



Scottish
Women's
Budget
Group

**FROM POLICY AMBITION
TO IMPLEMENTATION:
A GENDER BUDGET REVIEW
OF THE EXPANSION OF
EARLY LEARNING AND
CHILDCARE IN SCOTLAND**



CONTENTS

Executive summary	3
1. Introduction	6
2. Context of ELC in Scotland	8
3. Longstanding and emerging challenges	10
4. Gender budget review	12
5. The workforce perspective	22
6. The parent/carer perspective	25
7. Overall observations and conclusions	30
8. Recommendations	31
APPENDIX: Methodology	33

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from research which explored the implementation of the Scottish Government's policy on expanded funded early learning and childcare (ELC) at local level, and the impact of this implementation on the potential for achieving the policy's objectives. The research was carried out by the Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG). It involved a gender budget review informed by analysis of national and local government documents, as well as the gathering of views of ELC staff and parents as users of ELC services.

Policy context

The provision of funded ELC has been one of the flagship policies of the Scottish Government and represents one of the most significant areas of policy progress in Scotland since devolution. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 extended funded ELC to 600 hours per year for all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds (i.e. children from families receiving certain benefits and those where the parent and/or child has experience of care¹). This entitlement was subsequently extended to 1,140 hours, with this expansion of ELC fully rolled out in 2021.²

The long-term objectives of the expansion of ELC to date have been to:

- ▶ Improve children's development and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap;
- ▶ Enable more parents to enter or remain in work, training, or education;
- ▶ Strengthen family resilience through improvements in the health and wellbeing of parents and children.

The expansion of funded ELC has delivered important progress in improving affordability and increasing the capacity of public sector provision. However, workforce

pressures, difficulties in access (particularly in rural areas), changes to local delivery models, and growing financial constraints continue to limit the system's transformative potential. Alongside this, inequalities in outcomes persist. Collectively, these challenges point to a mismatch between national ambitions and implementation.

Findings and recommendations

This report highlights the need for a more outcomes-focused approach to implementation, which recognises ELC as a core component of Scotland's wider social and economic infrastructure. Such an approach is necessary if the policy is to deliver its intended outcomes, particularly for priority families; it also takes on additional significance, given the Scottish Government's intention to further expand provision of ELC.

This report identifies several interconnected challenges facing the ELC sector. These include a lack of evidence-driven policymaking, budgetary constraints, the limited voice and persistent undervaluation of the workforce within policy development, a lack of flexibility within current provision, and insufficient funded hours to deliver transformative change for priority families. All of these affect how policy is implemented and experienced on the ground.

The report also emphasises the importance of embedding gender budgeting and equality-sensitive policy analysis within ELC policymaking and funding decisions. This is particularly important given the highly gendered nature of the sector, both because women remain primary caregivers of children and because the ELC workforce is predominantly female. As a result, women are disproportionately affected by policy implementation and delivery, both as service providers and as service users.

¹ Scottish Government (2026) [Funded early learning and childcare for 2 year olds](#)

² Scottish Government (accessed: June 2026) [Funded early learning and childcare](#)

Key recommendations include:

Accessibility and support for families

- ▶ Provide more targeted support for children from low-income families within any universal ELC offer. Link the implementation of ELC more explicitly to the delivery of child poverty targets by making the offer more generous for the six priority family groups, including through the provision of additional funded hours for these families.
- ▶ Introduce greater flexibility in how and when funded hours are used, allowing parents to apply for the specific childcare hours they need rather than being tied to nursery opening times. This should include weekend and evening provision for parents working outside traditional 9–5 hours.
- ▶ Strengthen ELC delivery for eligible two-year-olds. This should include adequate and sustainable Scottish Government funding for local authorities to ensure consistent delivery across Scotland and to remove barriers that currently prevent eligible families from taking up their entitlement.
- ▶ Revise Scottish Government guidance to ensure that ELC entitlement begins the week after a child turns three, rather than from the start of the following term.
- ▶ Involve parents on low incomes and/or experiencing barriers in the design and development of the ELC application system, particularly in relation to digital approaches and the provision of information for parents of children with ASN.
- ▶ Ensure that digital approaches do not fully replace in-person support – parents must be able to meet with professionals who can provide guidance and advice on how ELC can better support their needs.

Governance and policy design

- ▶ Ensure the systematic use of intersectional gender budget analysis in policy design and the development of budget allocations to guarantee outcomes-focused policy delivery aligned with stated policy objectives. Budgetary decisions and spending priorities should be driven by evidence of inequality (including gender inequality) and need, drawing on robust disaggregated data to inform allocation, implementation and evaluation. This approach should transparently shape the ELC funding formula, and its distribution to, and spending by, local authorities, enabling clear tracking of funding from central allocation to local expenditure and evaluation against intended outcomes.
- ▶ In line with the Fair Work Convention Framework³ ensure that genuine opportunities for effective worker voice are embedded within the ELC sector, informing and influencing any future developments in ELC policy.
- ▶ Review governance mechanisms for ELC at both national and local levels to ensure stronger scrutiny of activities, including funding allocation and spending decisions, and their impact on outcomes. Ensure that intersectional sex-disaggregated data informs scrutiny, monitoring and evaluation processes.
- ▶ Strengthen opportunities for local authorities to share best practice on ELC implementation, including on approaches to accessibility, workforce development, flexibility for families, partnership working, and tackling inequalities in access and outcomes.

³ The [Fair Work Convention](#) acts as an independent advisory body to Scottish Ministers. It has been in place since April 2015.

Workforce and quality of provision

- ▶ Reform approaches to workforce professionalisation in order to increase the value placed on the ELC workforce and strengthen the quality of care.
- ▶ Review pay, childminder/child ratios and barriers to childminders providing funded hours in order to further support recruitment and retention among this part of the ELC workforce.
- ▶ Review and strengthen the quality of ELC provision. While quality is regulated and supported by the introduction of roles such as equity and excellence leads funded by the Scottish Government, the current approach may not be sufficient to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged children or to meaningfully support efforts to close the attainment gap.

Overall, the report argues that, if ELC policy, and the expansion to 1,140 hours per year, is to meet its three high-level objectives, greater attention must be paid not only to the type of provision offered, but also to implementation. This includes consideration of the number of funded hours provided, the development of delivery models that enable greater flexibility, and improved planning and use of data to ensure that priority families are placed at the centre of policy delivery.



1. INTRODUCTION

Current Scottish Government policy makes provision for 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare (ELC) per year for all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds. The policy is implemented by local authorities, working in partnership with ELC providers in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector. This report presents the findings of research carried out by Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) to explore how implementation is impacting on the delivery of national policy objectives.

The expansion of funded ELC in Scotland to 1,140 hours a year (compared to the previous offer of 600 hours a year) has been presented in its ambitions as a transformative policy intervention by the Scottish Government. The long-term objectives of this expansion are to:

- ▶ Improve children's development and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap;
- ▶ Enable more parents to enter or remain in work, training, or education;
- ▶ Strengthen family resilience through improvements in the health and wellbeing of parents and children.

As such, the expansion marked a major shift in the role of ELC within Scotland's policy landscape and reflected a different approach from that taken elsewhere in the UK.

Given these stated objectives and outcomes, the success of the Scottish Government's ELC policy cannot be measured solely by the expansion of the number

of funded hours delivered. The policy's core principles of accessibility, affordability, flexibility and quality are central to understanding whether it is achieving its intended objectives, particularly for the families expected to benefit most – those on low incomes or experiencing poverty. However, implementation challenges (including resource constraints, limitations in data availability, service design, and workforce capacity) intersect with these principles and risk undermining the long-term success of the policy.

Further policy development work is now anticipated, with the current (re-elected) Scottish National Party (SNP) administration having committed to "extending childcare support to every child in our country from 9 months old to the end of primary school by the end of the next parliament" in its manifesto for the Scottish Parliament elections of May 2026.⁴ This commitment stated that the system would be designed to "fit around families, rather than expecting families to fit around the system"⁵ and would provide support across 52 weeks of the year.

In this context, the report argues that greater attention must be paid to implementation, evidence-driven policymaking, the inclusion of workers' voices in service design, and equality and outcomes-focused approaches. This is necessary if current (and future) ELC policy is to deliver meaningful and lasting change, particularly for priority families, as identified in the Scottish Government's first delivery plan for tackling child poverty.⁶

⁴ Scottish National Party (2026) [On Scotland's Side. SNP Holyrood Election Manifesto 2026](#)

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ The Scottish Government's first delivery plan for tackling child poverty, [Every Child, Every Chance: The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-22](#), published in 2018, set out six priority family types: lone parent families, the large majority of which are headed by women; families that include a disabled adult or child; larger families; minority ethnic families; families with a child under one year old; families where the mother is under 25. Around 90% of children in poverty live in these family types.

The research

The research reported here explores the extent to which current ELC policy and delivery models at local level are aligned with the Scottish Government's stated policy objectives for ELC provision. Specifically, it aims to address the following questions:

1. Are local authorities using their budgets in a way that guarantees the implementation of ELC according to the Scottish Government's principles of quality, flexibility, accessibility and affordability for the policy?
2. How has the expansion of ELC impacted the workforce and services within the PVI and childminding sectors?
3. Is the implementation of ELC ensuring that children's development improves and the poverty-related outcomes gap narrows, improving family wellbeing and increasing parents' and carers' opportunities to take up or sustain work, training and study?

Overall, the research and the recommendations based on the research findings aim to support continued improvement in the affordability of and access to quality childcare, particularly for those on low incomes.

Research methods

This research used a mixed-method approach, incorporating three strands of work:

- 1. Analysis of secondary data published by national and local government to inform a gender budgeting review;**
- 2. Collection and analysis of primary data from parents as users of ELC, through interviews and focus groups;**
- 3. Collection and analysis of primary data from ELC workers, through an online survey.**

These lines of enquiry allowed a range of data to be collected, not only on the implementation of the policy but also on the lived experiences of those directly involved in providing and using ELC in Scotland.

Note that the analysis of local government documents (strand 1) focuses on six Scottish local authorities. These authorities were selected to represent a range of contexts, in terms of rurality, geographic spread, deprivation levels, population size, reports of mothballing or potential closures of services, and uptake rates among eligible two-year-olds. These local authorities are referred to using identifiers: LA1, LA2, etc. This helps maintain the focus on thematic analysis rather than authority-specific evaluation. All other aspects of the work adopted a Scotland-wide approach. Note also that the analysis relied solely on information in publicly available documents. The scope of the work did not allow further investigation or follow-up. Hence this report uses terms like "at least X local authorities..." to acknowledge that the documents consulted may not have been definitive in relation to all issues. Full details of the methodology used can be found in an appendix.

Structure of the report

The remainder of this report comprises seven further sections:

- SECTION 2:** Context of ELC in Scotland
- SECTION 3:** Longstanding and emerging challenges
- SECTION 4:** Gender budget review
- SECTION 5:** The workforce perspective
- SECTION 6:** The parent/ carer perspective
- SECTION 7:** Overall observations and conclusions
- SECTION 8:** Recommendations

An appendix to the report provides further information on the research methodology.

