



**Glasgow City Council**

**Education, Early Years and Skills City Policy Committee**

**Report by Executive Director of Education**

**Contact: Heather Douglas Ext: 74493**

**Item 3**

**20th August 2026**

## **ACCESSIBLE AND FLEXIBLE EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE**

### **Purpose of Report:**

To update committee on the delivery of accessible and flexible early learning and childcare provision for children aged 0-5 years.

### **Recommendations:**

It is recommended that Committee notes the current position and potential developments around accessible, flexible early learning and childcare for children 0-5 years and asks the Executive Director to continue to bring update reports as required.

Ward No(s):

Citywide: ✓

Local member(s) advised: Yes ☐ No ✓

consulted: Yes ☐ No ✓

### **PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING:**

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## **1. EARLY LEARNING & CHILDCARE – 0-5 YEARS**

### **1.1 Background**

Glasgow City Council continues to deliver universal access to 1140 hours of statutory early learning and childcare (ELC) per year for all 3 and 4 year olds and some 2 year olds in line with the Children & Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. The statutory entitlement was fully implemented in August 2021 and is now business as usual.

The expansion programme to offer up to 1140 hours of funded ELC to all eligible children was one of Scotland's biggest public sector national transformational change programmes and was set out in "A Blueprint for 2020 : the Expansion of Early Learning & Childcare in Scotland", published March 2017.

The Blueprint set out four cornerstones for delivery – Quality ; Accessibility ; Flexibility ; Affordability – and Glasgow's plan to redesign ELC services was entirely aligned to those principles. This report focuses on accessibility and flexibility.

### **1.2 Accessible Childcare**

#### **1.2.1 Model of Delivery**

The Scottish Government approach to making early learning and childcare more accessible for families was to ask local authorities to maximise the capacity of the existing ELC system by redesigning it to more fully meet the aspiration to deliver the new entitlement. This would allow the extra hours to be offered with additional provision only needing to be created where gaps existed.

The major redesign in operating model for Glasgow has been a shift from a traditional, predominantly (over 60%) term-time, short day (8.30am to 4.30pm) nursery model in 2017, towards a predominantly full year, long day (8am to 6pm) model. Over 70% of GCC operated nurseries are now open full year, 8am to 6pm. This was in response to parent consultation exercises carried out between 2015 and 2022, all of which showed consistently that the highest demand from Glasgow parents was for full year, extended day services, similar to those provided by private sector nurseries.

At the same time as changing the operating model, the ELC service moved to recruit only 52 week staff going forward. This was to support the extended opening hours and allow greater flexibility in deployment as parent demand shifted. The service still employs significant numbers of staff on term-time contracts who were already employed in this pattern but this figure is reducing over time. Some term-time staff will always be required to staff the nursery classes which are part of primary schools and the small number of standalone term-time nurseries.

Creating a larger envelope for service delivery allows either that children attend for longer hours – essential when increasing the entitlement to 1140 hours – or

that more children can access the service as it is open for longer hours, over more weeks of the year. Simply expanding the hours available to children without addressing the hours per week/weeks per year when services were previously closed, would have created a displacement issue as not all of the existing children would have been able to access the longer hours within the more limited delivery model as they would simply have run out of space.

Taking this approach meant that only 4 new build nurseries needed to be created across the city, with some other additional capacity being created through refurbishing existing buildings and registering some services for outdoor places as well as indoor places. This was the most cost efficient and sustainable approach to achieving the expansion required. It is also the most cost efficient use of staffing which is reviewed on an ongoing basis as demand fluctuates.

In addition to providing places for those children aged 2-5 years who have a statutory entitlement to ELC, some Council operated nurseries can also provide places for children under 2 years and for those 2 year olds who do not meet the eligibility criteria for funded provision. These places receive no government funding so are provided at the cost of the Council and charges for parents apply, unless the family meets the exemption/reduced fees criteria.

### **1.2.2 Funded Providers and Registered Childminders**

Glasgow is both the largest deliverer and commissioner of ELC in Scotland. On an annual basis over 15,000 children attend either a Council nursery or one of our Funded Provider settings for their statutory ELC provision. An estimated further 2,500 children under 3 years old access places within the Funded Provider settings, however, we do not hold data in relation to these places as we do not commission them.

Both statutory ELC and additional hours of childcare for children under 5 are delivered in a mixed model across 110 Council operated nurseries, 117 Funded Providers in the private, voluntary and independent school sector, and via 34 Registered Childminders who are part of the Council's ELC offer to families and a different form of funded provider.

Funded providers are an important element of provision for the city as they provide places for over one third of the children who are eligible for statutory ELC and additionally provide a significant level of provision for children under 3 who are not eligible for any funded provision.

In addition to those Registered Childminders who are part of the ELC delivery framework, there are a further 51 within the city who choose not to be part of the statutory ELC framework preferring to work privately, offering care to children aged 0 – 12 years which is entirely funded by the parent/carer. The ELC Team within Education have been working with the Scottish Childminding Association (SCMA) since 2024 on a Scottish Government funded childminding recruitment programme aiming to increase the number of childminders and have achieved 28 additional registrations, some of which are still in process.

