase in the workforce, but there are still concerns about the pay, status and working conditions of the staff delivering this essential public service. This briefing summarises the evaluation and its key findings, and highlights issues for ELC support workers, practitioners, and leads, in the expansion to 1140 hours.

Context

The expansion of funded ELC aimed to improve outcomes for children, help parents and carers get into work or study, and improve family wellbeing. A key aim of the expansion was also to tackle the poverty-related child development gap. ELC is increasingly being tasked with providing the foundations of a thriving society. As the workers responsible for laying these foundations, ELC workers must be given status and pay commensurate with this responsibility.

Uptake and delivery

The evaluation showed that take up of funded ELC is nearly universal for three-and four-year-olds. While there is no definitive data on the number of hours families are using, but the evaluation estimates that most three- to five-year-olds are using the full 1140 hours, while around 70% of two-year-olds are using the full entitlement. The evaluation shows the value of publicly delivered childcare. In 2024, 93% of public sector settings delivering funded ELC were rated as good or better, compared with 87% of third sector and 81% of private sector settings.

Outcomes

The evaluation found limited evidence for progress on children's outcomes that the ELC expansion set out to improve.

- The proportion of ELC leavers with no social, behavioural and emotional difficulties decreased since the expansion, from 85% to 78%
- There was no evidence for progress on children's cognitive and language development since the expansion, and mixed evidence on social, behavioural and emotional development



POLICY BRIEFING

KEY POINTS:

- **Evaluation of expansion of ELC finds public sector delivers highest quality services**
- **ELC workers' status and pay has not kept pace with the increased recognition of the importance of ELC for children and families**
- **There is no evidence that the expansion to 1140 hours has narrowed the poverty-related child development gap**



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- The proportion of ELC leavers with no social, behavioural and emotional difficulties decreased since the expansion, from 85% to 78%

These findings are broadly consistent with data over the same period which links declines in children's outcomes to the effects of the pandemic.

There was no evidence for a closing of the poverty-related gap in child development outcomes since the expansion of funded ELC. Figures from Public Health Scotland published in April showed that this gap remains persistent. There was however evidence of an increase in the proportion of mothers using funded ELC who are in employment, training, or full-time education since the expansion.

The workforce

The numbers of staff employed in early learning and childcare in Scotland has increased since expansion. Data from the Scottish Social Services Council show that the funded ELC workforce has increased by 43% since before the expansion. The public sector's share of this workforce has increased from 49% in 2016 to 57% in 2024.

All local authority ELC workers are paid at least the real living wage. The report shows that in 2016, pre-expansion, around 80% of practitioners in private and third sector ELC settings were paid below the real Living Wage. In 2023, post expansion, 81% of private and third sector ELC providers reported that they paid the real Living Wage to either all staff or to staff delivering funded ELC. While this is a welcome shift, no staff member delivering childcare and specialist early years services should be paid less than the real living wage. The real living wage itself doesn't reflect how specialist and complex this work, and it is unacceptable that any staff member involved in delivering childcare and vital specialist early years services is being paid even less than this. This also shows that public sector delivers the best wages for staff, as well as the best quality care for children.

The evaluation does not adequately highlight the demands placed on early years workers. Early years workers are tasked with developing and caring for children in the vital early years, which the Scottish government has increasingly recognised as a vital time in a child's life. This recognition has not come with sufficient improvements in the status or terms and conditions of ELC workers.

UNISON approach

Childcare should be delivered by the public sector and should be free at the point of access. ELC is the workers who deliver it. As with other areas of work predominately done by women, for too long, the skills and knowledge involved in working in ELC have been underpaid and undervalued. ELC workers are also expected to do increasingly complex and specialist tasks, without the time and resources to do them. These workers must be given appropriate status and pay that reflects the complexity and importance of this work, and must have protected learning time, and time 'off the floor' to complete essential reports built into their working week.

Action for branches

- Circulate this briefing to your members working in ELC
- This briefing can be used as part of recruitment materials for branches in education and ELC, and can be shared on social media
- Make sure your branch is represented by a delegate at the UNISON Education Issues Group

Additional reading

- [Expansion of funded early learning and childcare to 1140 hours: 2018-2025 national outcomes evaluation](#)
- [UNISON Scotland briefing: Early Learning and Childcare: 1140 hours expansion](#)
- [Public Health Scotland statistics: Early child development Scotland 2024 to 2025](#)
- [UNISON Scotland response Survey: The Development of Children and Young People National Occupational Standards SCQF 6,7 and 9](#)



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