

News release

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"Significant risks" to delivering early learning and childcare plan by 2020

There are "significant risks" surrounding the Scottish Government's ambition to double early learning and childcare hours by August 2020, say auditors.

Councils are preparing to provide 1,140 funded hours for all 3 and 4-year-olds -- and eligible two year-olds -- to improve outcomes for children and to support parents to work, study or train.

Providing those hours will require a large increase in the number of childcare staff and changes to premises. This will be difficult to achieve in the time available, says a report prepared for the Auditor General and Accounts Commission.

Detailed planning by the government should have been started earlier to help councils meet the 2020 deadline, notes the report. It also highlights the considerable gap between what local councils and the Scottish Government expect the policy to cost.

The report also assessed the earlier 2014 expansion of funded early learning and childcare to 600 hours. It says:

- The government did not identify measures of success before committing almost £650m to the increase, making it difficult to assess whether it is delivering value for money;
- The expansion was agreed without evidence that it would achieve the desired outcomes for children and parents and without considering other ways of achieving those objectives;
- The government and councils worked well together and parents were very positive about the benefits of funded hours to their children;
- However parents surveyed as part of the research said funded hours had a limited impact on improving their ability to work.

Caroline Gardner, Auditor General for Scotland said: "Focussing on the early years has the potential to make a real difference to young peoples' lives but the Scottish Government was not clear enough about what the expansion of funded hours in 2014 was expected to achieve.

"We are encouraged that the Scottish Government is now planning better for how it will assess the impact of the expansion to 1,140 hours and has already published some baseline information."

Graham Sharp, chair of the Accounts Commission, added: "The scale of change needed over the next two years is considerable and there are significant risks that councils will be unable to deliver that change in the time available.

"There is now an urgent need for plans addressing increases in the childcare workforce and changes to premises to be finalised and put in place."

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Notes to editors

1. From August 2014, entitlement for council-funded early learning and childcare (ELC) rose from 475 hours a year to 600 hours for all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds. Eligible two-year-olds are from potentially less advantaged backgrounds.
2. 1,140 hours per year is equivalent to 30 hours a week in school term time.
3. Extra staff refers to whole time equivalent (WTE) staff. Councils estimate that they will need 12,000 extra (WTE) staff and £690m for changes to infrastructure for the expansion. The Scottish Government expects a need for 6-8,000 more staff and initially allocated £400m for infrastructure.
4. Councils estimate they will need around £1 billion of annual revenue spending on funded ELC by 2021/22; the Scottish Government's indicative figure for annual revenue funding is around £840m.
5. Children receive ELC services in a range of settings, including nurseries in schools, standalone nurseries, early years centres, playgroups and childminders. ELC is delivered by providers in the public, private and third sectors, such as community groups and charities.
6. Audit Scotland has prepared this report for the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission for Scotland. All Audit Scotland reports published since 2000 are available at www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
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