The range of Council, Funded Provider and Childminder provision across the city ensures that services for children 0-5 years are accessible in each community and that there is a level of choice available to parents/carers looking for early learning and childcare.

### **1.2.3 Accessing Places**

If parents/carers are seeking a place in a Council nursery they are asked to apply directly to the nursery of their choice, noting the hours that they are looking for and also stating 2 further choices of nursery should their preferred option be unable to offer a place. Applications are weighted in line with the priorities set out in the Nursery Admission policy and places allocated by local area admissions panels made up of all of the Council nursery heads in the area to ensure that the highest priority applicants receive a place.

Places in Funded Provider nurseries are generally allocated on a first come, first served basis and the parent should simply apply directly to the nursery which will offer a place if they have capacity. The nursery then claims the funding from the Council for the statutory provision. ELC funded places with Registered Childminders are supported via SCMA who act as the allocations organisation, although similar to Funded Provider nurseries, they are allocated on a straightforward first come, first served basis.

The reason for the difference in allocation processes between Council provision and Funded Providers is that, in addition to the duty to provide ELC, the Council has a range of other statutory duties towards vulnerable children and children with additional support needs. The high demand for places in Council nurseries means that by necessity, a prioritisation system must be in place to give the greatest weighting to those in most need. This can lead to disappointment for families who may be unable to access their preferred service and have to be directed to alternate provision.

Information on all childcare services across the city can be found on Glasgow Family Information Service website – [www.gfis.org.uk](http://www.gfis.org.uk)

## **1.3 Flexible Childcare**

National guidance supports flexibility by requiring that ELC services for eligible children are made available using the “Funding Follows the Child” framework and commissioned by the Council from interested nursery providers and Registered Childminders using a “provider neutral approach”.

Provider neutrality ensures that the source of a child’s funded ELC place does not depend on the sector of the provider but on whether the provider meets the agreed National Standard which is set by Scottish Government. This applies to all settings eligible to deliver funded ELC, including Council nurseries, private and independent providers, 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations and Registered

Childminders. It also ensures that statutory ELC places are free at the point of access regardless of which provider a family uses.

For families, this principle guarantees that parents/carers can choose the provider which best suits their child's needs and family circumstances, subject to space availability, willingness of the provider to deliver funded hours, and where they are not a Council nursery, contractual arrangements with the local authority for the distribution of funding. This helps to ensure a more level playing field for all providers and protects flexibility of choice for families.

### 1.3.1 Flexible Models & Places

Across its 110 nursery settings, GCC offers a mix of service models to meet the varied needs of families. Key features include :

- **Year-round delivery:** 8am–6pm/ all year round. Predominant model. Places available for 0-5 years / 2-5 years / 3-5 years dependent on individual setting. Additional hours over and above the 1140 hours statutory entitlement can be purchased where capacity allows.
- **Block attendance:** Children's hours are arranged in blocks (e.g., 8am–1pm, 1pm–6pm, or 8am–6pm ) to maximise space utilisation by allowing the greatest number of children to access the service. This is the same model used in almost all Funded Provider nurseries.
- **Parental choice :** Parents/carers do not have to use the full block hours allocated and can drop off and pick up when they choose within the time slot, although they are encouraged to let their child stay for as much time as possible to enable them to fully access the curriculum. They can also opt for alternate attendance hours outwith the blocks where needed but this must be balanced by the service with operational efficiencies in terms of not displacing other children and staff deployment.
- **Term-time options:** Term-time only hours are available in both term-time only nurseries and also in the Council's full year settings where that is the parent/carer preference.

### 1.3.2 Uptake of 1140 and Additional Hours

Although the provision of ELC is a statutory duty for the Council, unlike school attendance, it is not statutory that parents/carers send their child to nursery but is rather a matter of parental choice. Uptake of the statutory hours, however, is currently 95% for 3-5 year olds and 52% for eligible 2 year olds - with more than 70% of parents/carers choosing to use their child's full 1140 hours entitlement and the majority of the remainder using between 600 and 1140 hours annually.

In relation to additional hours, over 2024/25, around 27% of parents/carers using Council nursery provision purchased extra childcare hours to support their

working needs. Data is not yet available for 2025/26 but the level of purchasing is likely to be similar.

Demand for additional hours for eligible 2, 3 and 4 year olds and hours for children under 2 in Council nurseries is high and it is not possible to meet all parent/carer requests within the current service capacity. In relation to places for children under 2 years old, nurseries routinely receive approximately 3 times the number of applications than there are places available. Expanding access to places for this age group, however, is costly due to the higher space and staff ratios required and the current lack of government funding to support this.