2. CONTEXT OF ELC IN SCOTLAND

Previous SWBG work⁷ explored the history and development of ELC policy in Scotland. Initial policy activity in this area was heavily influenced by changes introduced by the 1997 UK Labour Government following the publication of the first National Childcare Strategy for the UK. In Scotland, the 1998 consultation document *Meeting the Childcare Challenge: Childcare Strategy for Scotland*⁸ acknowledged the role of the future Scottish Parliament in implementing the strategy. In its introduction, the then Secretary of State for Scotland identified childcare as a major policy priority for the new parliament, with Scotland subsequently making significant progress in this area. The strategy shifted the focus of childcare from that of welfare to education, and since devolution the expansion of ELC has been one of the flagship policies of the Scottish Government and has been an area of significant policy progress.

However, it is notable that the Scottish Government's priorities for ELC have shifted over time. While increased female labour market participation and economic growth were emphasised as key policy benefits between 2013 and 2015, more recent policy framing of ELC has placed greater emphasis on its anti-poverty potential and its role in supporting family wellbeing.⁹

Since 2002, local authorities in Scotland have had a statutory duty to secure a funded ELC place for every three- and four-year-old whose parent wished to enrol them in formal ELC. Parents were initially entitled to 412.5 hours per year of free ELC from a local authority provider or from a private, voluntary or independent sector provider eligible to provide funded hours. Entitlement was expanded to 475 hours per year in

2007, and extended in 2012 to cover all looked after two-year-olds (i.e. those with a kinship care order or parent appointed guardian).

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 introduced 600 hours of funded ELC for all three- and four-year-olds and two-year-olds whose parents were in receipt of certain benefits.¹⁰ The statutory guidance for the 2014 Act identified two primary objectives for ELC: improving outcomes for children, particularly those most vulnerable; and supporting parents into employment, training or education, with a focus on those requiring assistance to secure sustainable work. The subsequent 1,140 hour expansion (implemented in 2021) placed increased emphasis on addressing the poverty-related attainment gap, defined as disparities in academic achievement linked to socio-economic disadvantage.¹¹

This shift in policy focus was likely influenced by the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, which introduced statutory child poverty targets and required the publication of delivery plans by the Scottish Government.¹² These plans incorporate a range of measures, including improving educational outcomes (particularly the closing of the attainment gap) and increasing the availability and affordability of childcare.^{13 14}

In addition, the expansion of ELC has been linked to broader objectives around family wellbeing, reflecting the Scottish Government's wider commitment to building a "wellbeing economy". The Scottish Government's 2022 delivery plan for tackling child poverty frames childcare not as a standalone policy, but as part of an integrated "employability offer", alongside measures such as accessible and affordable transport.¹⁵

⁷ SWBG (2025) [Investing in childcare. Initial Briefing.](#)

⁸ Scottish Office (1998) [Meeting the Childcare Challenge: A Childcare Strategy for Scotland.](#)

⁹ SWBG (2025) [Investing in Childcare. Initial Briefing](#)

¹⁰ Wane (2019) [The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare](#), SPICe.

¹¹ Lally, C. & Maisuria, A. (2024) [Education: Inequalities and Attainment Gaps](#)

¹² [Child Poverty \(Scotland\) Act 2017.](#)

¹³ Scottish Government (2018) [Every Child, Every Chance. The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan \(2018-22\)](#)

¹⁴ Scottish Government (2022) [Best Start, Bright Futures. Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022 to 2026](#)

¹⁵ *Ibid*

Overall, this evolving policy framing highlights the increasingly wide range of objectives attached to ELC expansion. While this reflects the central and positive role of ELC in Scotland's social policy landscape, it also raises questions about whether a single policy instrument of expanded ELC hours can simultaneously deliver improvements in economic growth, poverty reduction, educational attainment, and family wellbeing.

This report examines how the Scottish Government's multiple inter-linked policy objectives translate at the implementation stage at the local level, and whether the approach taken is conducive to goal-oriented policy. However, it is important to note that, alongside the apparent shift in policy focus over time, there has been limited explicit consideration of the trade-offs between sometimes competing objectives. For example, expanding funded hours may support parental employment and economic growth, but could reduce resources available for targeted support to reduce inequalities. Likewise, investing in universal provision may improve access, but may be less effective at narrowing the poverty-related attainment gap than other or additional targeted interventions. Finally, increasing quality standards may improve outcomes, but without appropriate funding, this could increase the pressure on providers of ELC by driving up costs.

It is also important to note that, overall, evidence on progress towards the Scottish Government's ELC policy objectives at this stage remains limited. A rapid review of ELC policy conducted by the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU) and the WiSE Centre for Economic Justice (WiSE) at Glasgow Caledonian University found no compelling international evidence of an immediate impact on poverty rates, employment outcomes, or household costs¹⁶, and recent Scottish evidence appears to reflect this.

Scottish Government data suggests that progress on ELC outcomes has been modest. Analysis published in 2025 shows the attainment gap between the most and least deprived groups for P1, P4 and P7 pupils stood at 20.2 percentage points for literacy and 17.4 percentage points for numeracy in 2023/24. Compared to 2016/17, these figures represent improvements of 1.9 and 0.2 percentage points respectively, indicating limited narrowing of inequalities over time, although it is noted that a range of factors may have influenced the attainment gap during this period.¹⁷ Similarly, an evaluation published in 2026 found that evidence of progress in improving the child outcomes targeted by ELC expansion remains limited, but noted that this finding has to be viewed in the context of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸ Alongside this, the affordability and accessibility of ELC remains a live issue, particularly in the context of the rising cost of living, as evidenced by campaigning work by civil society and academia (see, for example, the work of campaign group [Pregnant then Screwed](#)). Further, evidence on the short-term impacts of policy intervention in early childhood highlights targeted measures as being most effective in reaching low-income groups,¹⁹ thus pointing to the importance of explicitly considering the needs of priority families in planning the implementation of Scotland's universal ELC policy offering.

Taken together, this suggests that any measurable effects of ELC policy in Scotland are likely to emerge only over the longer term and will be contingent on successful implementation.

¹⁶ McKendrick, J.H., Hakeem, N., Reid, L., Ritchie, M., & Sadvovska, J. (2022) [Rapid Review of Evidence on the Impact of Childcare on Parental Poverty, Employment and Household Costs in Low-income Families](#) Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit.

¹⁷ Scottish Government (2025) [Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation: Reporting on National Improvement Framework Attainment and Health and Wellbeing Measures 2025](#)

¹⁸ The Scottish Government (2026) [Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare: Final Report](#)

¹⁹ IFS (2024) [The Short- and Medium-term Impacts of Sure Start on Educational Outcomes](#)

3. LONGSTANDING AND EMERGING CHALLENGES

From 2023 onwards, mounting fiscal pressures have led to a growing number of reported issues with ELC implementation across Scotland. These largely relate to the two inter-linked issues of funding and workforce capacity as discussed here.

Within the PVI sector, funding shortfalls have been linked to PVI nursery closures and the loss of at least 347 childminding businesses in 2023 alone, according to the National Day Nurseries Association.²⁰ The sector has highlighted the lower per-child rates paid by local authorities compared to the per-child rates allocated to their own local authority settings. The Scottish Government reviews the rates paid periodically, based on commissioned research.^{21 22}

Within local authority policy and delivery, a number of developments, including the following, raise concerns:

- ▶ Reports of the potential mothballing of local authority nurseries in at least two areas in 2025 indicate the challenges associated with ELC provision. While operating nurseries at low capacity may not be sustainable, the closure of local authority settings soon after implementation of the expanded 1,140 hours policy calls into question the adequacy of planning and, more fundamentally, whether its longer-term objectives may be at risk.
- ▶ Increasing financial pressures have led a growing number of local authorities to revert to statutory provision by delaying ELC entitlement until the term after a child turns three (rather than from when they turn three). This was already standard practice in some areas, and the approach has been adopted in at least two additional local authorities since 2024.

- ▶ Restrictions on cross-boundary placements have been introduced as a cost-saving measure. This prevents children who live elsewhere from accessing ELC places with partner providers in the PVI sector within a local authority area.

These examples illustrate that the sector is under significant pressure, with public provision, long considered a cornerstone of the policy, now under strain.

These fiscal pressures add to longstanding challenges within the sector related to workforce issues. Indeed, workforce capacity is a critical pressure point within the ELC system, with ongoing challenges in recruitment, retention, and working conditions.

In December 2015, the ELC sector employed 39,030 people in Scotland, including 5,570 childminders. The majority – approximately 86% – worked in day care services.²³ Projections produced by the Scottish Government in 2018 estimated that an additional 8,000 to 11,000 staff would be needed to support the expansion of ELC to 1,140 hours, relative to 2015/16 levels.²⁴

However, by 2024, the ELC workforce had increased to 45,280, including 3,030 childminders.²⁵ This meant that, as of 2024, the ELC workforce numbers fell short of projected need by between 1,750 and 4,750.

²⁰ STV News (13 December 2023) [Nurseries in crisis: Private childcare providers 'significantly underfunded' by councils](#)

²¹ Scottish Government (2023) [ELC: Review of Sustainable Rates](#)

²² Scottish Government (2026) [Costs of Delivering Funded Early Learning and Childcare \(ELC\) in Private, Third Sector and Childminding Settings](#)

²³ Skills Development Scotland (2017) [Skills Investment Plan: Prospectus for Scotland's Early Learning and Childcare Sector](#)

²⁴ Scottish Government (2018) [FOI Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare: Scottish Government Workforce Model](#)

²⁵ Scottish Social Services Council (2025) [Scottish Social Service Sector: Report on 2024 Workforce Data](#)

The *Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Delivery Progress Report*, published by the Improvement Service in April 2025, showed that the total local authority ELC workforce had decreased by 1.9% compared to the previous year.²⁶ Change in relation to individual workforce categories was most notable for support workers and senior practitioners: the proportion of support workers increased to 12.4% in April 2025 (from 10.2% in April 2022), while the proportion of senior practitioners decreased to 8.9% (from 10.3%).

A previous 2023 report by Audit Scotland found that some councils had experienced difficulties in recruiting ELC staff, particularly in rural settings.

Further evidence of the sector's fragility is provided by the challenges faced by the PVI sector in recruiting and retaining staff. Many of these providers report losing staff to the public sector, although a lack of data means the extent of this issue cannot be quantified.²⁷ Additionally, there has been a substantial decline in the number of childminders between 2012 and 2022, as demonstrated in the workforce numbers above and highlighted in news reports in 2024.²⁸ Given the important role childminders play, particularly in rural settings, and in providing wraparound care beyond typical 9–5 working patterns, this trend has placed additional pressure on an already fragile sector and limits flexible options for parents.

