



Early Years Scotland (EYS) aims to help enrich the lives of our youngest children from pre-birth to five years of age. Our work can be distilled into four key strands:

1. Working directly with children and families experiencing challenges in communities and in prisons; encouraging bonding, attachment and parental engagement through shared play and learning experiences.
2. Providing membership support services to early learning and childcare settings, both regulated and unregulated, playgroups, parent and toddler groups, early years professionals/childminders, students and other organisations and individuals.
3. Creating and delivering high-quality online and in-person professional learning courses and events to help equip the early years workforce, and anyone who supports young children, with the very best skills and knowledge.
4. Engaging with government and regulatory bodies to reflect the views and concerns of our members, and to help influence and shape early years policy and practice.

EYS fully understands the importance of positive early years experiences and are utterly committed to promoting this through every aspect of our work. While we know that the committed, qualified, and talented early years workforce provide dedicated care and learning which shape the lives of our youngest children, their value is not recognised in the same way in either financial or wider societal terms. Early years is frequently excluded from discussions around education and is very much still a 'Cinderella service', carrying out a high volume of important work with what feels like little to no recognition nationally for such an important role.

EYS believes that in discussing the future of Scottish education, the voices, experiences, and ideas of our early years sector absolutely must be but woven into the fabric of future plans. A plethora of international evidence clearly demonstrates the importance of positive early years experiences in supporting children's overall learning and development, prevention of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), narrowing of the pervasive poverty-related attainment gap and their future life chances overall.

We believe that all children deserve the best possible start in life to enable them to thrive and reach their potential. We are aware, however, that some children are born into difficult circumstances which can have a harmful impact on their life chances. Poor

living conditions, unemployment, parental imprisonment, and physical and mental health problems are just some of the issues that can create a stressful home environment, and potentially prevent a child establishing a strong, loving bond with their parents/carers.

Realising the Ambition: Being Me, states

“We will always be doing the right thing if we are aware of each child’s development and are providing interactions and opportunities that match the needs of the child. We also need to be mindful of the fundamental role of the parent as caregiver and as the child’s first educator.”

Developing the relationship between parent and child is a key focus of our services and within the wide range of our members’ settings nationally. Early Years Practitioners within our Stay Play and Learn services promote positive communication and social skills in children and parents through modelling consistent, positive behaviours. In line with the ‘Growing Up in Scotland’ study’s findings that the home learning environment is crucial for young children’s development and later educational achievement, our practitioners also demonstrate the benefits of simple, low/no cost activities, encouraging parents/carers to prepare materials and replicate activities at home.

EYS takes a ‘whole family’ approach to our service provision, bringing together parents/carers and other family members together with children, encouraging them to learn and grow together via our Stay Play and Learn model. This approach helps build parents’ awareness and understanding of their children’s learning and development, and increases their levels of confidence, knowledge, skills, motivation, and communication. It boosts their capacity to appreciate the importance of engagement, attachment, relationships, and their responsiveness to their children. It promotes effective, positive approaches to managing behaviour. It decreases social isolation, and it provides opportunities for much needed peer support.

EYS believes that there should be more focus on family support and family learning from pre-birth to 5 years.

“Bonding’ tends to be used to describe the parent’s relationship to the child. Although attachment is significant throughout a child’s lifespan, the early attachment process can have a life-long impact on how children deal with change and uncertainty.”

Realising the Ambition: Being Me

Consideration should be given to the expansion of 1140 hours to 1- and 2-year-olds, with more of a focus on family support services within ELC.

EYS also firmly believes that young children learn best through play and that play-based pedagogy should not cease once a child leaves their ELC setting. Play is a fundamental part of children’s learning and development, and children develop their cognitive, emotional, social, and physical capacities through play.