The ELC service does not hold equivalent data for additional hours for Funded Provider Nurseries as there is no legal locus to hold information relating to places which the Council does not purchase. A significant proportion of parents within private sector Funded Provider Nurseries, however, are likely to purchase additional hours or to be purchasing all hours attended where their child is under 3 years old and has no entitlement to funded provision.

## **2. NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS**

The Scottish Government has confirmed a commitment to expand funded childcare to cover children from the age of 9 months old through to the end of primary school, as part of its broader childcare strategy. This commitment is to be progressed within the course of the next parliamentary session and significant investment will be required to deliver it.

In the 27 May 2026 Scottish Parliament debate, the Government acknowledged the importance of “year-round childcare support to every child from 9 months old to the end of primary school”. As yet, however, there is no certainty as to whether any expanded childcare offer will be universal similar to the 1140 hours or targeted towards families affected by poverty, in line with the work within the Early Adopter Communities which has been underway since November 2022.

As early adopters, 6 local authorities of which Glasgow is one, have used small amounts of government funding to test out different models of childcare delivery for children under 2 and school aged children. This work has been targeted towards families identified within one of the six family types in the national Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan and has taken place in some of the booster ward areas prioritised as part of the Council’s local work on child poverty. The family wellbeing services for this age group are operated in partnership with the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector.

The ELC team have tested an expanded model of family wellbeing service for families with children who meet the eligible 2 year old criteria by rolling that down to also include children from 9 months. A research project has also taken place looking at methodology and providing staff training on capturing the “voice of the baby” to ensure that `needs of our youngest citizens are considered through a child rights lens. This work has taken place within all 26 of the Council’s baby

rooms although intensive support was offered to those settings within the booster wards.

School aged childcare services within booster wards have also been part of the early adopter work with testing largely focusing on differing models for providing subsidised places whilst maximising any available DWP benefits for families, enabling families to access more hours to support them to work by reducing their childcare costs or providing equitable access to activities for children which would otherwise be outwith the financial reach of some families.

While the commitment has been stated, the May debate also highlighted the need for:

- **A fully costed delivery plan and timeline for the expansion**

It is expected that some reference to this may be made in September's Programme for Government although it is unlikely to be a full delivery plan at this stage.

- **Workforce planning to ensure flexibility and availability**

In common with most local authorities, Glasgow faces ongoing challenges with regard to workforce availability to support ELC services, however, 3 rounds of recruitment over the summer have proven positive and it is hoped some of the current issues may be alleviated.

Any further expansion for children under 2 and school aged children will, however, bring its own issues in terms of a need for an even more expanded childcare workforce.

- **Cross-border placements and improved access to current funded hours for those families seeking an ELC place in a different Council area from whether they live.**

As a member of the West Partnership, Glasgow participates in the West Partnership Cross-boundary Protocol and supports Glasgow parents/carers seeking places in other areas as well as children from other areas taking up places in Glasgow services. This provides a high level of flexibility for families when choosing what works best for their child.

### **3 Policy and Resource Implications**

#### **Resource Implications:**

*Financial:*

Core ELC budget. Early adopter work funded by Scottish Government. Funding available to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2027.

*Legal:* Legal services have reviewed GDPR requirements and the application process

*Personnel:* All personnel implications will continue to be managed in line with health advice and in discussion with unions.

*Procurement:* Funded Provider ELC Framework Contract is subject to procurement. Five year contract refresh completed August 2026 via procurement processes. Annual cost of contract c.£38 million

**Council Strategic Plan:** Grand Challenge - Reduce poverty and inequality in our communities  
Mission 2 – Meet the learning and care needs of children and their families before and through school

Grand Challenge - Increase opportunity and prosperity for all our citizens  
Mission 1 – Support Glasgow residents into sustainable and fair work (childcare as an enabler of work)  
Mission 3 – Raise attainment amongst Glasgow's children and young people

**Equality and Socio-Economic Impacts:**

*Does the proposal support the Council's Equality Outcomes 2025-29? Please specify.* Yes  
Outcome 1 – lack of access to childcare is a significant barrier for women entering employment or training

*What are the potential equality impacts as a result of this report?* Positive impact

*Please highlight if the policy/proposal will help address socio-economic disadvantage.* The delivery of universal ELC and the targeted SAC Programme support the Council's Equality Outcomes through tackling poverty by providing access to high quality early learning and childcare for all age groups, supporting families to access work, training or education.



**Climate Impacts:**

*Does the proposal support any Climate Plan actions? Please specify:*

No

*What are the potential climate impacts as a result of this proposal?*

N/A

*Will the proposal contribute to Glasgow's net zero carbon target?*

N/A

**Privacy and Data Protection Impacts:**

Are there any potential data protection impacts as a result of this report  
Y/N

If Yes, please confirm that a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) has been carried out

**3 Recommendations**

It is recommended that Committee notes the current position and potential developments around accessible, flexible early learning and childcare and asks the Executive Director to continue to bring update reports as required.

**Notes**

The policy and resource implications paragraph should appear immediately **before** the recommendations in the body of the main report.

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