

MEDIA RELEASE
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For immediate release



After the election, partnership agreement must prioritise investment in early years

Children in Scotland welcomes the consensus among Scotland's political parties on improving services for children and young people. But it urges the parties involved in the post-election partnership agreement to prioritise early years investment.

Children in Scotland magazine publishes today (1 May) an analysis of manifesto commitments along with further pledges made by party leaders in a series of interviews with the magazine. It also highlights Children in Scotland's members' priorities for the new administration.

The main parties are pledged to improving the lives of children and share a commitment to investing in the early years, promoting the concept of using schools as a "hub" for services and reducing class sizes.

Chief executive Bronwen Cohen said: "We are pleased to see consensus among the parties. We particularly welcome Jack McConnell's commitment to piloting nature kindergartens and the SNP's proposal for a minister for early years. However, all parties' proposals fall short of the radical need for policy to end the current fragmentation of services for young children. What we want to see are simple and affordable services that all parents have equal access to. Currently nursery fees in Scotland are increasing at almost double the rate of those in England."

"Children in Scotland's manifesto asks for entitlement to integrated whole-day services for three and four year olds by 2009, free to low income parents and with progressively reduced costs to all parents, and that by 2011 entitlement be extended to all two-year-olds."

"I urge whoever is elected to consider again the report published late last year by the OECD on early childhood education and care, Starting Strong II, which found that most western countries need to double the amount invested in young children. The author of the report is visiting Scotland immediately after the election for a Children in Scotland conference discussing the implications of the report for Scotland."

On the early years:

SNP, Labour and the Lib Dems are committed to increasing free nursery education for three to four-year-olds. The SNP promises an increase of 50%, from 400 to 600 hours. Labour and the Liberal Democrats promise something similar: from 437 hours to 570 hours* - an increase of 30%. Labour will also offer nursery education to "two-year-olds who need it most", while the Lib Dems promise "up to 15 hours free play group provision for two-year-olds".

Speaking to Children in Scotland on plans for the creation of a minister for early years, Alex Salmond, SNP, said: "We're trying to suggest a departmental structure that will ensure childcare and education and social work link up."

Jack McConnell, Labour, committed to investment in young children's experience of the outdoors: "Our sunrise agenda will include piloting nature kindergartens."

On the school as a hub for services:

The SNP and the Liberal Democrats promote schools as being a "hub" for community services and both Labour and the Lib Dems refer to extended opening hours, with schools providing "wraparound care with schools open from 8am to 6pm".

Notes for editors

A copy of the magazine is available free for media contacts only.

A pdf extract of the manifesto comparison and pledges made in interviews with Children in Scotland magazine is also available on request.

For further information or to request a comment from Children in Scotland please contact:

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1. Statistical comparison:

Labour's manifesto: "Scottish Labour will expand the number of free hours of early years education from 12.5 hours per week to 15 hours per week; we will also expand the number of weeks in which children receive free nursery education from 35 to 38 weeks per year."

2. A typical full-time nursery place for a child under two is £146 a week – still lower than the cost in England (£152), but rising very fast. This compares to average UK earnings of £447 a week last year. The costs have increased from £132 last year, a rise of ten per cent. The cost increases in England and Wales were six per cent and two per cent respectively. Source: The Daycare Trust and Children in Scotland survey Jan 2007. www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/media/childcarecostsrls.pdf

3. Children in Scotland

Children in Scotland is the national agency for voluntary, statutory and professional organisations and individuals working with children and their families in Scotland. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that relevant policies, services and provisions are of the best possible quality and able to meet the needs of a diverse society.

Children in Scotland's manifesto for the 2007 election is available online www.childreninscotland.org.uk

4. Starting Strong II is the subject of a Children in Scotland conference on 14 May in New Lanark. Starting Strong II author John Bennett will among speakers discussing the implications of the report for Scotland. For details of speakers etc visit www.childreninscotland.org.uk/sss