The short video we have produced accompanying this written response¹ demonstrates children carrying out a range of play-based activities which, as well as being great fun, are teaching them skills and providing experiences which they will take with them into older childhood, adolescence and beyond. For example, a child choosing to jump in a muddy puddle isn't just splashing. They are learning about risk, about nature and the seasons, cause and effect, and they are exercising and creating memories. Doing a puzzle or building a tower requires problem solving skills, drawing a picture helps children to recognise and learn about colours and shape formation and enhances their fine motor skills. Games encourage teamwork, turn taking, and the list goes on.

The value of learning through play cannot be overstated and is something which needs to be recognised not only at ELC level, but into the school environment as part of a child's transition process. Play is a vital part of a child's development, however the move from ELC into primary school can often mean that this important way of learning is often curtailed or offered in more structured ways. As Froebel states, *"..play at this time is not trivial, it is highly serious and of deep significance."*

Transitions

It is extremely important that transitions within education are carried out effectively and are designed to support children and young people move from one phase in their learning journey to the next. For our youngest children, the transition from their ELC setting – whether that's a nursery, childminder or playgroup – marks a significant change in their young lives. They are moving from an environment where they learn through play and practice that supports and promotes child-led approaches. Where children are encouraged to be outdoors as often as possible and have the freedom to choose the activities they want to carry out on a daily basis, to a more formal, desk-based environment where they perhaps are not afforded the same freedoms they are used to. They are expected to adjust to a space and a new environment that is often more structured and 'formal'. Children moving from a nursery environment, where they will likely be used to more than one adult within their playroom, is in stark contrast to a classroom where, more often than not, there is only one member of staff.

It is, of course, important to note that this is not the case for all children – there are examples throughout the country of extremely effective transitions, where children enter a Primary 1 classroom which is set up in a very child-led, ELC style, and which takes a play-based approach to learning. There are also schools who engage meaningfully with ELC settings, sending teachers out to meet their new pupils and giving children the opportunity to get used to their new environments.

It would, however, be unfair to expect that this has been the situation for all parents with a transitioning child. The way in which placing requests are dealt with, and the very late stage at which they are often granted, and then communicated to parents, means that often many have faced an anxious wait. During this time, their child may have missed out on engagement with the school they will ultimately attend. This could mean that children have less of an opportunity to interact with their peers, as well as their teacher and the environment overall.

¹ <https://youtu.be/KKuc7jearrs>

It is also important to note that many children who will be moving into the school environment over the next few years are “pandemic babies”. These children, who are currently attending sessions and accessing ELC via settings/childminders, were not afforded the same opportunities for socialisation and interaction with their peers in their earliest stages. Both EYS members and our own early years practitioners have reported that as a result, some are experiencing delays in their speech and language development, and socialisation skills, which will have a knock-on effect on their entry into primary education and beyond.

They may not be ready to go to school and their parents may seek to defer their entry, along with the other school-age children who are not ready to make that transition. While the Scottish Government has enacted legislation guaranteeing a right to another year of funded ELC for children who are not ready to start school, this does not come into force until August 2023. Families are, therefore, still at the mercy of the discretion of their local authority, which has the power to decide that the child is either eligible or ineligible for a further year’s funding in preparation for starting school. There has also been a concern amongst parents with children currently within ELC who informed that they they are registering for the 2023/24 academic session and not all local authorities are making this information readily available on their website, so parents who may think their child would benefit from deferred entry are often unaware of their right to do so.

There also has to be an awareness of the impact that a potential increase in deferrals will have on an already stretched ELC sector.

