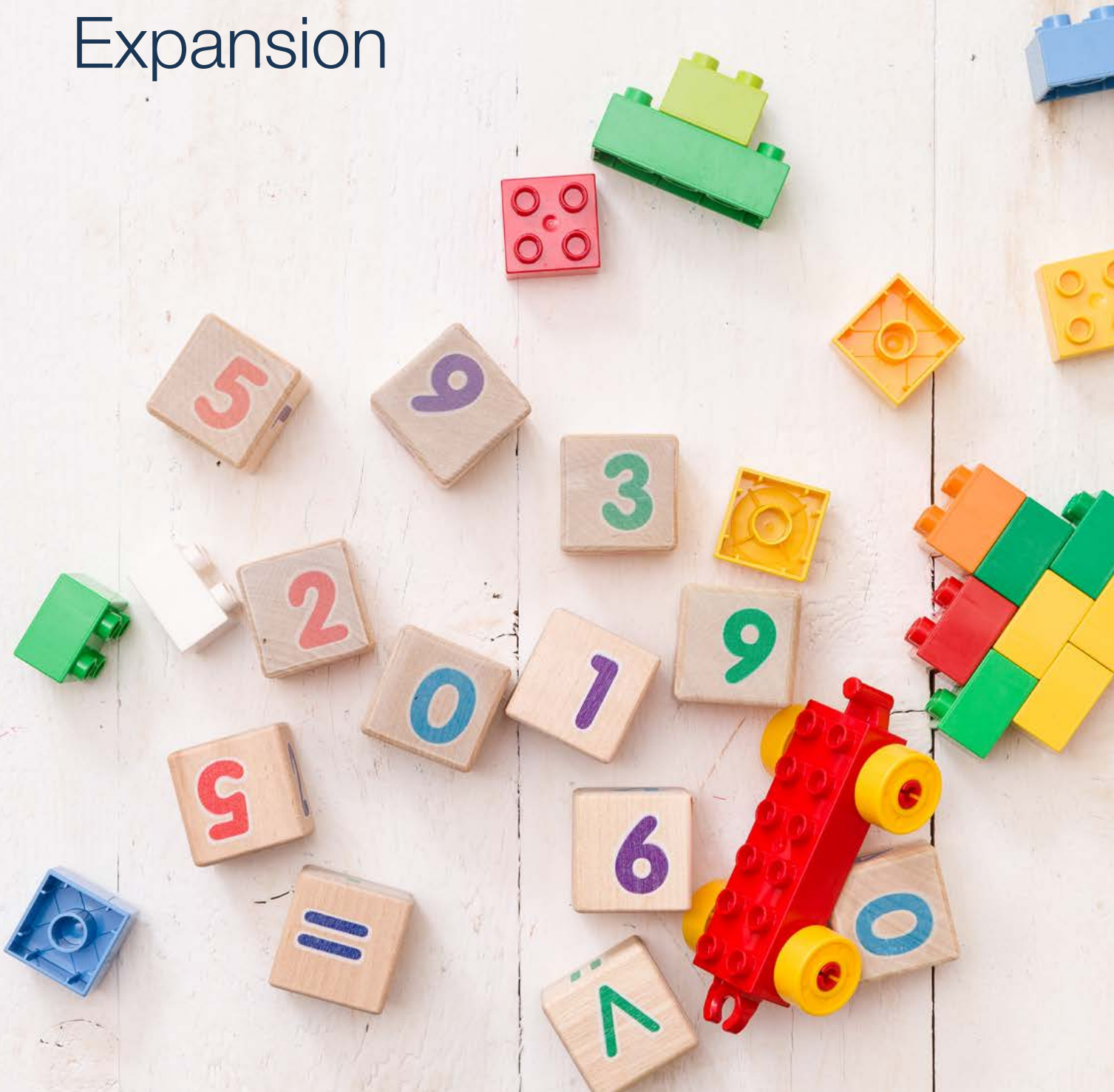


ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Early Learning and Childcare Expansion





Elected Members Briefing Series

The Improvement Service (IS) has developed an Elected Members Briefing Series to help elected members keep pace with key issues affecting local government.

