

Members' Briefing: Scottish Government Legislative Programme

Briefing Paper: What the Government's Programme for Scotland means for children, young people and their families

A Strong Economy

Children in Scotland welcomes measures intended to hasten economic recovery and expand labour market opportunities. We are pleased to see measures that help young people gain the qualifications, experience and skills that will enable them to move successfully into the world of work.¹

We urge, however, the Scottish Government to develop the modern infrastructure needed to underpin its economic and employment objectives by making an unequivocal commitment to the provision of full-time affordable Early Childhood Education and Care for all children, when families need or want it. Without this, the road to recovery and growth will be obstructed.

Expanding childcare provision will in itself create a substantial number of employment opportunities. It will also allow more parents to enter the workforce, thus reducing benefit dependency and increasing both government revenues and general consumption. Most importantly, it will have an immediate impact on child poverty – currently affecting almost one in five Scottish children. The recent European Commission Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care² underlines the fundamental connection between economic growth and accessible, affordable childcare.

It is disappointing that the Scottish Government has failed to make this connection meaningful with robust and immediate action.

Rights of Children and Young People

We welcome a rights-based foundation for children's services. The introduction of legislation in support of children's rights will give prominence and authority to this matter. We urge that the legislation is made effective by setting out specific entitlements for children and young people, from birth to adulthood, with statutory recourse if rights are infringed or entitlements not delivered. The proposed Children's Services Bill could be the mechanism for doing so, though it is extremely regrettable that it is not being brought forward for another two years.

Early Childhood Education and Care

The delay in introducing the Children's Services Bill will compound the problem arising from the increase in the pre-5 population.³ Our youngest children are very often our poorest children. The highest levels of poverty in Scotland can be found among families with children under 5. It is vital for our future as a nation that this serious problem is addressed. Children's development in the

birth to 3 period sets the tone for their outcomes in later life – in education, lifestyle, and health. If children have positive experiences in early life: attachment to parents who nurture and stimulate them; good diet and appropriate physical activity; learning and socialising with their peers, and freedom from stress and worry, their health and wellbeing will be better – and will stay better throughout life – than children who have had adverse or ineffectual experience. Freedom from the stress associated with inadequate family income, and with a fragmented and complicated patchwork of childcare arrangements, will help families do the best for their young children. The proposed parenting strategy must address the real issues with which parents grapple, and support them in doing the best they can in raising the next generation.

Good quality Early Childhood Education and Care, with a well-qualified workforce, will support parents in providing the best kind of environment for their children to flourish. This will, in turn, bring about change for the better in some of the many problem areas we have in Scotland at present: childhood obesity, alcohol misuse, educational failure, violence and crime. Progress towards implementing the 'flagship' Early Years Framework, and meeting external targets such as the EU

2020 strategy for economic growth, will also be supported.

Of course childcare is not only of concern to families with children under 3. Entry to pre-school education can, for some families, bring more complexity to their childcare arrangements. The Concordat has failed to deliver a consistent, family-friendly service across Scotland. Few local authority nurseries offer full-day care. In a few areas, limitations on the number of available places means that some children are not offered a place until they are almost 4. Even when children go to school, difficulties in accessing local, good quality out of school care can be problematic and costly. The extended day offered by many of the 'free schools' in England has proved attractive to many parents.

Alcohol, Violence and Hatred

Children in Scotland has long advocated taking action on all of these blights to Scottish society. Scots consume more drink than our UK neighbours, fuelling violence in homes and communities. Children who see parents, peers and members of the public misusing alcohol, and becoming violent, will be negatively affected by their experience. When young, this may affect their education and

mental health adversely. When older, their risk of repeating the cycle is much increased. We support, and continue to support, minimum pricing on alcohol and welcome the re-introduction of legislation on this issue.

We urge, however, that action on alcohol takes a much broader, preventive, approach. Preventing the harm that alcohol can do to unborn children should be a key element of a comprehensive approach to limit alcohol-related harm, and there is a World Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Awareness Day, on 9 September.

There is no doubt that sectarian violence is frequently exacerbated by alcohol misuse. Underlying it, however, are divisive and intolerant views of diversity. Encouraging families in accepting and valuing diversity is another important contribution that positive support in early childhood can make. In particular, the pivotal role of fathers can be positively encouraged and reinforced.

Getting It Right

We are keen to see better coordination of support for children. Evidence shows that this is best achieved by integration of services rather

than making the best of a fragmented, disconnected system that is often incomprehensible to families. Good universal provision, with support for those children and families who need extra help has been shown internationally to be of the greatest benefit in helping those most in need. A workforce that understands and promotes children's wellbeing and healthy development is essential. The 'social pedagogue' qualification, prevalent in many neighbouring European countries, has been shown to deliver good outcomes more effectively than our current qualification repertoire.

This is true not only for children's early years, but in work with older children and young people too. The importance of good, community-based activity programmes for young people should not be underestimated in terms of promoting social inclusion and solidarity and avoiding the kind of disaffection and disorder recently seen in several English cities.

We want to see healthier, happier children in a healthier, happier Scotland. We urge the government to take action in the ways we have described to help achieve this.

If you have any comments about this briefing or suggestions about professional practice or strategy, then please contact Sara Collier at scollier@childreninscotland.org.uk or on 0131 222 2412.

Published by *Children in Scotland - working for children and their families (SC003527)*

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