In our manifesto ahead of the 2021 Holyrood elections, EYS called for more support around effective transitions, and this is something that our organisation still thinks is extremely important. There absolutely must be recognition and prioritisation of the experience, care and love that the early years workforce has when it comes to children leaving their settings and moving into school. Earlier engagement with nurseries, childminders, playgroups etc and schools would be welcomed and, as part of this, there needs to be a stronger valuation of the relationships between these settings and the children they look after. It goes without saying that children would benefit significantly from earlier access to the school environment in order to properly prepare them for what is a big change in their lives. Children learn best through a child-centred play pedagogy that is supported from ELC into Primary,

EYS also calls for support for parents and children via an enhanced transition from ELC into Primary 1. Providing a phased, blended approach, whereby children spend time in both their ELC setting and school from August until the end of Term 1 for example, would allow for staggered entry into this next phase in their lives. Both ELC staff and teachers would be working in partnership, involved in supporting enhanced and extended play-based learning pedagogies, which would be of great benefit to those children starting Primary 1. It would also be of benefit to both ELC and primary staff, as they could share examples of best practice, and learn from each other regarding how best to support this significant transition for our youngest children.

EYS would also argue that there should be more access to shared opportunities for Professional learning between ELC settings and Primary 1 focusing jointly on important early years guidance, such as Realising the Ambition: Being Me. As previously outlined, the move to school is an extremely important transition, and would benefit significantly from collaborative working and sharing of effective pedagogy and practice, in order to support effective transitions. EYS also supports a renewed focus on leadership within ELC and believes that we should continue to explore the need for more effective leadership professional learning and development, alongside a clear leadership path and journey for early years professionals. Key in this will be an agreed position in the language of leadership within ELC. Concepts of leadership and management continue to cause mixed levels of understanding for all stakeholders. Current work with the Scottish Government and partners sees commitment to address this to ensure a position of shared understanding.

Value the workforce

The impact of COVID-19

It is no exaggeration that COVID-19 has impacted on our sector in ways that could never have been imagined. The pandemic and its associated lockdowns meant, for private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) and childminding providers in particular, a significant loss of income and dip into financial reserves which has made business sustainability and, as a result, the ongoing provision of high quality ELC, extremely difficult.

The expansion to 1140 hours, while delayed by a year because of COVID, has taken a toll on the sector. Private and Third sector ELC settings and childminders are also facing ongoing sustainability challenges, as indicated in the publication of the Scottish Government's Financial Sustainability Health Check of the Childcare Sector. The variability of the funded rate paid to members nationally in particular, is extremely concerning for the ongoing sustainability of the sector and until this is addressed, will continue to create a pervasive gulf and an ever-increasing gap between the PVI and local authority sector. It simply should not be the case that a workforce, that has the same role, and the same guidance, policies, practice, and legislation, has such a significant difference in the wage scales provided nationally.

The continued loss of highly qualified and experienced staff from the PVI sector settings to local authorities or indeed other sectors entirely, which offer higher pay, and often improved terms and conditions, is an ongoing and very significant issue. In our 2021 Holyrood manifesto, EYS also called for the creation of a National Pay Scale to ensure that the (predominantly female) workforce delivering early years provision are paid a fair and equitable wage, which is based on qualifications, skills, and experience, and not subject to the type of setting that they work in. The benefits of this financial recognition may also counter the established and pervasive gender imbalance in the sector.

Pressures faced by the workforce

At present the ELC sector is subject to a series of standards and frameworks which have significantly increased bureaucracy, and this has become very challenging. The recent release of the new Care Inspectorate Quality Framework, alongside the requirement to also use Education Scotland's 'How good is our ELC?' is causing the sector increased challenges and pressure. These pressures also include staff recruitment and retention, professional learning, and training of new and existing staff, managing the resumption of full inspections, and balancing the health and wellbeing of staff and children and families.

We are also aware that with the Scottish Government manifesto commitment of the introduction of a 1-year-old offer of ELC provision, and increased wrap around school care, there could therefore be further capacity pressures on an already stretched sector. This has already led to many ELC professionals sadly leaving the profession altogether and seeking employment in other sectors, due to the sheer burden of bureaucracy and workloads.

The omission of any recognition of the importance of ELC can devalue the vital role undertaken by Scotland's early years workforce as well as the importance of supporting a clear learning continuum and skills progression from ages 3-18. As an organisation, EYS sees first-hand the importance of high-quality ELC that offers effective play-based pedagogies, child-led practice, positive interactions and nurturing approaches and support in the earliest years of a child's life.

