

News release

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Early learning plans make progress, but risks remain

Plans to boost early learning and childcare (ELC) hours have made steady progress but risks around buildings and staffing remain, say public sector watchdogs.

The Scottish Government and councils are working well together to increase ELC hours from 600 to 1,140 a year from August 2020. And the pace of the expansion is broadly in line with plans.

But around half of the building work required is due to be completed over the summer, and about half of the additional ELC staff still need to be recruited. Private and third sector providers - which are expected to deliver over a quarter of the hours - also continue to report significant workforce challenges that threaten their sustainability.

The Scottish Government's evaluation plans for the expansion are well advanced but challenges remain. For example, it is not clear how the longer-term economic benefits of the policy, or its impact on family wellbeing, will be measured.

Caroline Gardner, Auditor General for Scotland, said:

"The Scottish Government and councils have worked well together to increase early learning and childcare hours, and we've also seen improvements in how the project will be evaluated. But the timeline remains tight and there are big risks around infrastructure and workforce."

Graham Sharp, Chair of the Accounts Commission said:

"Given the amount of work due to be completed over summer 2020, it's important that councils continue to work closely with the Scottish Government to manage the risks of any delays, including how best to keep parents informed."

ENDS

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Notes to editors

1. From August 2020, funded ELC for all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds will increase from 600 to 1,140 hours per year. This is the equivalent of about 30 hours of funded ELC per week in school term time.
2. Three-year-olds typically become eligible for funded ELC the term after their third birthday, meaning that not all three-year-olds will be eligible in August 2020. In this report, *Early Learning and Childcare: Follow up audit*, we include data up to April 2021, as this reflects the point at which all three-year-olds due to become eligible in the 2020/21 academic year will be eligible for funded ELC.
3. Councils will receive £567 million in additional revenue funding by 2020/21 to deliver the ELC expansion.

4. As of September 2019, 4,310 (FTE) additional staff were in post in council settings, about half of the total additional staff required for the expansion.

5. As at October 2019, 5,097 places were created by building projects - 23 per cent of the total places (22,357) to be created. Thirty-four per cent of places are expected to be created by July 2020, and 79 per cent by August 2020 (see Exhibit 6). A further 20 per cent of places are planned to be ready after August 2020.

6. From April 2021, councils expect to provide 72 per cent of funded ELC. Private nurseries, charities and childminders are expected to deliver the remaining 28 per cent.

7. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk

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