Audit Scotland has flagged that workforce pressures within the PVI sector may also lead to a reduction in flexibility and choice for families.²⁹ While this is difficult

to substantiate fully, available evidence suggests that the current system is not consistently meeting families' needs. For example, a 2024 survey of parents in Aberdeenshire undertaken by SWBG found that while around 95% of respondents were able to access their ELC entitlement, only 31% said this fully met their needs. A further 65% reported that it only partly met their needs, and 4% said it did not meet their needs at all.³⁰ Further, respondents highlighted the insufficiency of 1,140 hours, particularly when delivered during term time only; limited flexibility in how funded hours can be used; and difficulties aligning childcare availability with working hours. Qualitative evidence from SWBG's 2023 work with the Fa'side Women and Girls Group and Making Rights Real in East Lothian similarly highlighted how the local delivery of funded childcare can affect women's ability to access suitable work or increase their earnings.³¹

Although evidence available to date (news reports, surveys, statistical data) highlights broad patterns and issues in ELC provision, it does not fully capture whether current implementation and delivery models are supporting the policy's long-term objectives, particularly for low-income families. This research seeks to address this gap. It builds on existing evidence, and explores how local authorities are implementing national policy at local level through a gender budgeting lens; how the challenges identified are affecting this implementation and the experiences of families and the ELC workforce; and how this relates to the overarching objectives of ELC policy in Scotland.

²⁶ Improvement Service (2025) [Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Delivery Progress Report](#)

²⁷ Audit Scotland (2023) [Early Learning and Childcare. Progress on Delivery of the 1,140 Hours Expansion](#)

²⁸ BBC (17 March 2024) [Scottish childminder numbers almost halve in a decade](#)

²⁹ Audit Scotland (2023) [Early Learning and Childcare. Progress on Delivery of the 1,140 Hours Expansion](#)

³⁰ SWBG (2025) [Assessing the Suitability and Need for Further Childcare Provision in Aberdeenshire](#)

³¹ Fa'side Women and Girls Group, SWBG and Making Rights Real (2023) [The Cost of Living Crisis – I Think About It All the Time!](#)

4. GENDER BUDGET REVIEW

A key strand of the research undertaken by SWBG was a gender budget review of the implementation of the expansion of ELC at the local level. Gender budget analysis looks at policy through the lens of gender equity. It looks at how proposals affect women and men differently, and how choices can either reduce or reinforce inequality. It focuses on results, and ties how money is spent to the outcomes public bodies want to achieve.

The gender budget review undertaken as part of this project aimed to uncover the reasons behind increasing reports of challenges within ELC delivery. The work involved an analysis of publicly available information from the Scottish Government and a sample of six local authorities related to the development and delivery of policy on expanded ELC provision. The sections below cover three main themes: resources; planning and the use of data; and workforce structures.

Resources

The gender budget review identified a number of key themes in relation to resources. These related to funding and expenditure planning, transparency on service-level expenditure, linking expenditure objectives and outcomes, and local financial constraints, as discussed below.

Funding and expenditure planning

In October 2016, the Scottish Government launched its *Blueprint for 2020* consultation, setting out its vision to expand ELC provision from 600 to 1,140 hours per year by 2020.³² This consultation informed the subsequent action plan *A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland*, published in March 2017.³³ The plan outlined a series of actions, including a requirement for local authorities to submit plans demonstrating how they intended to use additional graduate staff in line with policy objectives aimed at reducing the attainment gap.

A subsequent 2017 publication, *A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) in Scotland – ELC Expansion Planning Guidance for Local Authorities*, required local authorities to submit their approved ELC plans to the Scottish Government ELC Expansion Programme by 29 September 2017.³⁴ This guidance was accompanied by a financial template for local authorities to record estimated revenue and capital costs associated with the expansion.

While this approach was robust from a policymaking perspective, issues emerged later. A letter issued to local authority chief executives by the Scottish Government on 25 January 2018 acknowledged that the money provisionally allocated to local authorities did not, in all cases, cover the cost estimates for plans previously submitted.³⁵ Information contained in LA4 reports gives an example that may partly explain this variation:

“Scottish Government has for example highlighted their calculations do not include a provision for the purpose of land, or demolition/remediation sites. Conversely, the Scottish Government considers authorities will achieve cost benefits and economies of scale through the delivery of large elements of their programmes through the established HUBs.”³⁶

The Scottish Government’s ELC finance working group subsequently asked all local authorities to resubmit their estimated implementation costs. Local authorities were also encouraged to seek support from the Scottish Government’s ELC delivery team to review their financial projections ahead of the next submission deadline of 2 March 2018. However, the sequencing of planning and funding created an initial mismatch between policy expectations and financial certainty. Local authorities were required to develop detailed, costed delivery plans before final funding allocations were confirmed, meaning that early plans were based on estimated rather than confirmed resources.

³² Scottish Government (2016) [A Blueprint for 2020: Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland Consultation](#)

³³ Scottish Government (2017) [A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland](#)

³⁴ Scottish Government (2017) [A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare \(ELC\) in Scotland – ELC Expansion Planning Guidance for Local Authorities](#)

³⁵ Scottish Government (2018) [Annex A – Letter to Chief Executives 25 January 2018](#)

³⁶ A hub refers to a multi-agency facility, established in some Scottish local authorities, that brings together nursery provision and family support services for the local community.



The funding package for ELC expansion was formally confirmed on 1 May 2018.³⁷ This research found evidence that, despite earlier work on financial estimates, at least two of the six local authorities examined in this study received capital allocations lower than the revised bids submitted to the Scottish Government in March, with implications for the feasibility of their expansion plans. In one case, this required the local authority to draw on its revenue grant to cover capital costs as a contingency measure to ensure deliverability.

For revenue allocations, mismatches between local estimates and final central allocations are more difficult to identify from the available documentation. However, at least one local authority forecast a potential shortfall from 2021/22 onwards “if the inflation rate is greater than the 2.5% included in the Scottish Government funding”, which would have implications for the sustainability of delivery and, ultimately, the success of the policy.

These shortfalls in funding may partly explain why the Scottish Government stated that the package would be subject to annual review to ensure it reflected delivery costs and uptake, both in terms of the total eligible population and uptake among two-year-olds. However, this raises a further issue. Given the clearly defined objectives of the expansion (particularly improving outcomes for children and closing the attainment gap) the level of investment would be expected to be based on eligibility rather than uptake.

From a local authority perspective, LA6 stated that funding was “sufficient to implement the policy” but did not consider whether it was sufficient to achieve its longer-term objectives. In contrast, LA3 viewed funding as insufficient to meet policy aims. The following statement from a committee report published in May 2018 expresses concern that funding assumptions could lead to delivery models that may not support parental employment:

“There is a risk that the guidance we received from Scottish Government delivery support team to devise our expansion plans estimates in our finance template may require us to provide models of delivery for the 1,140 hours which will not be suitable for many parents to be able to access work.”

Overall, this evidence suggests that the level and basis of investment planning is aligned with the implementation of a statutory entitlement (the universal offer of 1,140 hours for three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds). However, this is less suited to a full assessment of whether funding is sufficient to achieve the policy’s longer-term objectives.

Transparency on service-level expenditure

Beyond issues of funding variation, a further challenge for this research concerns the extent to which Scottish Government allocations can be effectively traced through to local delivery. Publicly available documents consulted as part of this research show that all six local authorities implemented the 1,140 hours on a phased basis, and provided regular updates at local committee level on the number of settings offering this each year. While total Scottish Government funding allocations for the expansion are clearly documented, it is difficult to trace how this investment is distributed and used at service level. This reflects the way local authority budgets are structured, with ELC spending typically embedded within broader categories such as “early years”, “education” or “communities”, making it difficult to isolate and track specific allocations. This is confirmed in work by Audit Scotland, which found that spending on pre-primary education extends beyond the expansion to 1,140 hours. It also highlighted that Local Financial

³⁷ Scottish Government (2018) *Early Learning and Childcare – Multi-Year Revenue and Capital Allocations*

Return (LFR) information local authorities are required to submit to the Scottish Government each year (one of the main tools for monitoring council expenditure) does not distinguish between spending on the original 600 hours of funded ELC and the additional costs associated with the expansion to 1,140 hours. These and other complexities mean that the Scottish Government does not have a clear picture of the total amount spent on implementing the increase from 600 to 1,140 hours.³⁸

Figure 1. Example of a local authority budget containing funding allocations without a specific budget line for 1,140 hour entitlement

EDUCATION & CHILDREN'S SERVICES	BASE BUDGET FINANCIAL YEAR £'000
Admin & Management	£
Nursery	£
Primary	£
Secondary	£
Special	£
Community Learning & Development	£
Active Schools	£
School Catering	£
Children – Community Care	£
Children – Family Placement	£
Children – Residential Care	£
Children – Out of Authority Placements	£
TOTAL	£

As a result, although significant investment has been made, the difficulty of tracking expenditure limits the ability to assess overall impact on service delivery.

A clear distinction also emerges between capital and revenue expenditure. Capital investment is generally transparent and traceable, and is often linked to specific infrastructure projects, whereas revenue funding is embedded within broader service budgets, making it significantly more difficult to isolate expenditure on 1,140 hours expansion. Our review found that only one local authority (LA5) had an early years revenue budget that included a specific line for the expansion of ELC provision to 1,140 hours. However, the allocation shown did not fully match the allocation from the Scottish

Government. Moreover, this budget line provides no information on what the funding translates into in practice – that is, what it actually pays for.

By contrast, LA1 demonstrated best practice in capital funding among the local authorities reviewed, providing clear and transparent information on the total Scottish Government budget, annual local budgets, and variations in expenditure. This meant that changes were easily traceable in subsequent budgets, alongside explanations for project delays.

This imbalance in financial transparency, where capital investment is more identifiable than revenue spending, limits the extent to which funding can be meaningfully linked to service delivery and outcomes. In the absence of clear expenditure tracking, assessing whether investment supports the policy's objectives is challenging.

Linking expenditure to objectives and outcomes

A common theme across all the local authorities examined was the lack of focus and/or analysis regarding how ELC investment was contributing to (or failing to contribute to) progress towards the policy's long-term objectives. While funding has clearly supported³⁹ the expansion of provision with high take-up rates and improvements in operational delivery, there is less evidence demonstrating its impact on longer-term outcomes.

In several cases, local authorities in our sample reported positive developments in outputs associated with the expansion. For example, LA1 demonstrated increased uptake of funded ELC places among eligible two-year-olds over the three years to 2021/22, alongside improvements in quality indicators, with all settings assessed in 2021/22 achieving Care Inspectorate ratings of "good" or better.⁴⁰ These improvements were linked to funded activities such as workforce expansion and targeted quality support, including the introduction of early years senior practitioners. This suggests that financial investment has enabled key delivery actions and contributed to measurable improvements in short-term outputs.

³⁸ Audit Scotland (2023) [Early Learning and Childcare. Progress on Delivery of the 1,140 Hours Expansion](#)

³⁹ Scottish Government (2025) [Funded Early Learning and Childcare Statistics 2025](#)

⁴⁰ The [Care Inspectorate](#) is a national body responsible for inspecting all registered care services in Scotland. The Care Inspectorate uses a six-point scale in evaluating services, ranging from unsatisfactory to excellent.

However, these outputs are not consistently linked to the policy's long-term objectives, such as improving child development outcomes or increasing parental employment. While LA2 undertook an early evaluation in 2022 and identified improvements in service quality and uptake among two-year-olds, it did not quantify how many children and families benefited, or the extent to which these changes translated into improved outcomes. Similarly, other authorities reported progress in delivery but did not assess whether these changes were sufficient to achieve long-term policy goals.