Some briefing notes will be directly produced by IS staff but we will also make available material from as wide a range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services as possible.

We will use the IS website and elected member e-bulletin to publicise and provide access to the briefing notes. All briefing notes in the series can be accessed at www.improvementservice.org.uk/products-and-services/skills-and-development/elected-members-development/elected-member-guidance-and-briefings

About this briefing note

The purpose of this briefing is to support elected members' awareness of the key Scottish Government policy to increase the hours of funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) available to young children, and to highlight the successes achieved and challenges faced by local authorities in bringing this vision to realisation.



What is the issue and why does it matter?

Background

Reducing the poverty related attainment gap in learning through giving every child the best possible start in life has been central to Scottish Government policy in recent years.

Since 2016/17 the Government and local authorities have been planning for an increase in funded early years learning from a statutory annual provision of 600 hours per child, to 1140 hours per child for all eligible three and four-year-olds and some eligible two-year olds. The £2 billion programme also aims to give parents and carers more flexibility to explore work, education or training opportunities. The duty on local authorities to provide 1140 hours of funded ELC, originally intended to come into effect in August 2020, was revoked in April 2020. This was because local authorities required flexibility to focus on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst the closure of colleges and construction sites due to lockdown made it impossible to complete the building of nurseries and the recruitment of ELC staff in time for August 2020. As agreed with COSLA and Scottish Ministers, the duty has since been reinstated and will now come into effect in August 2021.

Central to the vision is that ELC provision should be ‘provider neutral’ and each family can decide the type of provider to use; known as ‘funding follows the child’. A National Standard is also to come into force on 1 August 2021, to ensure consistent and high quality of learning and care, irrespective of provider. The role of local authorities, working closely with the Care Inspectorate and Scottish Social Services Council, is to co-ordinate provision; tendering and contracting with the private, independent and voluntary sector to provide early learning and care. In this way, parents will be free to choose the childcare arrangements that suit their needs, and funding for provision will support this.

1140 Funded Hours Delivery

Sector wide opening took place from 22nd February following the early 2021 lockdown. At this stage, the statutory duty to provide 600 hours to all eligible children came back into force, although many local authorities are offering significantly more than this.

Data collected by the Improvement Service indicated that, 118,068 children were accessing funded ELC as April 2021. Of these, 102,410 children (87%) were accessing more than the statutory entitlement of 600 hours, and 84,606 children (72%) were accessing 1140 hours funded ELC.

17 out of 32 local authorities noted that they were already offering 1140 hours to all eligible children in June 2021. This continued roll out of the expansion despite removal of the statutory duty shows the commitment by local authorities to delivering the expansion and realising the benefits for their children and families.

Of the remaining local authorities to yet deliver 1140, there is confidence that every local authority will be able to offer 1140 funded hours in August. Issues such as infrastructure delays have prevented some local authorities to offer 1140 any earlier, however risks are being managed with contingency plans in place to ensure delivery in August.

Guidance provided to LA's which allow for COVID-safe opening, require some protective measures, recommended by public health colleagues. These measures include face coverings, ventilation, staff working only with a cohort, or 'bubble' of children and physical distancing between staff. From July 2021, levels of public health measures to be observed align to the COVID-19 protection levels in each local authority. This allows for proportionate responses to be taken – locally or nationally – using a range of measures.

This Scottish Government guidance is continuing to be updated, as needed, in line with health advice.



What does this mean for elected members?

When will the policy restart?

The commitment for delivering 1140 hours annually will come into effect in August 2021, with most local authorities already providing 1140.

What is the impact on local authorities and private/third sectors?

Before August 2021, authorities were delivering as much funded childcare over the statutory 600 hours as was workable under current guidance and considering the status of their expansion programmes and were encouraged to do so. Over half of all local authorities were offering 1140 to all eligible children in June 2021.

The private, voluntary and independent sector providers also made plans based on offering 1140 hours of care and in most cases are being funded to do so. This should also be supported, both for the delivery of the expansion to achieve outcomes for children and families, but to increase sustainability of the sector also. Transition fund grants were made available to all private and third sector childcare providers, not just those delivering funded early learning and childcare. This includes out of school care providers.