The Scottish Government has demonstrated a clear commitment, through the expansion to 1140 hours of funded ELC for all children aged 3-5 and eligible 2-year-olds, to ensuring that our youngest citizens are given the best start in life. The recent Programme for Government has also promised to extend this provision to younger children within this parliamentary term, as well as committing to the creation of a wraparound system of care for school-aged children. These policy objectives are, of course, to be commended, given the benefits they will provide for children, not only while they are in ELC, but as a positive foundation for the rest of their lives. As we have made clear, the value of a positive early years' experience is immeasurable.

Planning and development

Early years professionals are, at present, not afforded the opportunity to have meaningful time away to engage with curriculum planning and development within their settings, yet their colleagues within schools are. Both are adhering to the same curricular framework from 3 - 6, however again, the importance of early years involvement is not recognised. There are also disparities between parts of the ELC sector, as there may be some McCrone time embedded into Local Authority settings (particularly those with teachers, which are often ELC settings attached to schools), yet there is none within PVI settings that we are aware of. This is despite the fact that the whole sector providing funded ELC entitlement has to work within the early level of Curriculum for Excellence, as well as other key national documentation and guidance. This could, arguably, create inequalities between children whose settings have time to jointly plan and develop with other school professionals, and those who do not.

It is, therefore, extremely disappointing that those with the skills, expertise, and experience to deliver high quality ELC are not always fully recognised. Unfortunately, the workforce within our sector do not benefit from the same opportunities as teaching colleagues.

Professional Learning

There is a wide range of professional learning (PL) opportunities available to the early years sector in Scotland, however there is a need for clarity and equity of access. The provision of PL is one of the four key strands of work of Early Years Scotland, delivered via our highly successful Professional Learning Academy. The organisation has invested in establishing an expert dedicated professional learning team who design, develop, and deliver affordable, accessible, and relevant high quality professional learning opportunities across the country.

That being said, there is currently a disjointed professional learning landscape nationally, and the organisation is also aware of the challenges faced by the sector, and in particular PVI colleagues, in accessing the level of PL required. The lack of time available to those within PVI settings to undertake the courses which are on offer, further permeates the inequalities within the sector. One of the underpinning principles of the expansion to 1140 hours of funded ELC is that children will benefit from high-quality provision, delivered by highly skilled, trained professionals. There can be a lack of access to PL for PVI settings, often due to ongoing staff challenges, a lack of funding to pay for PL, or lack of access to this within their LA. The PVI providers regularly state that they often do not have the time or the resources to be in a position to release staff for external PL opportunities. Although the PVI sector continues to support their own staff team's professional learning in house, and train and develop students, there are ongoing challenges to supporting wider staff access to high-quality PL, more often than not through no fault of their own, and the ongoing loss of their qualified staff requires critical support. Evidence of the challenges in accessing PL have been gathered by SSSC and reflect the disparity between LAs and PVI providers.

EYS is aware of good practice examples across a range of LAs who fully involve their commissioned nurseries to access and participate in the professional learning that is on offer for the LA ELC staff teams. This is a very beneficial and inclusive approach that our members would welcome across all LAs.

Inspection Challenges

EYS recently responded to the Scottish Government consultation on inspection of ELC and school-aged childcare, highlighting the way in which the current framework could be improved in order to best support those being inspected.

As Scotland is currently undertaking an ambitious and aspirational National Discussion on Scottish Education, we believe that this would be the ideal time to address transformative change for ELC in Scotland.

“One framework with two bodies is simply not going to work. The National Standard is a single document for example, and it's implemented in completely different ways across the country. Why would a single inspection framework be any different?”

- *Nursery owner, online focus group.*

Most members stated that it has become abundantly clear that the current approach to inspection over the last couple of years in particular, does not always encourage and empower settings to work collaboratively towards continuous improvement, given the very differing ways members reported in which Care Inspectorate (CI) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) carry out their work.