LA4 participated, as part of the ELC West Partnership Early Years Network, in a longitudinal study of the impact of 1,140 hours expansion on children and families. This study aimed to assess implications for Scotland's **Curriculum for Excellence** and the early level, with the findings intended to inform pedagogical approaches and provide a more detailed understanding of how expansion affects outcomes for children and families. LA2 also reported in 2023 its intention to participate in a longitudinal evaluation of the expansion of ELC against its three high-level outcomes. These examples illustrate a more developed approach to evaluation in some local authorities, but our research suggests that these remain exceptions rather than the norm.



More broadly, the absence of systematic evaluation in most local authorities (as suggested by our research) limits the ability to assess the effectiveness of investment. In cases such as LA6, successful implementation “on time, on budget” was reported, but without any formal assessment of impact. As a result, funding is primarily linked to the delivery of activities and outputs, rather than demonstrable outcomes.

Overall, while there is clear evidence that financial investment has enabled the expansion of ELC provision and improvements in access and quality, there is limited and inconsistent evidence linking this investment to the achievement of the policy's core objectives.

Local financial constraints

While national ring-fenced investment has enabled the expansion of ELC provision and supported improvements in access, it is important to consider the constraints under which local authorities operate. In practice, ongoing financial pressures have required authorities to make adjustments to delivery in order to maintain balanced budgets. These adjustments appear to have become more frequent since funding associated with the expansion ceased to be ring-fenced in 2025.

This is particularly evident in two of the local authorities included in our review, where recent updates to relevant local committees indicate responses to mounting financial pressures rather than the outcomes of formal evaluation. The publication of guidance in one local authority on the mothballing or deactivation of ELC settings at the end of 2024 (three years after full rollout, rather than as part of early-stage policy design) is one such example, as is the decision in another authority to limit cross-boundary placements to local authority settings.

Another reactive measure concerns LA4's proposal in May 2023 to change its ELC admissions policy. Until then, this local authority had provided funded ELC to three-year-olds from the day after their third birthday, ahead of the statutory obligation requiring provision from the term after a child turns three. Committee papers show that a proposed change to statutory provision was intended to “enable the service to accrue potential efficiencies to support the anticipated increase in deferred [placements]”.

Following committee approval of the change to statutory provision from August 2024, LA4 established a working group to review the three-year-old charging policy “to allow parents/carers the opportunity to pay for their child(ren) to take up their ELC placement in advance of their third birthday, or to provide additionality over and above the statutory entitlement”. The absence of a clear impact assessment accompanying this change to statutory provision is notable, particularly given the potential implications for low-income families.

In these cases, these measures appear to have been driven primarily by reductions in available funding. Moreover, there is little or no reference to their potential impact on the policy’s long-term objectives in how these proposals are presented to elected members.

Overall, this highlights that, where evaluative evidence is limited, financial constraint and the delivery of statutory obligations become key drivers of policy implementation and adjustment, potentially at the expense of intended outcomes.

Planning and the use of data

The first section of this gender budgeting review has examined investment and the allocation of resources in an attempt to follow the money. However, another key area of analysis concerns how gender budgeting is translated into practice through planning processes, and data collection and use, and the extent to which these are linked to policy outcomes.

Data

Data collection has been a crucial component of planning for the implementation of ELC. In 2017, in preparation for submitting delivery plans to the Scottish Government, local authorities were required to review the number of settings (public, private, voluntary

and independent) and the number of childminders offering the then statutory entitlement of 600 hours of funded ELC. This information enabled local authorities to forecast the number of settings and places, and the workforce expansion required to deliver the expanded policy of 1,140 hours. It also supported reporting to elected members, enabling scrutiny of progress towards full implementation.

Data from the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) also played an important role in the planning process.⁴¹ The Scottish Government’s 2017 ELC expansion planning guidance for local authorities encouraged the use of SIMD data “to ensure that the families and communities who stand to benefit the most from the expansion benefit first”.⁴² Subsequently, this research identified that five of the six local authorities reviewed used SIMD data to inform their delivery plans, including decisions on phasing the rollout of 1,140 hours and capital projects, with SIMD deciles 1 and 2 used as key criteria in the decision-making process. (It was not possible to determine whether this was the case for the remaining authority, based on publicly available information.)

Overall, the use of SIMD data represents a positive step, as it provides a mechanism for aligning implementation with the policy objectives of improving outcomes for children and reducing the attainment gap, and increasing parents’ opportunities to enter or sustain work and education. In the case of capital projects, some local authorities demonstrated a strong understanding of the original intention behind public sector involvement in ELC delivery, by targeting investment towards increasing provision in the most deprived areas. LA4 provides a particularly strong example of this approach, ensuring that public provision served the most deprived areas, while leaving more affluent areas to the PVI sector.

⁴¹The [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation](#) is an area-based relative measure of deprivation. It looks at the extent to which an area (a data zone) is deprived across seven domains of income, employment, education, health, access to services, crime and housing, with data zones then ranked from most deprived (ranked 1) to least deprived (ranked 6,976). SIMD data zone rankings are often referred to in terms of deciles, with decile 1 being most deprived, and decile 10 being least deprived.

⁴²Scottish Government (2017) [Supporting documents – A blueprint for 2020: the expansion of early learning and childcare \(ELC\) in Scotland – ELC expansion planning guidance for local authorities](#)

However, while the use of SIMD information supports targeting, the use of data on parental demand and preferences is equally important for designing and implementing provision. Yet, for this data to be meaningful, it is crucial to collect and consider information on parents' socio-economic circumstances, including working patterns and annual household income. This is particularly relevant to one of the key objectives of the policy: increasing parents' opportunities to take up or sustain work or training. However, the local authority documentation reviewed by SWBG highlights gaps in the availability, collection, and use of such information at local level, including how SIMD data intersects with other socio-economic data relating to parents. This suggests a limited understanding of how data should drive implementation and decision-making, weakening the ability to align service provision with policy outcomes and/or understand the impact of implementation on the progress towards the policy's long-term objectives.

LA3 provides a useful example illustrating gaps in data collection. While its ELC delivery plan included community engagement (specifically a consultation in which more than 1,700 parents and carers shared their views on the 1,140 hours expansion) the information presented in the plan and the accompanying Appendix 4 (which outlines the parent/carer survey questions) lacks detail on key socio-economic factors. In particular, there is no information on parental employment patterns, household income, or levels of literacy, all of which are critical for informing the design and phasing of provision. This limits the extent to which service delivery can be aligned with the needs of families most likely to benefit, particularly in relation to supporting parental employment and reducing inequalities.

LA3 also demonstrates shortcomings in relation to how SIMD data informed the ELC offer. For example, while the development of forest nurseries was a specific feature of its delivery plan, in line with access to outdoor learning advice provided by the Scottish Government,⁴³ the first pilot of such a nursery was in an area categorised as SIMD decile 10. More broadly, out



of seven outdoor nurseries in the local authority, four were situated in areas categorised as SIMD decile 8 or above, with only one located in a decile 2 area, and one in a decile 3 area. This suggests a limited use of spatial deprivation data in service planning and indicates a lack of alignment between new developments in ELC provision and the communities that stood to benefit most from improved access to ELC.

By contrast, LA2's consultation ahead of developing its ELC delivery plan stated that respondents were primarily from more affluent areas (SIMD deciles 7, 8, 9 and 10) and explicitly noted that the consultation with parents and carers provided "clear indicators of how those in higher socio-economic communities might access ELC in the future". Importantly, recognising that the initial consultation did not generate sufficient insight to inform planning in identified priority areas, the authority undertook a second consultation targeted at redressing this. One of the stated aims was to better understand the extent to which lack of access to childcare limited parents' and carers' employment opportunities.

Despite this evidence of good practice, subsequent parent and carer surveys in LA2 did not gather consistent demographic and socio-economic data. This adds to the evidence base highlighting shortcomings in data collection and use and represents a missed opportunity to better understand how ELC implementation relates to the policy's intended outcomes.

⁴³ Scottish Government (2017) [A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of ELC in Scotland](#)

Eligible twos

The effective use of data is particularly critical in ELC planning and implementation for identifying need and targeting provision in relation to eligible two-year-olds. As noted in the analysis of budget allocations (see above), funding has tended to be linked to uptake rather than underlying need, raising questions about how effectively provision is targeted towards eligible children. However, while local authorities made some good use of SIMD data to support the phasing of implementation, this review has identified inconsistencies in the use of such data and a lack of focus on eligible twos throughout the implementation period. This limits the extent to which policy implementation can be said to have been systematically designed around the needs of eligible two-year-olds, with implications for its effectiveness in achieving intended objectives.

Evidence from our study suggests variable practice in relation to planning provision for and increasing uptake among eligible twos:

- As already noted, LA4 designed its capital programme to ensure accessibility in SIMD deciles 1–4. However, when it comes to eligible two-year-olds, reports from this authority provide limited detail, with little reference to evidence on uptake among this cohort or actions taken to increase it. Notwithstanding this, LA4 made some positive decisions, such as increasing the rate paid to childminders for eligible two-year-olds in 2020. However, subsequent developments raise concerns. In particular, its 2024 birth–3 admissions policy states that “where places are limited, all eligible two-year-olds should be considered individually by the Head Teacher/Head of Centre and panel chairperson in accordance with the admissions criteria”. In this instance, the council does not provide sufficient data on demand, such as numbers or proportions of eligible children, to allow assessment of the impact of this policy decision. More critically, this approach raises concerns about whether the statutory entitlement for eligible two-year-olds is being fully delivered.

- LA1 offers a good example of early thinking and planning to increase uptake among eligible two-year-olds. As early as August 2018, this local authority made the decision, in partnership with providers, to offer up to 1,140 hours of childcare per year to eligible two-year-olds via the PVI sector. To support this, they increased the rate paid to providers (including childminders) for eligible two-year-olds to £6 per hour. This represents a strong example of using the PVI sector’s capacity – in terms of staff (as ratios are higher for under-threes) and space – to ensure the policy works for the most disadvantaged.
- LA3’s committee update in December 2021 highlights low uptake among eligible two-year-olds, and notes that not all areas of the city have local authority provision for this cohort. Provision for children under three relies on private providers working in partnership with the local authority. It costs more for providers to care for eligible twos because of the lower child ratio allowed, but the rates paid by LA3 did not fully compensate for this. Thus, the relatively low hourly rate paid for eligible two-year-olds may have contributed to providers prioritising the delivery of funded ELC for three- and four-year-olds. While a decision was taken by LA3 at that time to explore the cost of increasing the hourly rate paid to partner providers for eligible two-year-olds, this example reinforces the finding that the focus on this group was not consistent throughout the implementation phase.



Childminders and eligible twos

Our research identified three local authorities planning to use childminders to increase ELC uptake among eligible two-year-olds. LA2 provided a particularly strong example of this approach as it was able to increase the number of childminders registered to provide funded ELC from zero in 2017 to 70 in 2022. Crucially, the LA tried to encourage uptake of eligible twos via childminders.

