An Equal Start: A plan for equality in early learning and care in Scotland

Annex
COMMON WEAL is a think-and-do tank that advocates policies that put All of Us First. For more information on Common Weal Policy visit allofusfirst.org/policy or email ben@common.scot

This annex tries to capture the range of discussions of the Common Weal Policy Lab held at Edinburgh University in September 2015 with a range of stakeholders, including parents, children, practitioners, policy makers, civil servants, researchers, trade unionists, and interested citizens.

Focusing on the question of delivering a robust Early Learning and Care system for Scotland, three topics came up as particularly important to the group:

A. Ensuring a happy and healthy workforce
B. Developing a modern syllabus
C. Delivering a holistic service

Each section begins with an explanation for the discussion and topics of note, followed by suggestions and areas for further inquiry agreed upon during the lab. As much as possible, the range of opinions have been represented insofar as they have been recorded in the notes gathered at the meeting. I urge readers to note that each section is fundamentally interrelated – how can we deliver a holistic service without ensuring the workforce feel secure, respected and supported?

To maintain nuance and complexity, the following report may not always show complete ideological cohesion, but is instead a testament to the range of ideas stakeholders have for improving Early Learning and Care in Scotland.

A. Ensuring a Happy and Healthy Workforce

In recent years, pains have been taken to ‘professionalise’ Early Learning and Care. However, the development of qualifications and academic inquiry in the field have not been matched with salaries or institutional respect. Barely able to deliver the 15-hour week to their communities just now, practitioners are cynical about their capacity—as the sector stands—to achieve this to schedule.

Many practitioners are overburdened with work – whether in the delivery of care and learning, or in the administration of their centres – relying on staff working more hours than they are paid for almost every shift, and unpaid labour from volunteering parents. Without this ‘under-the-table’ help, attendees confirmed that their centres would not be able to function: they must work longer hours for less in order that children receive care.

Attendees said that on top of this frustration, the ‘professional’ status of their work is questioned too by the infrastructure of care that children receive: despite the fact that practitioners spend more time with children than anyone else in the learning or care chain, they are often undermined and not consulted when their expertise could be of great use.

Combined with the difficulty of recruitment and gender equality within the sector itself, overwork and being routinely undermined causes high levels of stress, anxiety, and insecurity in staff. Attendees called for Early Learning and Care policy to be more than just child centred, but practitioner-centred too, valuing the health and happiness of both as crucial to successful policy.

Policy Ideas:

1. Standard Hourly Rates: Because of the fragmented nature of the sector as it stands, being able to implement a standard hourly rate for the service is one way to have a better level of standardisation for all of the Early Learning and Care in Scotland, and a level playing field for providers.

2. Industrial Democracy: Staff should feel like they have a stake in developing their work culture. Taking part in developing the strategy and organisation of their centre will foster more job-satisfaction, innovative thinking and empowerment.

3. Career Development: More opportunities for staff to grow and develop their skills, as well as providing regular feedback and professional opportunities, will retain more staff within the sector, and secure Early Learning and Care as a desirable career.

4. Recruitment: More strategies need to be developed to attract a range of people to the sector. This means, for example, ending the gender segregation of labour and ensuring that men feel welcome within the sector, but also means ensuring Early Learning and Care is a profession with a good work/life balance, secure pay, and professional growth opportunities. This is particularly important in order that Government can deliver the 30-hour week to schedule.

5. Respecting the workforce: By ensuring that each member of staff is respected and trusted in their role within the wider education and care infrastructure. This means better ways of integrating the services and communication between practitioners (to be discussed further below).

6. Proportionate Bureaucracy: With the long line of duties and responsibilities of those managing centres for Early Learning and Care, unnecessary bureaucracy feels like a burden and a waste of their energy. They have to do everything at all times for the centre: recruit, staff, clean, organise, cater, as well as all bureaucracy and administration. Some centres who work closely with schools already outsource a lot of their administration to them. Revising current bureaucratic measures, or investigating whether the capacity for integration into other local services could lift this burden would mean that qualified administrators are responsible for more, and practitioners can focus on their time with the children.
B. Developing a Modern Syllabus

Moving the focus away from teaching and towards learning should be the starting point of any new Early Learning and Care policy. Learning at a Early Learning and Care level needs to be children-centred, not curriculum-centred. Attendees agreed that the foundations of an early years syllabus should include play, listening, and community.

Policy Ideas

1. **Play**: Attendees, from the small children to the practitioners themselves, all agreed that play needs to have a more prominent focus in any early years syllabus. Learning in a Early Learning and Care setting should question what is meant by teaching and learning, and the current formality surrounding these terms. Further, learning through play should encourage children to explore social skills, their rights as children, and their community.

   Conversely, many expressed concerns about recent suggestions of increased standardized testing, which are considered counterproductive to learning. Developing any assessment should focus on “What do children get out of this?” Assessments should be meaningful, upholding a standard to expect from Early Learning and Care in Scotland, but we must develop alternative methods which take into account the voices of the children and avoid the “slavishness to top-down indicators” presented by standardised testing and stressful inspections. This will be more expensive, but will achieve nuance in place of the blunt instrument of testing. Attendees urge policymakers to keep the joy of learning—rather than learning for progression.

