A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland

The Open University in Scotland response to the Scottish Government consultation

Background

The Scottish Government is expanding the entitlement to free early learning and childcare provision. This expansion has various implications for how that provision is made available and the Government launched a consultation to get views on some of these. What follows is The OU response to those questions to which we thought we could usefully contribute, as submitted via https://consult.scotland.gov.uk.

**Question 1:** How do we ensure children are fully supported at the transition stages throughout their early-learner journey? What support should be provided to ensure that the ELC workforce and teachers have the skills, knowledge and capacity to support transitions?

Appropriate learning as part of initial training and suitable continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities are central to ensuring that children are well supported through transitions. Different children have different needs and so a broad range of skills are necessary. There should be proactive collaboration between different settings, with parental understanding and input, in order to manage transitions. The definition of ‘transition’ should be drawn broadly in order to include horizontal transitions (for example, to another room) as well as vertical transitions into older age group settings.

**Question 2:** What support is required to ensure that the ELC workforce have the skills, knowledge and capacity to deliver high quality provision for two year olds? How can the ELC sector best meet the specific learning, developmental and environmental needs of two year olds? What approach should be taken on the transition for these children when they turn three?

As noted, different children have different needs. This is true in respect of age, but also within age groups. A broad skills base is therefore necessary throughout the workforce. Within initial training and CPD there should be a focus on supporting language development and personal care, as well as developing communication and problem-solving skills. Supporting the workforce to develop and maintain productive relationships with parents would also be beneficial.

**Question 3:** How can the qualification routes and career paths that are open to early learning and childcare practitioners be developed to ensure that the ELC sector is seen as an attractive long-term career route?

Clear pathways with multiple appropriate stages are necessary. For example, there should be a route from vocational qualifications into academic qualifications. Flexibility and ease of progression through and between qualification routes and career paths and collaboration between learning providers could make the ELC sector more attractive as a long-term career route, particularly for those who may have been out of education for a longer period of time. An emphasis on quality in learning provision will enhance confidence in and respect for the necessary qualifications. Additionally, an additional stage between practitioner (SCQF7) and lead practitioner / manager (SCQF9) may prove attractive to those who consider the gap between these existing categories to be too large.

A clearer ELC practitioner identity and consistent terminology may also be advantageous.
**Question 4:** How can we increase the diversity of the ELC workforce, in particular increasing the gender balance in the sector?

Flexible modes of study in relation to qualification will make the profession more accessible to different demographics and people from different backgrounds. The development of a clear ELC professional identity and career pathway may also be attractive to new and returning entrants, as well as existing staff. Marketing, sector ambassadors and case studies utilising relevant role models as part of a broader recruitment drive should be considered. Partnerships with third party networks, including youth and community organisations, as well as education providers, may extend the reach of recruitment. Specific action intended to recognise, upskill and recruit childminders may prove worthwhile.

**Question 6:** What actions should be taken to support increased access to outdoor learning, exercise and play?

Specific CPD regarding outdoor learning could be developed drawing on forest school pedagogy and practices as well as Nordic pedagogy. It could be a registration requirement that all settings can provide outdoor learning and play opportunities (which may in some cases need to be facilitated through partnerships with owners of appropriate spaces, such as schools), including the provision of suitable clothing so that children can access the outdoors regardless of the Scottish weather. There could also be a greater emphasis in qualifications at all levels on understanding of the importance of movement and physical development for children’s learning and wider wellbeing.

**Question 8:** What factors must be considered in delivering flexible ELC provision, while continuing to ensure a high quality service? To what extent could funded ELC support parents and carers with non-standard working hours, such as working shifts and weekends?

ELC providers often struggle to release staff in order to participate in learning, particular when this is in respect of daytime provision during the standard working week. This problem can be largely alleviated by the adoption of flexible modes of study, including part-time and distance learning. Additionally, suitable training opportunities must be available for ELC staff working in settings offering non-standard hours provision. Training providers need to acknowledge and address the constraints which practitioners have in accessing training and CPD opportunities, especially if they work extended days and weekends. Increased flexibility for training needs to be provided so those living in rural and remote areas, those working extended days and weekends, and those combining work with family responsibilities can participate. This may involve more part-time, distance learning and flexible learning, as well as an emphasis on the importance of the ability to transfer credit from one learning provider to another. This latter point may be especially important for practitioners returning to the sector.

**Question 10:** What more can we do to promote and support the involvement of childminders in the entitlement to ELC? What are the barriers, if any, to becoming a childminder? How can we ensure quality while preserving the unique value of home-based care?

It is important to recognise the contribution made by childminders and to create a skills/qualification pathway to develop their skills and knowledge as appropriate. It has also been suggested that childminder provision is valued particularly highly in certain contexts, for example in rural areas. There may be scope for the development of a specific qualification, potentially vocational, which recognises childminders’ position as both ELC practitioners and, usually, small business owners. Given this dual role, flexibility of learning provision will be essential to fit with existing commitments.
**Question 11:** How do we ensure that the voice of children and their families is heard as we plan this expansion?

A culture of listening and the utilisation of relational pedagogies underpinned by listening should be a core part of ELC training and CPD. Ongoing engagement by both providers and policymakers with parent and family representative groups and organisations is critical.

**Question 12:** How can we ensure equality of access for all children? What barriers do children with disabilities and additional support needs currently face in accessing early learning and childcare? What further action is required to address these barriers?

Training and CPD must account for children with different needs and from different backgrounds. Given the focus on narrowing the gap in communication and problem solving skills between children of different socio-economic backgrounds at the point of entry to the school system, focus needs to be on effective strategies for developing these areas of language and cognitive development. Practitioners must also be equipped with the skills to deal with children who speak English as an additional language.

**Question 18:** How can ELC providers, particularly private and third sector providers, be encouraged to extend capacity?

ELC providers should support their staff to achieve qualifications, including through flexible working, facilitating peer learning and support, and accommodating learning provision on-site.

**Question 20:** If it were possible for aspects of the entitlement to be phased in ahead the full roll out by 2020, how should this be implemented?

A well-trained and qualified workforce is the foundation on which the expansion of ELC provision must be built. In order to expand the ELC workforce by up to 20,000 people, flexible and accessible education provision will be critical. Consideration should be given to a range of modes of delivery in order to ensure that qualifications are accessible to a broad spectrum of prospective students, including older learners and those in rural and remote communities. We would anticipate that this would include part-time and distance learning. Recruitment and retention of prospective, existing and returning practitioners will be enhanced by a clear and accessible training and CPD offering, underpinned by a variety of modes of learning provision to fit in with practitioners’ work, location, experience and other commitments. The training and CPD offering must be prioritised in order to enable the growth of the workforce.

**For more information**

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