However, the conditions of registration for childminders, as set out by the Care Inspectorate, present significant constraints. When working alone, a childminder can care for a maximum of six children under the age of 12, with no more than three children not yet attending primary school and no more than one child under the age of one. Importantly, the childminder's own children are included within these limits, regardless of whether they are present in the setting.⁴⁴

These restrictions can create financial challenges for childminders, particularly when combined with the inadequacy of the rates received for funded hours. As a result, while childminders may theoretically provide a way of increasing capacity for and uptake among eligible two-year-olds, the sustainability of this approach remains questionable without improved funding arrangements.

Governance or scrutiny

The issues discussed above point to the role of governance arrangements in shaping how policy is implemented and monitored in practice. Understanding the principles and long-term goals of a policy is crucial to both implementation and robust scrutiny of the activities being undertaken.

The previously presented example from LA3 about uptake among two-year-olds presented an opportunity to scrutinise this issue. In March 2020, a committee report on LA3's new admissions policy highlighted the prioritisation of eligible twos by granting access to funded ELC from the week after a child's second birthday, rather than from the term after, as is the case for three-year-olds. This indicates a clear awareness of the importance of this cohort. Furthermore, earlier work in the authority had already highlighted the importance of prioritising implementation in SIMD 1 and 2 areas, where eligible two-year-olds are likely to be concentrated. However, throughout the implementation phase, there was little evidence in committee reports that provision and uptake for eligible two-year-olds were consistently foregrounded, and limited indication of this issue being raised by elected members. By contrast, LA2's work prior to and following implementation included regular committee updates on uptake among eligible two-year-olds, and the actions taken to address this.

LA5 offers a different example of shortcomings in the scrutiny of early planning assumptions. While the authority acknowledged efforts to increase capacity for eligible two-year-olds and to work with childminders to ensure provision met statutory requirements, successive updates lacked a clear focus on progress made in delivering the number of childminders required to meet objectives. Baseline data from 2016/17 showed that there were 85 registered childminders working within the local authority area, 29 of whom were commissioned to provide funded ELC for eligible two-year-olds. An update in 2019 indicated that the number of childminders had fallen to around 79, with only 25 commissioned to provide ELC for eligible two-year-olds.

⁴⁴ Care Inspectorate (2024) [Registering and Running a Childminding Service: What You Need to Know](#)

Although the committee requested a further update on ELC implementation progress at its June 2020 meeting, the decline in the number of childminders does not appear to have been raised by elected members, despite this part of the workforce being recognised as central to the successful implementation of the expansion of ELC to 1,140 hours.

These examples provide evidence of gaps in governance, limiting the focus on outcomes when it comes to the delivery phase. In general, our review found little evidence the policy objectives of improving children's outcomes and supporting parents and carers to enter and remain in work (or education) informed decision-making or served as a lens through which to scrutinise implementation.

This highlights potentially weak governance, with some crucial aspects of the policy or development of activities – including the consideration of the impact on long-term ELC objectives – not being scrutinised properly. It also raises issues about accountability. The success of the policy depends on it being well resourced; however, most of the resources come from the Scottish Government. It is therefore arguable that local authorities cannot be held solely accountable when attempting to meet nationally set policy objectives with the resources provided to them.

Workforce structure

The final point that emerged strongly from the gender budgeting review concerned changes in workforce structures.

The Scottish Government's 2017 ELC expansion planning guidance for local authorities included a series of assumptions, the third of which related to workforce development. The document highlighted the need for a "skilled and qualified workforce that focuses on leadership, valuing and developing the existing workforce, and recruiting and training a high-performing additional workforce".⁴⁵ Reflecting this

priority, all the reviewed local authority development plans⁴⁶ submitted to the Scottish Government included information on two key areas: workforce growth, and workforce training. Some local authorities went as far as identifying recruitment as a key risk to the successful implementation of the policy.

Despite recognition of the workforce's central role in ensuring both quality of service and capacity to deliver the expanded statutory hours, evidence from local authority plans and updates to committees suggest that workforce expansion was frequently pursued through lower-cost staffing models and restructuring measures that appeared to sit uneasily with the commitment of valuing the workforce. This is particularly significant given the overwhelmingly female composition of the ELC workforce and longstanding concerns regarding the undervaluation of feminised labour.^{47 48} While greater public sector involvement in ELC potentially created more opportunities for better-paid employment compared with, for example, the PVI sector, most LA workforce plans outlined structural changes, including the phasing out of teacher roles. These measures, representing attempts to contain costs, contribute to the de-professionalisation of early years provision, and raise questions about the long-term implications for quality and workforce sustainability. In addition, very few of the reviewed local authorities acknowledged the implications of these changes for a predominantly female workforce.

Example of such staffing adjustments can be seen in a number of local authorities. LA1 reallocated nursery teachers to primary education and created early years practitioner roles. LA2's workforce delivery plan (2018) included the introduction of modern apprentice and support worker roles which, while they provided opportunities to enter the workforce, indicated a shift to lower-cost staffing models to support expansion. LA6 introduced a new staffing structure "to support career progression in ELC", including greater use of early years support assistant, nursery nurse, and trainee posts.

⁴⁵ Scottish Government (2020) [A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare \(ELC\) in Scotland – ELC Expansion Planning Guidance for Local Authorities](#)

⁴⁶ Of the six local authorities reviewed, only three published their full delivery plans. For two additional authorities, information was obtained from summaries and updates presented to relevant local authority committees. No publicly available plan or equivalent summary could be identified for the remaining authority.

⁴⁷ Scottish Government (2019) [A Fairer Scotland for Women: Gender Pay Gap Action Plan](#)

⁴⁸ Koskinen Sandberg, P. & Kohvakka, T. (16 January 2019) [The institutionalised undervaluation of women's work: What can we do about it?](#) LSE Business Review.

However, one of the clearest examples of the tension between workforce valuation and financial sustainability (partly due to the level of detail provided in committee updates) is offered by LA4. In this local authority, early years practitioner posts were graded at the same level as early years practitioner lead posts. As a result, early years practitioner salaries were significantly higher than those in other local authorities, and workforce costs became a central concern in discussions about long-term sustainability.

The average annual cost of one full-time equivalent early years practitioner in LA4 was estimated at £35,392 (including on costs). Scottish Government guidance provided in 2018 suggested that councils should anticipate average annual costs of approximately £30,000 per early years practitioner. Consequently, the council committee concluded that the existing workforce structure did not meet future business needs, arguing that it was not cost-effective, lacked clearly defined leadership structures, offered limited opportunities for progression, and failed to ensure a sustainable skilled workforce.

The proposed revised workforce structure for LA4 phased out early years practitioners, kept lead practitioners, and relied on support workers and key workers of a lower grade to support service expansion. This restructuring would result in redundancies and reductions in contracted hours for some staff, with working weeks in some cases reduced from 35 to 32 hours. Head teacher and deputy head teacher posts would be replaced by manager and deputy manager roles although, from the information provided, it remained unclear whether salaries would be equivalent to those of head (or deputy head) teachers. While the communication plan for the restructuring emphasised that “no jobs will be lost” and highlighted opportunities for career progression, the proposed reforms nevertheless contribute to continued downward pressure on the pay and professional status of the ELC workforce.

Beyond the implications for workforce valuation, these developments also raise important questions about the wider objectives of Scottish Government ELC policy. The Scottish Government’s 2017 action plan for the expansion of ELC included ambitions to diversify the ELC workforce so that it would better “reflect wider society”.⁴⁹ One key action intended to support this aim was a commitment to work with delivery partners to raise the profile of careers in ELC among underrepresented groups. Given the staffing structure changes discussed above, it is important to question whether these ambitions can realistically be achieved, particularly in relation to increasing male representation within the sector.

Taken together, our findings suggest that funding constraints played a central role in shaping new staffing structures and accelerating their implementation. While the new workforce models created additional entry points and opportunities for progression, they also represented a shift away from a more highly paid and professionalised workforce structure. Little or no recognition was given to the gendered implications of these changes, or to their broader implications for equality. Most importantly, there was no attempt to connect the policy’s anti-poverty ambitions in relation to closing the attainment gap with its potential to improve pay, conditions and professional opportunities for the highly gendered ELC workforce. In this sense, the expansion of ELC was framed primarily as an intervention for children and families, rather than also as an opportunity to address low pay and precarity within the sector itself. While successive local reports state that changes in workforce structures (will) create entry points without compromising quality of care, evidence from countries with more robust ELC systems suggests that high-quality provision is typically associated with more professionalised staff structures and enhanced workforce conditions.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Scottish Government (2017) [A Blueprint for 2020: the Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland 2017-18 Action Plan](#)

⁵⁰ Cohen, B., Moss, P., Petrie, P. & Wallace, J. (2021) ‘A New Deal for Children?’ – What happened next: A cross-national study of transferring early childhood services into education. *Early Years*, 41(2–3), pp.110–127. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09575146.2018.1504753?needAccess=true#abstract>

5. THE WORKFORCE PERSPECTIVE

Having examined the implementation of ELC through a gender budgeting lens, the report now turns to the experiences of ELC workers. Findings from a survey of workers conducted as part of this project provide insights into how wider funding and policy decisions impact on day-to-day working conditions across the sector, and how these intersect with the sector's sustainability and the policy's long-term ambitions.

The sections below cover the following main issues: value and recognition; motivation, job satisfaction and career progression; pay and working conditions; workforce sustainability and retention; and challenges for the sector. A final section then discusses structural and gendered implications of the findings.

Perceptions of value and recognition

The SWBG survey asked respondents how valued they feel by different groups. Table 1 shows that the majority of staff felt valued by children (93% said they felt valued) and parents / carers (74%) and, to a lesser extent, employers (58%). However, significantly fewer felt valued by local or national government (23% and 21% respectively). These findings suggest a clear difference between perceptions of interpersonal recognition and institutional recognition.

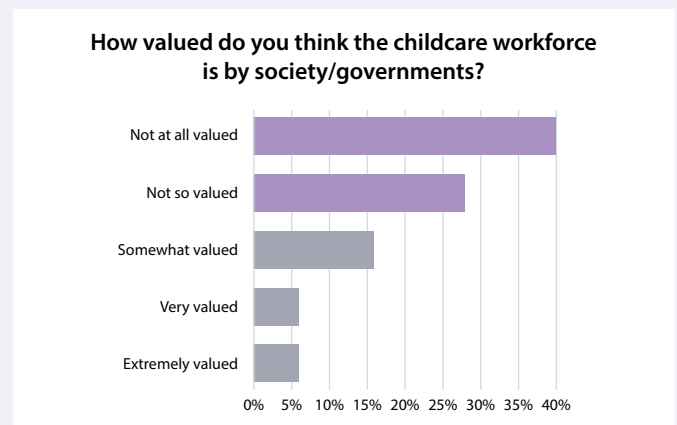
Table 1. Do you feel valued in the work you do by any of the following groups? (Number of respondents = 143)

Group	Yes	No
Children you care for	93%	7%
Parents or carers	74%	26%
Your employer	58%	42%
The local council	23%	77%
The Scottish Government	21%	79%

This pattern appears to align with wider evidence on parental satisfaction with ELC services, as high levels of satisfaction may lead to workers feeling positively recognised by families. However, the clear contrast between this and perceptions of employer and government recognition may reflect broader concerns about policy design and sector governance, a view reinforced by qualitative comments from respondents.

