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Additional information:

This is a copy of a response at officer level to a call for evidence from the Scottish Parliament Education and Culture Committee in its Inquiry into Scotland's Potential Educational and Cultural Future.

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## Theme 2: Early Years, Childcare and Employability

### **The benefits to children, families and the wider economy of investing in childcare:**

There is no doubt that families will benefit from the proposed investment in Early Learning and Childcare by the Scottish Government, in particular 600 hours for all 3 and 4 year olds, 2 year olds who are looked after or from workless households. There should be no assumption made that all children from workless households are or will be vulnerable.

The funding of 600 hours Early Learning and Childcare will reduce the costs of childcare for families where parents are in work, education or training, whilst enabling others to consider a return to work. This will contribute towards an increase in family income and in some instances contribute to lifting families out of poverty. An increase in family income may enable families to take advantage of local social activities for children such as swimming, ballet, Scouts and Brownies, to name but a few. This enables children to have the same experiences as their peers. Whilst research debates the relationship between education levels of parents, hours worked and outcomes for young children, (*Joseph Rowntree Foundation – The Effects of Parents Employment on Outcomes for Children*) evidence also shows there are benefits for parents, including how returning to work, education or training contributes to increased confidence, self worth and improved mental health. All of which has the potential to impact on outcomes for children in the family. Having gained increased confidence parents are more likely to seek advice help and support in their role of parent and engage with nursery and school.

Whilst quality childcare can have positive long term results for young children especially those from lower socio economic backgrounds, it is important to remember that not all children thrive in group care settings. A mis-match at an early stage may negate the positive outcomes intended. Hence an argument for flexibility to include community based childcare including childminders who can offer both flexible childcare and support to families, including those in rural areas. In providing childcare there may be differences in priorities with Local Authorities focusing on the needs of the child, quality and flexibility of provision, compared to parents who may prioritise flexibility, convenience and availability over quality and suitability.

We need to remind ourselves that whilst increased employment for families benefits the family as a whole, and the economy in general, the childcare put in place to support this should not be seen as a substitute for parents taking on responsibility for parenting their own children. Swedish psychiatrist Dr David Eberhard highlights the challenges faced when young children spend extended time in day care and are effectively parented by others. This once again confirms the importance of supporting parents to be parents rather than seeing “free childcare” as a way of passing this responsibility to others.

Parental choice must be respected, so that those who choose not to work and stay a home with their children are not seen as workshy or criticised for lifestyle decisions made. In addition these children should not be disadvantaged by 2 year olds who will automatically transition to nursery in the term after their 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday, when it comes to allocation of local authority nursery places, for the anti- pre-school year. In the extreme this could result in a 2yr old having received 3 full years of pre-school early learning and childcare whilst others applying to enter the term after their 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday, may only receive a year and a term.

## **The Planning, training and investment that would be required to bring about a transformation in childcare provision:**

The Children & Young People (Scotland) Bill and associated guidance focuses on quality and flexibility of provision. No one can disagree that every child deserves the best possible start in life and that this outcome is better met through the provision of quality early learning and childcare. Herein lies the difference between Local Authority nursery provision and private providers. Although there can be no blanket statement made saying that all local authority nursery provision meets or exceeds standards expected and all private partner nurseries fall below standard, this is often the assumption made.

The main influencing factor between one and another is often money, in particular investment with local authority nurseries being financed from a central budget to provide “education” though the provision of teachers, nursery staff, and materials required, whilst private nurseries are seen as providing childcare in a competitive market solely funded through parental fees, or minimal fees in the case of partner providers. Despite this both are inspected by the same regulator and required to achieve the same standards and outcomes.

To ensure quality a value has to be placed on the childcare industry. This fails to be the case at the moment with staff in the private sector often working long hours for the minimum wage, and when it comes to CPD and qualifications an expectation that study will take place in their own time or not at all. Compare this to Local Authority staff who have time for CPD factored in annually, are paid at a rate commensurate to responsibility and role with non contact time built into weekly hours.

Voluntary and community groups (Playgroups) often struggle to attract the calibre of staff to create exciting and innovative learning opportunities using play as a tool for learning within informal community environments. Whilst training opportunities are made available to staff in registered settings this can be seen as an additional burden for what is considered little reward. Management committees, whilst keen to support staff often find themselves supporting others in a field which they know little about.

Opportunities to develop support for all childcare practitioners in cluster groups would be welcomed as a way of bringing people together to have a round table discussion on current topics, and developments. This may facilitate a more open and supportive approach amongst peers.

East and Midlothian Councils work in partnership to provide and support training and qualifications for all childcare practitioners. This takes account of need identified through the annual training needs analysis which takes place each year. Training includes both CPD and formal qualifications, from National Progression Awards to BA’s, most of which is undertaken in the locale at times to suit the workforce, which tends to be am or twighlight. The introduction of ILA’s/SAAS grants has given more practitioners access to formal qualifications training and enabled Councils to provide additional CPD sessions.

There is, however, always scope to further develop the training calendar to include opportunities such as leadership and management skills, an understanding of the importance of play, and attachment in child development, along with Pre-Birth to Three, as standard. A shared training and CPD calendar for Local Authority and Partner provider nurseries contribute to a better

understanding of roles and to a reduction in the “them” and “us” attitude and divide that exists with some. It also contributes towards the breakdown of barriers, sharing of ideas and resources thereby promoting and achieving better outcomes for young children.

In considering the workforce of the future there is an opportunity to establish childcare on the curriculum for all pupils.

The announcement by Aileen Campbell that Professor Iram Siraj will chair a review of the early years workforce, leading a team to examine the skills and qualifications of those working in the field of childcare is welcomed.

Pauline Homer  
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February 2014