Overall, EYS members stated the previous joint inspections often felt very disjointed and conflicting in their approach for staff and settings. For this joint inspection aspiration with a single framework to be successful, it was felt that this would require significantly more cooperation, collaboration, and joint planning between both regulatory bodies to streamline the process to the benefit of the children, staff and parents in early years settings, childminders and out of school care settings.

From discussions with representatives from the ELC sector, it is clear that there are a number of challenges as a result of the way in which inspections are currently carried out. Fundamentally settings face inspection from two separate bodies, who are reported by most members to often take two very different approaches, using two frameworks and differing ways of grading.

Alongside this is the added complication of examination and analysis from local authorities as guarantors of quality. Not only does this provide a third level of inspection, but ELC managers and childminders reported feeling a conflict of interest given local authorities are the ones who provide the funding. Understandably, this added level of scrutiny causes a significant amount of stress and anxiety amongst staff within settings and childminders, who fear a loss of partnership and possible sustainability challenges as a result.

This is an opportunity to really get inspection processes right, both for the sector and for children and families. Therefore, while EYS is in agreement in principle with the vision for a single framework, we feel it is unlikely that there will be any meaningful change if this is not accompanied by the necessary structural changes and the creation of a single inspection body, which encompasses the skillset and expertise of both organisations.

It would be much more beneficial overall to have a single, professional, streamlined service, encompassing the skills and expertise of both Care Inspectorate and the new Education Scotland body, that ensures quality and consistency in practice and approaches, rather than two very different systems which appear to inspect on care and education separately.

A valued career choice

Much of this education discussion will no doubt focus on older children and positive destinations, i.e. entry into the labour market or further/higher education. EYS would like to see greater promotion of the benefits of a career in early learning and childcare, recognising the personal reward that comes with working in our sector. ELC is a vocation and requires a high level of skills and knowledge. Despite this, it is not often promoted this way within careers advice and can be, in some cases, seen as a role which young women who are not considered to be academic can undertake.

There needs to be more recognition of the vital nature of the work and a dispelling of the myth that it is low-skilled. We are a degree-led workforce and the roles available within ELC come with continuous opportunities for professional learning and development.

There is also a significant gender imbalance in the ELC workforce, which is overwhelmingly female. This continues to be a result of the notion that care is 'women's work', and that the gender streaming within career options at secondary school unfortunately still exists. EYS has recently been involved in the Skills Development Scotland Gender Commission, where we were tasked with finding out about perceptions around gender within ELC, both in terms of the workforce and how outdated notions which are often perpetuated around the concept of jobs for men and women can be broken down and dispelled. From discussions with parents/carers and the ELC workforce there was clear support for trying to get more men into ELC, as it is important for children to have positive role models of all genders and none. Overwhelmingly, however, it was noted that there should not be talk of increasing wages in order to attract more men into the workforce, but that current staff should be given more recognition and value, both in societal and financial terms.

Assessment in early years

In considering areas that the national discussion should also focus on for early years, EYS believes that there requires to be recognition from other sectors, policy makers and educators that any form of formal assessment is not necessary. It is better to fully equip pedagogical leaders with the skills of observation and noticing what children can do and taking action to provide an appropriate early childhood experience. We believe that any changes to the curriculum in early childhood should be responsive and flexible, culturally creative, and staffed with well-trained, and well-paid educators.

Conclusion

EYS has welcomed the opportunity to participate in this extremely important discussion on the future of Scottish education. We have clearly outlined the importance of including early years as part of these discussions, given just how vital it is that children receive the best start in life. If we are to realise the Scottish Government's ambition to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up, we have to grab the opportunity for radical, transformational change and get early years right, for the sake of our children's future.

EYS would like to thank the settings and in particular the children who took the time to participate in this consultation process so that their voices can be heard. The short video outlining their priorities can be accessed [here](#).