Further evidence of this perceived lack of recognition is seen in responses to a question on societal value, where 40% of respondents reported that they do not feel the ELC workforce is valued "at all" by society or government, and a further 29% feel it is "not so valued". See Figure 2.

Figure 2. How valued do you think the childcare workforce is by society/governments? (Number of respondents = 143)



Comments from respondents help explain these findings, highlighting concerns around pay and funding arrangements, working conditions, expectations of the role, guidance, and policy implementation:

“Expecting people who care for young children or vulnerable children to work for £4 odd an hour, only allowed 2 children if you have your own under 5 so working for 2/3 minimum wage and not allowed to charge for items that are not covered by funding (has to be optional) leaves childminders out of pocket, stressed and resentful.”

EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONER AND CHILDMINDER

“Always forgotten about. Pay doesn’t match that of teachers but we are expected to do the same assessments of the curriculum. Constant changes in publications and guidance. With new 1,140, parents now just see us as childcare...Definitely not getting it right for the children at all simply childcare. Budgets are appalling, buildings we work in even worse, staffing shortages throughout and no one cares. People leaving the sector constantly due to lack of enjoyment from the job.”

EARLY YEARS MANAGER

Recurring themes in the survey responses included workload pressures, insufficient staffing, stress, and perceptions that policy changes have shifted the ELC workforce role towards childcare provision rather than educational practice.

Motivation, job satisfaction and career progression

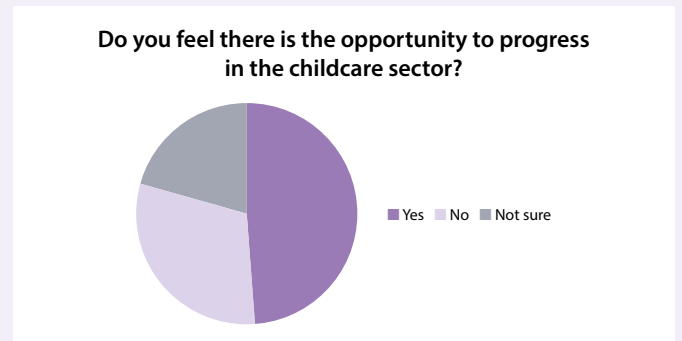
Despite these challenges, respondents nevertheless reported strong motivations for working in ELC. The majority valued spending time with children (80%), and reported a strong sense of purpose in contributing meaningfully to children’s lives (69%). Around 73% entered the sector specifically to work with children, with smaller proportions citing vocation (26%) or suitability for the role (38%).

However, this sense of purpose is not matched by confidence in career development. While half of respondents (49%) thought that there were opportunities to progress, around a third (30%) reported that there are no opportunities for progression, while a further fifth (21%) were unsure. See Figure 3. This suggests either limited visibility of career pathways within the sector or limited career progression. One respondent highlighted barriers to progression, as follows:

“Opportunities for progression are better than before. But the cost of doing further qualifications is too high putting a ceiling on how far staff can be promoted.”

EARLY YEARS LEAD PRACTITIONER

Figure 3. Do you feel there is the opportunity to progress in the childcare sector? (Number of respondents = 141)



Pay and working conditions

Pay was a central concern for survey respondents. While Scottish Government policy commits to ensuring staff delivering funded ELC are paid at least the Real Living Wage,⁵¹ survey findings indicate inconsistent implementation. Table 2 shows that while most respondents, 78%, reported being paid at or above the Real Living Wage for all hours worked, 13% reported earning below it, and 9% reported only receiving it for some hours worked.

Table 2. Do you receive the real living wage or above for all your hours of employment? (Number of respondents = 141)

1	Yes, all hours worked	69%
2	Yes, some hours worked	9%
3	No, I receive less than the real living wage	13%
4	No, I receive more than the real living wage	9%

The impact of low pay is reflected in lived experience:

“If I was paid the RLW I could afford to not have to use food hubs for food parcels, I could stop using the toothpaste that the health visitor gives out for my child for myself, we could afford to buy meat for more than one meal a week.”

CHILDMINDER

Alongside pay dissatisfaction, wider financial strain was also evident. Respondents reported difficulties with energy costs (38% reported this), food costs (31%), housing costs (30%), and transport costs (28%).

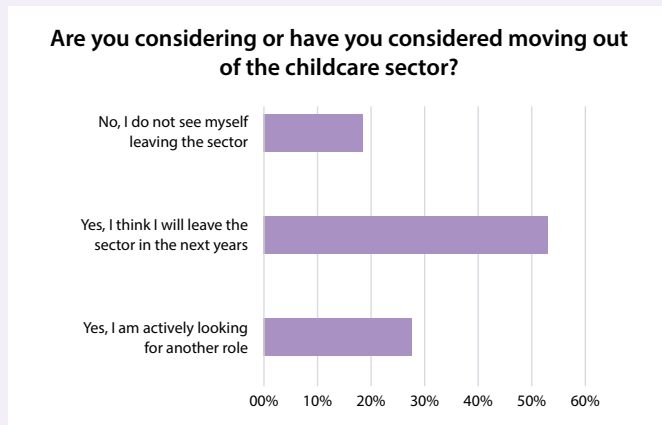
⁵¹ The **Real Living Wage** is independently calculated on the real cost of living, and is paid on a voluntary basis by employers. At the time of the survey the RLW was £12.60 per hour, but was due to increase to £13.45 per hour.

Workforce sustainability and retention

The pressures described above appear to be contributing to significant workforce instability. More than half of respondents (56%) reported high staff turnover in their workplace.

Intentions to leave are also high: around a half of respondents (54%) expected to leave the sector within a few years, while around a quarter (28%) were actively seeking alternative employment. See Figure 4. This is particularly significant given ongoing and potential future expansion of funded ELC provision.

Figure 4. Are you considering or have you considered moving out of the childcare sector? (Number of respondents = 140)



Fewer than a fifth of respondents (17% of those who commented on this issue) said they would recommend a career in ELC.

Challenges for the sector

When asked about key challenges, respondents most frequently identified workloads (identified by 67% of respondents), workforce stress (66%), physical demands (64%), pay and conditions (55%), and recruitment difficulties (38%).

Comments from respondents highlighted the additional challenge of dealing with increasing bureaucracy and an increasing administrative burden, particularly linked to the implementation of the 1,140 hours policy.

“Unrealistic expectations in paperwork, paperwork is more important than children’s care, different opinions, wants and instructions from inspectors, not seeing inspectors for years and years and then fearing inspections because you have no definitive idea what they are looking for.”

CHILDMINDER

Respondents also highlighted increasing pressures related to demand, particularly in relation to children with additional support needs (ASN). Many reported insufficient staffing, training and specialist support to meet these needs effectively.

Discussion: Structural and gendered implications

These findings highlight a sector under sustained pressure, where workforce undervaluation, pay and workloads are central concerns. A feminist analysis points to the gendered nature of these dynamics: the expansion of ELC provision relies heavily on a predominantly female workforce (with women making up 98% of the ELC workforce⁵²), and those responding to our survey indicated they feel both under-recognised and under-compensated.

These findings also align with those of the gender budgeting review, particularly in relation to the planning assumptions and changes to workforce structures identified which, in many cases, accelerated the phasing out of teachers from early years education in favour of lower-cost staffing models and restructuring measures that ultimately undervalue the workforce. The changes associated with the 1,140 hours expansion – including revised staffing structures, altered pay expectations, and increased administrative demands – seem to have contributed to a deterioration in working conditions. More broadly, these issues reflect the consequences of funding constraints and implementation challenges examined in the previous section, adding weight to concerns about the long-term sustainability of the current service model and its capacity to support further expansion.

Without addressing structural undervaluation, workforce sustainability, and rising complexity of need, the long-term objectives of ELC policy may be difficult to achieve in practice.

⁵² Scottish Government (2019) [Barriers to employment in early learning and childcare: EQIA](#)

6. THE PARENT/CARER PERSPECTIVE

This section of the report considers parents' views of ELC provision, shifting the focus to service users' perspectives to assess the extent to which implementation is meeting the policy's longer-term objectives, particularly for low-income families. The findings are based on interviews and focus groups with parents and carers across Scotland.

The section starts by presenting views and experiences related to the overall impact of ELC provision. It then goes on to cover two key issues that emerged from the interviews and focus groups: the lack of flexibility in the system; and the complexity of the system. A third less common but equally important issue raised was that of accessing ELC for children with additional support needs, and this is also discussed below.

Overall positive impact of ELC provision

Regarding the positive impact of the policy, parents emphasised both the benefits of ELC for their children's development and the opportunities it provided that would otherwise have been unaffordable without the funded hours:

"My son attends a forest nursery through his funded hours and this really suits his needs. There's no way I could have afforded this otherwise."

"Nursery has been good for my daughter – she gets to socialise with her friends and the teacher, and it has helped with her language development."

"As a single parent, nursery is the only break I get. Nursery helps him to use up his energy and the routine is good for him. The nursery identified he has some focus issues and they have helped me to support him."

Furthermore, participants highlighted that funded ELC hours provided financial support and/or contributed to their ability to balance work with caring responsibilities:

"The funded hours has definitely helped me to balance work with childcare which has benefited me financially."

Flexibility of the system and meeting parents' needs

Increased flexibility was viewed as essential to improving affordability, as many parents described how the way funded hours are scheduled by providers, both public and PVI, can result in wasted hours or the need to pay for additional wraparound care, thereby reducing the financial benefit of the entitlement:

"The private nursery applied funded hours rigidly [9am to 3pm, Monday to Friday] which did not align with [a] compressed four-day work week or [the] need for early drop-offs and late pick-ups. This negated much of the financial benefit as had to pay for wraparound care."

"If you work shifts or weekends then the hours really don't help you."

Participants' experiences also suggested that the current model is often designed around assumptions of dual-parent households or the availability of extended family support. Where this is not the case, particularly for single parents and migrant households, balancing paid work and childcare becomes significantly more challenging when available provision does not align with parents' working patterns and everyday realities. In turn, this can have knock-on effects on parents' ability to secure or remain in employment, or the hours they are able to work:

"The funded hours are a godsend, they allow me to work as I couldn't do it as a single parent otherwise, but they only allow me to work part-time."

In addition, some participants highlighted the impact of poor planning assumptions on their ability to make the best use of funded hours. The following example from a mother of two children who had to attend different nurseries because of their ages is particularly striking and demonstrates the need for better joined-up thinking at the local authority level:

“One of the nurseries is round the corner, while the other is a 10-minute drive away. The nurseries start at different times: we can drop our eldest off from 8.30am and he stays there until 4.30pm – we pay for an extra hour for him. My youngest can attend from 7.30am until 6pm. However, for funded childcare, the latest pick-up time is 3 or 3.30pm. We wouldn’t need the additional hours if we didn’t have the travel time.”

