



**FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE
SERVICES SCOTLAND**

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Manifesto Asks 2026



Introduction:

Scottish Government has already recognised that early learning and school age childcare are pivotal in supporting children's development, reducing inequality, and enabling parents to participate fully in the workforce.

According to [The Scottish Household Survey 2025](#), 83% of Scottish households with pre-school children use some form of childcare, however, families consistently report that provision doesn't match their real-world needs. To effectively meet those needs, we require a rich and diverse range of providers, offering high-quality services, choice, flexibility, inclusion and wraparound support.

Currently, administration and delivery of the Scottish Government's Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) commitment falls to the 32 local authorities, who are responsible for both delivery of services and procuring additional spaces from partner providers within the Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) sector, this places them in the position of being both a competitor and contracting authority with responsibility for setting funded rates. Inevitably, this results in disparity and must be reviewed to create a position where all children and families can access services that benefit from equitable funding and investment.

Childcare remains one of the highest costs for British families and yet evidence from our services shows that flexible childcare reduces parents' childcare costs while empowering them to return to employment, education, or training, where they can either increase their earning potential now or improve their employment opportunities in the future.

In Scottish Government's [Childcare sector: financial sustainability health check](#) it states, "Flexible, accessible and affordable childcare services are a vital part of our national economic infrastructure, enabling parents and carers to work, study or undertake training."

However, inequitable funding rates across provider types, the positioning of ELC delivery within education departments and siloed working practices across local and national governments mean that the sector cannot fulfil its role as critical national infrastructure. This results in fragmented and non-aligned services where hours of childcare don't match operating hours of local employers, transport challenges create an access barrier for families and efforts to support parents back to work fall flat due to a lack of suitable childcare provision.

Workforce recognition and capacity remains one of the most pressing challenges facing Scotland's childcare sector. PVI providers have long argued that the sustainable rates paid by local authorities do not fully cover the true costs of delivering funded hours.

The combination of constrained funding, lower pay, and more demanding working conditions has left many practitioners feeling undervalued. As a result, qualified staff are increasingly exiting the sector—often not to other childcare roles, but to entirely different industries offering higher wages and improved job security. This loss of experienced practitioners poses a critical risk to the sustainability and the quality of childcare provision across Scotland.



Review

Review existing childcare delivery models, administration, and funding with a view to creating a fairer, more sustainable model.

Review:



The traditional route for childcare is not compatible with modern working and living. The traditional route of non flexible childcare costs the service users more money which is not cost effective in a cost of living crisis."

Priorities:

- Carry out a full review of the current early learning and all-age childcare model, including specialist services for children and young people with additional support needs, to ensure that it meets the needs of children, parents, providers, communities and local and national economies. It is important that this review involves all stakeholders, including local and national government, service providers and the children and families who use these services.
- Reform the current funding system where Local Authorities play a multi-faceted role as procurers, guarantors of quality, funding administrators, and competitors. Move to an independent organisation being the funding administrator, following the principles of Funding Follows the Child.

What difference this will make:

- Ensure early learning and all age childcare better meets the needs of all children, families, and communities.
- No child/children will miss out on the benefits of attending high quality early learning and childcare services.
- Parents will be empowered to work, study or train, meaning they will be better off financially and have enhanced career opportunities.
- More women will be able to join and stay in the workforce reducing gender inequality and gender related pay gaps.
- Local businesses will be able to recruit the workforce they need to thrive.
- Providers will be more sustainable and less susceptible to financial difficulties.
- The sector, as a whole, will be more robust and resilient.
- The distribution of funding will be fairer, more stable and more equitable.
- There will be greater transparency around budget spend.
- Parents will have more choice of which services to use.



Empower

Empower parents and carers by ensuring they have more choice and flexibility



In the ever evolving world, flexibility is key as parents are more often than not trying to juggle both work and appointments daily."

Priorities:

- Policymakers should prioritise expanding responsive and accessible early learning and all-age childcare options to support flourishing families by empowering parents to work, study, or train. Special attention should be given to families belonging to one or more priority groups identified as being at a higher risk of poverty. By making flexible childcare more accessible to these families, policymakers can help increase household income and improve overall financial stability, effectively reducing child and family poverty.
- Require early learning and all-age childcare providers across Scotland to adopt an element of responsive, accessible attendance in their delivery models to better meet family needs. This requirement should be incorporated into local government procurement policy for early learning and all-age childcare provision.

What difference this will make:

- Families who need flexible provision that matches their work or education hours will have access to services that work for them.
- Priority group families will be empowered to improve outcomes for themselves through entering, or remaining in employment, education, or training.
- Families using flexible services can maximise the benefit of funded hours and reduce spend on wraparound hours, this along with the ability to work more, or progress their career, means they are better off financially and less at risk of poverty.
- Families will be able to choose flexible early learning and all-age childcare in locations that work for them. This will reduce the cost and environmental impact of extra travel to reach suitable services.
- Building this requirement into procurement policies will ensure broad coverage across the country removing gaps where families cannot reach a service that meets their needs.



Recognise

Recognise that childcare is a key part of our national infrastructure

Recognise:



Without flexible childcare I wouldn't be able to go back to work."

Priorities:

- Consider investment in childcare as an investment in essential social and economic infrastructure, the same as transport, health and other education.
- Work collaboratively across Government departments to ensure that early learning and all-age childcare providers deliver a service that supports local businesses by ensuring operating hours align with local workplaces.

What difference this will make:

- Reclassifying childcare as key infrastructure will support appropriate investment.
- Removing the silos of different departments will ensure cohesiveness between childcare services, transport routes, and employment opportunities. Families will be able to travel to the services they need, and childcare will fit employment opportunities supporting local economic growth and empowering parents to work.



Value
Value the childcare workforce



The team care for our children highly and provide an excellent service. My child adores his key worker and talks about her consistently, even after only been at the group for a few hours weekly.

Priorities:

- Ensure that funding rates support fair remuneration for the whole workforce, to remove the current variance in salaries between local authority and Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) employees.
- Create a national pay structure for the whole sector.

What difference this will make:

- This will create a diverse and skilled workforce that is valued, fairly paid and gender balanced.
- PVI services will be more sustainable supporting parent choice and Funding Follows the Child.
- A national pay structure will remove variances in salary linked to the employer sector, i.e. those working in local authority and PVI settings will be paid equally. This will reduce recruitment challenges and create dynamic movement within the workforce, ensuring the right people are in place to sustain quality of provision in all settings.



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