The financial impact of COVID-19 may impact on the budgetary outlook.

What are the implications for staff?

Many staff and managers have demonstrated vital commitment to parents and children in enabling the Critical Childcare to be provided during the last 18 months. Since 2016/17, the local authority ELC workforce has significantly increased by 75% from 9576 to 16754. The workforce comprises of many new staff, as well as existing staff who have undergone changes in their working arrangements and contracts. Consideration should be given to how this radically changed workforce can be supported by local authorities and elected members.



What does good practice look like in this area?

Local authority delivery plans

Local authorities are delivering 1140 funded hours to all three- and four-year olds and eligible 2-year olds.

The ELC workforce has increased greatly in the last few years in preparation for 1140 delivery, so maintaining and supporting the workforce is vital for local authorities. Local authorities should invest in skills and enhance the learning and development of existing and new workers.

In short term, finalising the construction projects which were impacted by the lockdown will be the priority for local authorities and ensuring there are contingency plans in place. In the long term, preparation will be needed for any planned future changes to the ELC estate, and potential changes linked to the wider education estate.

Local authorities will need to be agile to respond to the needs to parents and families. As COVID-19 restrictions ease beyond level 0, local authorities should focus on flexibility and how it can improve the models for parent's needs.

Increasing uptake and promoting the ELC offer effectively for all ages is crucial for local authorities. Increasing the uptake of eligible 2-year-olds is important to ensure parents and children from disadvantaged circumstances benefit from the early access to the expanded entitlement.

Partner provider relationship

Maintaining good relationships with partner providers is an essential component to delivering the planned range of ELC options. Local authorities have been working closely with providers and offering support to plan for delivery of 1140, whilst sharing good practice on training, quality improvement and safe working amongst staff. Some local authorities are in the process of negotiating contracts with the providers to agree a sustainable rate for future delivery, thus highlighting the importance of constructive relationships.

Contact with parents

Given the high level of interest from parents, the clarity of communication on each local authority website and other social media is an essential component in enabling them to plan ahead, understanding what provision is on offer and how they can engage. Allocations for August 2021 are largely complete, and local authorities have been

in contact with parents with regarding places for start of term. Local authorities are required to undertake parent consultations every two years to engage with parents and receive feedback regarding the service. The consultations should be used to tailor the service based on the needs of the parents and families.



Key questions for elected members

You may wish to ask officers questions around:

- Plans for future sustainable delivery of 1140 hours, in terms of capital projects to be completed and workforce availability, including workforce planning and ongoing recruitment.
- Plans for ensuring and monitoring staff confidence and wellbeing.
- Communication with parents and partners, and how they are being kept up to date and made aware of the service on offer.
- Financial issues – Transition grant funding and future revenue and capital funding, including setting rates for the PVI sector.
- Questions on flexibility and choice for parents in terms of the models of service delivery.
- Arrangements with funded partners for partnership working, contracts and relationship building.
- Service improvement - plans to improve the offer to parents, e.g. improve flexibility.
- 2-year-old uptake – plans to increase uptake to ensure low-income families take advantage of the offer.



Summary

Expanding funded childcare to 1140 hours is a key policy for closing the poverty related attainment gap.

The duty on local authorities to secure 1140 hours funded ELC, originally intended to come into effect in August 2020, was revoked in April 2020 both to give local authorities the flexibility to focus on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. As agreed with COSLA and Scottish Ministers, the duty has since been reinstated and will now come into effect in August 2021.

Despite the delay to the duty, 17 local authorities are already offering 1140 funded hours to all eligible children as of June 2021 and every other local authority is on track to offer 1140 in August 2021. This continued roll out of the expansion despite removal of the statutory duty shows the commitment by local authorities to delivering the expansion and realising the benefits for their children and families.

Flexibility, accessibility, uptake and promotion of the offer are key areas which local authorities will need to address beyond August 2021

Public Health guidance for the operation of nurseries is continuing to be updated as necessary, in line with health advice.

Parents need clear, well timed and aligned communication to improve their ability to access the provision on offer and support their childcare arrangements.

Further support and contacts

- Email: elc@improvementservice.org.uk
- [Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland - timeline](#)

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