At the same time, some parents reported that the issue was not flexibility alone; rather, the number of funded hours was insufficient once travel time to and from work was taken into account:

“The DWP [Department for Work and Pensions] expect you to work 30 hours [term time] but you only get access to 30 hours a week funded childcare. It’s as if they think you can fly to work. You need at least 40 hours childcare to manage drop-off and pick-ups, and it needs to be over the full year not just term time.”

Other respondents described how the ELC options available did not support career progression or planning:

“The childcare system supported me in staying in my job but offered no flexibility for career progression or taking on more hours/responsibility due to its inconsistent nature.”

“The lack of flexibility in childcare has meant I haven’t been able to progress in my work as you can’t build or plan with just two years of childcare in place.”

⁵³ IPPR (2025) [Women in Scotland: The Gendered Impact of Care on Financial Stability and Well-being](#)

⁵⁴ Scottish Government (2025) [A gendered lens to income from employment – Tackling child poverty – progress report 2024-2025: annex b – focus report on gender and poverty](#)

Parents in rural areas shared the particular challenges they faced:

“There are limitations to what childcare I can access due to rurality. I didn’t have much choice about provider, I had to take what I could be able to work. Using a private nursery 9am to 3pm, Monday to Friday as there were no school nurseries or childminders in my area.”

Additionally, parents reported that the current model appears to assume that families are able to absorb caring responsibilities during holiday periods. Participants noted that this issue becomes even more challenging in rural settings and, more broadly, can lessen the positive impact of funded ELC due to affordability constraints:

“I’m stuck during the summer holiday, no idea what I’ll do or how I’ll afford it.”

“My nursery is only open term time. It costs £50 a day to get childcare during the holiday. It’s just too expensive when you only have one income coming in.”

The challenges faced can be compounded when families have more than one child, as this increases both the amount of childcare needed and the complexity of managing care alongside work.

“Having children of different ages is a real struggle in terms of accessing care that works for them all. Even if nursery was open over the holidays, I’d then have to drop my kids off at different places and different times.”

The quotes presented here point to the insufficiency of the current funded ELC offer in supporting parents and carers to enter, remain in or progress at work. Changes in social norms, including a shift away from the traditional nuclear family model and an increase in dual-earner households, mean that unsuitable childcare can significantly impact parents’ ability to balance caring and work responsibilities. Evidence beyond this research indicates that mothers remain the primary caregivers,⁵³ are more likely to be second earners, and make up the majority of single parents,⁵⁴ meaning this continues to be an entrenched gendered issue.

Complexity of the system

The second strong theme that emerged was the complexity of navigating the ELC system. Participants described difficulties understanding how to make best use of funded hours; reported that information provided by local councils was often unclear; and highlighted challenges in contacting councils directly for support or clarification.

Eligible twos

Parents with children under three years of age emphasised the difficulty of finding information about funded provision for eligible two-year-olds and determining whether the criteria applied to their children.

There is evidence of local authority admissions policies in some areas, including provisions for the head teacher/head of centre to assess individual cases where capacity is limited, compounding the difficulty in accessing consistent information. (See also the gender budgeting section of this report.)

In addition to the lack of clear information, poor website design was identified as another barrier preventing parents from navigating ELC registrations and accessing service information.

Further research should examine whether these issues are contributing to the low uptake of funded provision among eligible two-year-olds.

More broadly, participants' experiences suggest that the system is frequently based on the assumption that families understand how to navigate administrative processes and entitlement systems:

"It felt like it's so rigidly bound in some imaginary rules. It wasn't working for our family at all. For someone who has absolutely no support."

This aligns with the findings of other research (see SWBG's report on gender inequality and poverty in Aberdeen⁵⁵).

One woman with no recourse to public funds⁵⁶ who had recently moved to a new area believed she could not access funded provision until her child turned three because the local authority website indicated that eligibility was linked to receipt of benefits. Although families with no recourse to public funds may be eligible in some circumstances, the information provided did not make this clear and discouraged her from applying. Reflecting on this experience, she said: "There's an assumption made that people know what they are entitled to and how to access it. People think you know these things." She also described how access to childcare would have enabled her child to socialise and increased her own ability to work or volunteer, but that the cost of childcare for children under the age of three was prohibitive.

This participant also described difficulties accessing support and information more generally. Her health visitor had not provided information about funded provision for eligible two-year-olds, and she had struggled to contact services for further guidance. Although she attempted to register her child with a nursery, she was unable to do so because forms were unavailable. While she had identified a suitable nursery, it was far from her current home, and she remained uncertain about local availability. Overall, she felt that the information and guidance available had been insufficient, and she had relied instead on informal support from friends to navigate the system.

Limited and unclear information created barriers to accessing support for other parents, particularly regarding awareness of entitlements and the complexity of navigating the system. The following quotes from other participants further illustrate these challenges:

"There was the added stress of figuring out how to make the best use of your hours. The information on the council's site wasn't clear. The nursery helped with this once I was able to get in touch with them."

"They assume everyone works in the council and they understand their systems, when in reality they are difficult to navigate."

⁵⁵ SWBG (2025) [Aberdeen Gender Inequality and Poverty Report](#)

⁵⁶ An individual granted leave to remain in the UK may have a "no recourse to public funds" (NRPF) restriction as a condition of that leave. The NRPF condition means the individual cannot claim most benefits, or housing assistance.

“Hub helped us to understand what we were entitled to, without them we wouldn’t have known what we needed to do. They actually explained it to us. The website wasn’t helpful as you can’t ask questions online. It’s like they assume everyone knows what they can access.”

Accessing ELC for children with additional support needs

A final issue that emerged from the work with parents was the challenges faced by this with children with ASN, with participants highlighting the difficulties of accessing appropriate support for their children. One

mother described how insufficient staffing within her child’s nursery undermined both her child’s inclusion and her own ability to remain in employment:

“My child has ASN, is non-verbal. I regularly was called by nursery to come and pick him up early as they were unable to manage. There just weren’t enough staff for them to provide him one-to-one support. There’s no way I could keep a job with them phoning me after a couple of hours.”

This reflects wider concerns raised throughout the research regarding staffing pressures, insufficient specialist support, and the growing complexity of need within the ELC sector.

CASE STUDY: The complex relationship between childcare access, financial insecurity, disability and experiences of domestic abuse

Parent A is a disabled single parent with two children. Her younger child started nursery at nine months old to allow her to return to work. However, the cost of year-round childcare meant that most of her salary was spent on nursery fees:

“What was the point of me earning minimum wage to pay someone minimum wage to look after my child?”

Nursery fees of approximately £840 per month had left her with very little disposable income, even with support from family members.

Although she was a registered disabled parent, Parent A was not eligible for funded provision for two-year-olds while living with her partner because she was in work. Following the breakdown of the relationship, the time required to process her application meant that funded support was not approved before her child turned three.

The flexibility offered by a private nursery had been essential in enabling Parent A to remain in employment, as local authority provision did not align with her working hours. The nursery provider had advocated successfully for her child to remain in the setting once funded hours became available,

despite pressure from the council to move to one of their nurseries.

Parent A linked her ability to leave an abusive relationship, maintain employment, and eventually move into more fulfilling work to access to funded childcare:

“If it wasn’t for the funded childcare, I wouldn’t have been able to leave my partner...I wouldn’t have had the freedom to change my situation.”

She acknowledged that she couldn’t have continued working without funded childcare, but said “it doesn’t go far enough”.

Parent A also highlighted the complexity of the application process and the lack of accessible information about entitlements:

“If you don’t know about it, how do you know to apply for it? The information about it isn’t clear.”

Overall, Parent A’s case demonstrates how childcare policy intersects with disability, gender-based violence, employment and poverty, while also illustrating the importance of flexibility and clear entitlement systems for parents in vulnerable situations.



These findings suggest that, while parents recognise the benefits of ELC and report positive impacts for both themselves and their children, the current entitlement remains insufficient to meet the needs of many families. In particular, the number of funded hours often falls short of the childcare requirements of single-parent households, disabled women, migrant families and families without access to wider informal support networks. The limited flexibility in how funded hours can be used further compounds these challenges, reducing the extent to which the policy can support parents on low incomes to access and sustain employment or education.

These issues have important gendered implications. Women are more likely to be single parents and to assume primary responsibility for childcare and unpaid care work. As a result, constraints in the availability and flexibility of ELC provision may disproportionately affect women's ability to participate in the labour market. Existing gender inequalities, including the prevalence of violence against women and girls, can create additional barriers for women seeking to balance work and caring responsibilities following family breakdown. Taken together, these findings suggest that, although the policy has delivered important benefits, further attention is required to ensure that its anti-poverty objectives are fully realised and that a gendered lens is taken to any future policy development on ELC.

7. OVERALL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this research brings to the fore the shortcomings of multilevel, goal-oriented policymaking in Scotland. While the objectives of ELC expansion have been clearly articulated for several years, they are rarely reflected in discussions surrounding implementation at the local level. Consequently, although it is clear that financial investment has enabled the expansion of ELC provision and improvements in access and quality, there is limited and inconsistent evidence linking this investment to the achievement of the policy's long-term objectives.

By combining local authority information with information gathered from parents and ELC workers, this research provides a broad view of ELC implementation, particularly in relation to how the disconnect between national and local government, funding shortfalls, weak scrutiny, and differing levels of entitlement interact to create a system that often falls short for parents, children, and workers.

Funding and implementation appear to be assessed primarily in terms of the delivery of activities, outputs, and statutory obligations, rather than demonstrable social outcomes. As a result, financial constraints and compliance requirements often become the main drivers of policy implementation and adjustment, potentially at the expense of the policy's intended long-term objectives. Furthermore, an imbalance in financial transparency, for example between revenue and capital spending, makes it difficult to assess the overall impact of investment in relation to outcomes. In the absence of clear expenditure tracking, determining whether investment supports the policy's objectives is challenging. These findings also suggest that the governance arrangements underpinning ELC expansion require strengthening, particularly in relation to scrutiny, transparency, coordination between national and local government, and the evaluation of outcomes in relation to investment.

More broadly, the findings suggest that ELC policy has not been approached holistically, with insufficient attention paid to the interdependencies between children's outcomes, parents' experiences of access and affordability, and the conditions of the workforce responsible for delivering provision. In light of renewed interest in ELC and commitments to further expansion,

greater attention should be paid to the potential trade-offs associated with the policy. Positioning ELC as an anti-poverty tool within a universal offer may not be the most effective approach to maintaining a focus on supporting the most vulnerable children. In this respect, the research raises concerns about whether the statutory entitlement for eligible two-year-olds is being fully delivered. Equally importantly, qualitative evidence from parents demonstrates that, if the policy is not designed with the needs of parents on low incomes at its core, the result is an insufficient offer that fails to deliver transformative change for the families who need it most. Targeted measures within the universal policy framework could be an effective means of strengthening provision, by ensuring it places the long-term objectives of ELC at the forefront of delivery and reaches those who would benefit the most.