2. **Listening**: Concurrent with a child-centred and play-filled approach to learning, Early Learning and Care should be a collaboration with the children and their families. Listening to children cuts through a broad range of issues. This aspect of an early years syllabus should be included in everything that affects children where possible, for example, in the recruitment and evaluation of staff. This can be transformational (and challenging), as it will begin to give children access to spaces and conversations they are traditionally excluded from. By engaging in dialogue with them at this stage, children can begin to explore their rights as individuals, as well as the rights of those around them—incorporating their right not to speak.

   The challenge facing this idea is implementation: how do we ensure that listening to all children, staff, and parents is not just an empty statement? How do we ensure all are heard and involved in the community built around the child care centre?

3. **Community**: For both ‘play’ and ‘listening’ to reach their potential as a part of any new syllabus for early years, Early Learning and Care needs to be put back into the heart of communities. Practitioners voiced that they recognised a marked difference when community members participated in their centres, including both parents, extended family members, and ambassadors within the community. Early Learning and Care should be a community effort, incorporating the voices of a broad range of society, ensuring that children have the tools they need to locate themselves within that society.

   This can be interpreted both practically and ideologically. Practically, it would be an ideal situation if we could ensure that urban planning placed Early Learning and Care at the centre of their designs, ensuring that they have access to green spaces and outdoor learning facilities, that they avoid traffic, but that they still can be close to the centre of their towns, neighbourhoods and villages. Our town’s infrastructure should respond to the needs of small children and their learning, rather than seeing them as an afterthought.

   Ideologically, developing more opportunities for family members to engage with the centre’s learning practices, and reaching out to different people in any community should be a crucial part of any syllabus. Intergenerational relationships should be encouraged, incorporating all members as beneficiaries of a robust child care service, and seeing the passing on and sharing of culture as valuable. Early Learning and Care in Scotland should respond to the community that lives there, teaching history, culture, traditional songs, and more about children’s heritage, with more effort put into realising a Scotland-specific child care syllabus.

   Crucial to this aspect of any syllabus is that it emphasise the growth and development of children’s social skills, an awareness of their rights, and the importance of community. Thus far, these aspects of education, though essential, are not recognised by the ‘system’ as valuable.

   The assumption behind childcare policy should not be to simply encourage women into work, but rather to give parents the flexibility of choice. As has been outlined in this report, the responsibility to nurture the next generation of Scots should be valued accordingly, and so a parent who chooses to care for their children themselves should not be at a loss for not using the 30 hours available to them. Introducing some sort of citizen’s income for a parent or grandparent who wishes to care for their child themselves will ensure that this role in society is valued, and that we do not continue to use unpaid female labour to support our economy. The socialisation of children at this crucial stage, however, should also be emphasised, and the evident social value of a new, high quality early years syllabus should encourage parents to take advantage of the services.
C. Delivering a holistic service

To deliver the sort of world-leading Early Learning and Care that the Scottish Government is aiming for, politicians need to be fearless. Attendees at the lab expressed frustration about the top-down management and lack of innovation in policy decision-making, commenting that Early Learning and Care should not be a political football, which causes the upheaval of lives and communities when policy changes every five years. Overwhelmingly, attendees called for flexibility, trust, more robust consultation opportunities, and ultimately, a holistic approach.

1. Integration: Again and again, attendees referenced first-hand experience of inefficient systems caused by a lack of systemic integration and institutional respect. This is specifically frustrating and stressful when it relates to hierarchies within public services. One example is the 27-month health visitor check up, which could simply be completed by the professional who knows the child best: the Childhood Practitioner.

2. Top-Down Management: According to attendees, a disjuncture with the evolving field as an expanding professional practice and top-down management leads innovation and expertise to be stymied in the workplace. There needs to be more trust and respect for practitioners to make the correct choices for their centres, and not be subject to regulation which prevents them from using their potential to its fullest. This, of course, shouldn’t take away from the need to ensure that care is delivered safely and at a certain minimum standard, but this should avoid detracting from any practitioner’s care.

3. Connected Pathways: The best schools are those with seamless connections between Early Learning and Care and the next steps in a child’s education. Practitioners at the Lab claimed that this is often prevented because Early Learning and Care isn’t seen as a learning opportunity by educational professionals and policy makers. By having child care centres more directly connected to schools, children will transition to primary school more easily, and child care practitioners will be part of a wider professional community.

4. Consultation: Current consultation practice does not invest enough in ethnographic methods and human experiences with practitioners, parents, children, and community members. For robust policy, consultation should be pragmatic, respectful and participatory, in order to ensure we achieve the best possible policy for the community that is involved. This is crucial for all other pieces of the puzzle, from giving more decentralised trust to practitioners, to ensuring that a community builds around Early Learning and Care delivery. Without listening to what the community needs, the organisation and delivery of child care policy will continue to be a top down pressure on the workforce.

Conclusion

There are four principles which underpin these policy suggestions and areas of inquiry: Early Learning and Care should be holistic, it should be playful, it should invoke and involve community, it should be decentralised and respond to a community’s needs, and it should be respected as a profession.

Ends