

Easy read summary

Early learning and childcare



What is early learning and childcare?



Early learning and childcare (or ELC for short) is the care and learning services that children get before starting school.

It can be paid for by parents or by councils.

Children get ELC services in places like:



- nurseries
- early years centres
- playgroups
- childminders.

ELC providers can be:

- from the **private sector** – run by a person or company as a business
- from the **public sector** – run by councils to provide a service for the community
- from the **voluntary sector** – organisations with people who offer their time and help for free including community groups and charities.



Sector means an area of work.



‘Funded ELC’ means the hours of ELC paid for by councils.

Councils can:

- provide funded ELC services themselves
- fund a provider from the voluntary or private sector or a childminder
- or use a mix of these things.



If you are **eligible** it means you have the right to get something.

In August 2021 the number of hours of funded ELC available to **eligible** children almost doubled, from 6 hundred, to 1 thousand 1 hundred and 40 hours a year.



This is around 30 hours of funded ELC a week in school term-time.

This applies to all 3 and 4 year olds and eligible 2 year olds.



Around 1 in 4 children aged 2 will be eligible.

Some 5 year olds will also get funded ELC.

What did our report cover?



This is the third time we have looked at funded ELC.

Our first report was published in February 2018.

Our second report was in March 2020.

This document is about our third report.

It looked at the policy to increase funded ELC hours to see:

- progress with increasing funded ELC hours



Progress means how things are going.

- how the Scottish Government will check if the policy has worked well for children and families.

What did our report find?



The Scottish Government and councils did well to increase funded ELC in the Covid-19 pandemic.

Most building work got finished and lots of new staff were given jobs.



A lot of parents of 3 and 4 year old children are using the extra ELC hours.

Most parents are happy they can get the ELC hours at the times they want, in the place they want.



More 2 year olds now get funded ELC than in 2020.

Many more 2 year olds are eligible but are not using the funded hours.



The Scottish Government and partner organisations now have plans to share information so that councils know which 2 year olds are eligible and can contact them – for example families that get a particular benefit.



Increasing childcare hours is one of the Scottish Government's most important policies.

They spend around £1 billion on it every year.

The Scottish Government thinks that it will help:



- improve **childrens' development**

Childrens' development is the series of physical, language, and emotional changes that children go through as they get older.

- let parents work, study or do training
- improve family wellbeing.



Some things might make it harder in the future for families to have a choice about:

- who they want to take their ELC hours with
- when they want to take the hours.

Things that could make it harder in the future are worries about:



- if there will be enough money for the policy
- if ELC providers will continue to have enough staff to cover the extra hours
- if there will be enough funded providers like private nurseries and childminders in the future.



Because of the way information is recorded the Scottish Government does not know how much councils spent in total to bring in the extra hours between 2018/19 and 2021/22.

The Scottish Government plans to check if the policy is good value for money.

It will do this by comparing the costs and **outcomes** of:

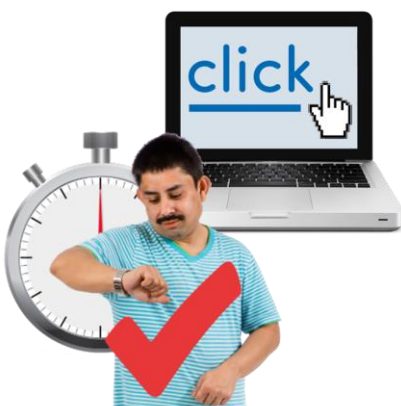
- providing 6 hundred hours of ELC in 2018/19
- providing 1 thousand 1 hundred and 40 hours of ELC in 2023/24.

An **outcome** is what the policy achieves for children and families.



There have been more delays in developing **software** to make it easier to run and check ELC services.

Software is the instructions and information that tell a computer how to work.





It is too early to tell if having more hours of ELC has achieved what it wanted to do for children and their families.

The Scottish Government has plans to check this in future.



This will be more difficult to do because Covid-19 has affected:

- children's development
- chances for parents to work, do training or to study.



Our future audit work will check if the policy has achieved what it wanted to do for children and their families.

What do we want to happen next?



A recommendation is what we think should happen.

Our report recommends that the Scottish Government and councils work together to get the data that is missing.



Better data is needed:

- to help with planning
- to understand and check progress.



Data that is missing includes:

- ELC staff moving jobs between the public, private and voluntary sectors
- how many parents want:
 - funded ELC
 - childcare they pay for themselves
- how many children with additional support needs:
 - are not using funded ELC
 - why they are not using funded ELC?
 - what needs are not being met.



We also recommend that the Scottish Government should:

- work with councils and other organisations to make plans about staff

This would make it more likely that there are enough ELC staff in the future.





- work with councils to check if providers are paying the **Living Wage** to staff delivering funded ELC

The **Living Wage** is a rate of pay based on the cost of living.

This will help decisions to be made about funding and staff.



- ask children what they think, and record their views as part of checking the policy



- make plans for future policies to get the data needed at an early stage, including data on the costs of the policy.

This will:

- improve how future policies are planned and put in place
- help to check if policies are:
 - good value for money
 - doing what they said they would do.