Finally, in relation to the workforce, this research highlights several potential unintended consequences of 1,140 hours implementation. Our findings point to a sector under sustained pressure, in which workforce undervaluation, pay constraints and workload intensification are central concerns. Funding constraints appear to have played a significant role in shaping new staffing structures and accelerating their implementation. While these changes and new workforce models have created additional entry points and opportunities for progression, they have also represented a shift away from a more highly paid and professionalised workforce structure. Little or no attention has been paid to the gendered implications of these changes or to their broader implications for equality. Most importantly, despite the Scottish Government's commitment to paying the Real Living Wage to those delivering funded hours, there has been no meaningful attempt to connect the policy's anti-poverty ambitions, particularly in relation to closing the attainment gap, with its potential to improve pay, conditions and professional opportunities within a highly gendered workforce. This disconnect is particularly significant because workforce conditions are closely linked to the quality, sustainability and inclusiveness of provision for children and families.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

ELC is a crucial policy within Scotland's socio-economic policy landscape. With the Scottish Government now focusing its attention on further expansion, it is imperative that the current system is strengthened alongside any future developments, and that this strengthening should include a review of governance mechanisms to ensure proper accountability and increased transparency of revenue allocation and spending.

The following recommendations aim to support this process.

Accessibility and support for families

- ▶ Provide more targeted support for children from low-income families within any universal ELC offer. Link the implementation of ELC more explicitly to the delivery of child poverty targets by making the offer more generous for the six priority family groups, including through the provision of additional funded hours for these families.
- ▶ Introduce greater flexibility in how and when funded hours are used, allowing parents to apply for the specific childcare hours they need rather than being tied to nursery opening times. This should include weekend and evening provision for parents working outside traditional 9–5 hours.
- ▶ Strengthen ELC delivery for eligible two-year-olds. This should include adequate and sustainable Scottish Government funding for local authorities to ensure consistent delivery across Scotland and to remove barriers that currently prevent eligible families from taking up their entitlement.
- ▶ Revise Scottish Government guidance to ensure that ELC entitlement begins the week after a child turns three, rather than from the start of the following term.
- ▶ Involve parents on low incomes and/or experiencing barriers in the design and development of the ELC application system, particularly in relation to digital approaches and the provision of information for parents of children with ASN.

- ▶ Ensure that digital approaches do not fully replace in-person support – parents must be able to meet with professionals who can provide guidance and advice on how ELC can better support their needs.

Governance and policy design

- ▶ Ensure the systematic use of intersectional gender budget analysis in policy design and the development of budget allocations to guarantee outcomes-focused policy delivery aligned with stated policy objectives. Budgetary decisions and spending priorities should be driven by evidence of inequality (including gender inequality) and need, drawing on robust disaggregated data to inform allocation, implementation and evaluation. This approach should transparently shape the ELC funding formula, and its distribution to, and spending by, local authorities, enabling clear tracking of funding from central allocation to local expenditure and evaluation against intended outcomes.
- ▶ In line with the Fair Work Convention Framework⁵⁷ ensure that genuine opportunities for effective worker voice are embedded within the ELC sector, informing and influencing any future developments in ELC policy.
- ▶ Review governance mechanisms for ELC at both national and local levels to ensure stronger scrutiny of activities, including funding allocation and spending decisions, and their impact on outcomes. Ensure that intersectional sex-disaggregated data informs scrutiny, monitoring and evaluation processes.
- ▶ Strengthen opportunities for local authorities to share best practice on ELC implementation, including on approaches to accessibility, workforce development, flexibility for families, partnership working, and tackling inequalities in access and outcomes.

⁵⁷The [Fair Work Convention](#) acts as an independent advisory body to Scottish Ministers. It has been in place since April 2015.

Workforce and quality of provision

- ▶ Reform approaches to workforce professionalisation in order to increase the value placed on the ELC workforce and strengthen the quality of care.
- ▶ Review pay, childminder/child ratios and barriers to childminders providing funded hours in order to further support recruitment and retention among this part of the ELC workforce.
- ▶ Review and strengthen the quality of ELC provision. While quality is regulated and supported by the introduction of roles such as equity and excellence leads funded by the Scottish Government, the current approach may not be sufficient to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged children or to meaningfully support efforts to close the attainment gap.



APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

This research investigated the ways in which the implementation of early learning and childcare (ELC) policy in Scotland has impacted the delivery of the economic, social and educational objectives of ELC expansion as outlined by the Scottish Government. The long-term objectives of the expansion of ELC to date have been to:

- ▶ Improve children's development and narrow the poverty-related attainment gap;
- ▶ Enable more parents to enter or remain in work, training, or education;
- ▶ Strengthen family resilience through improvements in the health and wellbeing of parents and children.

The research aimed to assess whether current delivery models are on track to achieve the policy's intended outcomes. It particularly examined the impact of the policy on low-income families, in terms of improving access to high-quality, affordable ELC. By adopting a gender budgeting approach, the project aimed to assess the impact on, and implications for, women in particular, as both childcare users and providers.

Given the broad scope of the policy's long-term objectives, and the range of groups impacted by the policy, the research adopted a mixed-methods approach. This enabled us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impacts of expansion of ELC, to capture different perspectives, and to triangulate the data to strengthen the validity of the results.

The research used three main lines of enquiry:

- 1. Analysis of secondary data published by national and local government;**
- 2. Collection and analysis of primary data from parents as users of ELC, through interviews and focus groups;**
- 3. Collection and analysis of primary data from ELC workers, through an online survey.**

These lines of enquiry allowed a range of data to be collected not only on the implementation of the policy but also on the lived experiences of those directly involved in providing and using ELC in Scotland.

Note that while secondary data was gathered from a limited number of local authority areas, primary data was gathered from across Scotland.

Secondary data – Scottish Government and local authority documents

The research examined publicly available Scottish Government and local authority documents on ELC implementation for the period 2017 to 2025. The aim was to gather information on budget allocation, delivery models and targeted support for eligible twos.

Given the scope of the research, the collection of secondary data focused on a sample of local authorities that would capture a range of contexts and characteristics. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select six local authorities representing variation in rurality, geographic location, deprivation levels, population size, uptake among eligible two-year-olds, and reports of mothballing and potential closures of ELC settings. Although the policy documents considered in the research are publicly available, local authorities have been anonymised in the reporting to ensure the focus is on thematic analysis and conclusions and not authority-specific evaluation. Local authorities are thus referred to by number (LA1, LA2, etc.). Table A1 below summarises the characteristics of each of the six local authorities.

Table A1. Features of the reviewed local authorities

Local authority	Contexts and characteristics
LA1	Rural; low levels of deprivation;* low populated area; low uptake among eligible two-year-olds; reports of mothballing, potential closures, or other related issues.
LA2	Urban; mid-range levels of deprivation overall; high-populated area.**
LA3	Urban; mid-range levels of deprivation overall; high-populated area;** reports of mothballing, potential closures, or other related issues.
LA4	(Mostly) urban; high levels of deprivation; high-populated area.
LA5	Rural; low levels of deprivation; low populated area; low uptake among eligible two-year-olds.
LA6	Rural; mid-range levels of deprivation overall; low populated area.

Notes: * Based on SIMD data

Relevant documents were identified via website searches. In all, the research identified 364 relevant documents: 14 from the Scottish Government and 350 from local authorities. The local authority documents focused on those presented to committees responsible for overseeing ELC implementation. These included, but are not limited to, ELC local delivery plans, updates to relevant committees, financial outturn reports, and minutes from committee meetings. Each identified document was read carefully and relevant information extracted to allow the policymaking and implementation pathway to be mapped. Data for each local authority was collated and analysed at individual authority level. This was then combined to allow broader thematic analysis across the six authorities.

It should be noted that the analysis reported relied solely on information included in the published documents identified by the researchers. The scope of the work did not allow further investigation or follow-up with local authorities. Hence this report uses terms like “at least X local authorities...” to acknowledge that the data considered may not have been definitive in relation to all issues.

Primary data

This research gathered primary data from two groups: parents as users of ELC services, and members of the ELC workforce.

Survey of the ELC workforce

An online survey of those working within the ELC sector was undertaken. This aimed to gather information on issues such as job satisfaction, pay and conditions and potential challenges in the sector.

Survey participants were recruited using open convenience sampling, which allowed individuals to voluntarily self-select to participate in the survey. The survey was promoted to those working within the ELC sector across Scotland through relevant organisational channels such as mailing lists and social media platforms; partner organisations operating within the third sector also circulated study information to their own networks and mailing lists. Participants provided informed consent and were guaranteed anonymity. All participants were entered into a prize draw for a £25 shopping voucher.

The survey was available for a month from 27 March 2026. It was completed by 143 respondents, of whom 94% were women and 5% were men. In terms of sectoral representation, 51% worked in the public sector, 16% in the private sector, 9% in the voluntary sector, and 24% were childminders. In terms of area type, 31% of respondents were based in a rural area and 69% were based in an urban area.

Interviews and focus groups with parents / carers

Interviews and focus groups were carried out with parents / carers as users of ELC services. These aimed to gather information on the affordability, accessibility, flexibility and quality of childcare, and the impact of funded ELC on participants' ability to undertake work or study.

The interviews and focus groups used semi-structured topic guides with the aim of allowing in-depth exploration of the experiences and views of participants and encouraging open discussion and coverage of the issues important to participants.

Participants were recruited using an approach combining purposive, convenience and referral-based methods.

Participants were initially recruited from a pool of parents / carers who had participated in previous SWBG

research and had consented to being contacted about future studies. Additional participants were recruited through partner organisations operating within the third sector in Scotland, which circulated study information to their own networks and mailing lists.

Interested individuals were offered a choice between inclusion in a focus group or individual interview, and were also given a face-to-face or online option. Across all scenarios, participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained, with anonymity guaranteed in the analysis and reporting. Those who chose to take part in the study were given a £25 shopping voucher.

Altogether, 25 parents / carers took part in either an interview or a focus group, between December 2025 and March 2026. Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 14 participants, and one-to-one interviews were conducted with 11 participants. Within the achieved sample there was representation from across Scotland; from those in formal employment, not in formal employment, and in education; from ethnic minority and migrant communities, including those subject to no recourse to public funds; and from single parents, parents with disabilities, parents with children with additional support needs, and children with disabilities. All but one of the 25 participants were women. Their children ranged in age from 1 year to 15 years.

This report was published by the Scottish Women's Budget Group in June 2026.

Contact: info@swbg.org.uk

The report was written by Carmen Martinez.

Research inputs were provided by Naveed Hakeem, Heather Williams and Sara Cowan.

Editing support provided by Alison Platts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our sincere thanks go to the parents, carers, early years practitioners, managers, and childminders who participated in surveys, interviews, and discussions, generously sharing their time, experiences, and insights.

This work was funded by The Robertson Trust, whose support made this research possible.

ABOUT SWBG

The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) is a charity that promotes women's equality. We do this by helping people understand how budgets and economic policy can tackle inequality. SWBG brings together a wide range of women from across Scotland who have an interest in women's equality and want to achieve better gender equality in our society. We have focused on encouraging active gender analysis in the Scottish Budget process since 2000.

Work supported by

The
Robertson
Trust