

COMMENT

Early Years

The expansion of early years provision can't be done on the cheap

Amid a drive to double early learning and childcare hours by 2020, the failure to invest in staff is glaring

Jennifer Barnes



The Scottish government has a bold ambition to almost double entitlement to free early learning and childcare (ELC). By 2020, the total for all three- and four-year-olds, along with eligible two-year-olds, would reach 1,140 hours per year.

So is this a modern, ambitious, forward-thinking intervention in Scottish education? Or is it a starting gun signalling a race to the bottom in nursery provision by local authorities desperate to cut costs?

Clearly, a near doubling of service hours within such a short proposed period will require some serious wooing of potential new entrants to the profession. Indeed, when

announcing the action plan earlier this year, childcare and early years minister Mark McDonald stated that the government would "need to demonstrate how much we value this work, by offering fulfilling career opportunities, entrance pathways and progression routes at all levels". He spoke of "recruitment and career pathways to assist in attracting and retaining high-calibre candidates...to raise the profile of a career in ELC amongst underrepresented groups and to seek to improve gender balance".

The government has indicated that "quality", including the value of early years professionals, is one of the four guiding principles for this service expansion. It also recognises that high-quality learning and care at an early years level contributes significantly to closing the attainment gap. That is a view shared by Voice Scotland, as well as by Iram Siraj in her 2015 review of the sector's workforce.

Unfortunately, Professor Siraj's recommendation of a national pay scale for early years professionals was, disappointingly, rejected by government. A modest commitment to the living wage, instead, hardly matches aspirations. The fact that the position on pay will not significantly change means that the autumn 2017 early years recruitment campaign will remain hindered by the perception of the practitioner role as being poorly paid and low status, with limited future career prospects.

The absence of any sort of nationalised terms and conditions means that, unlike their teaching colleagues, early years practitioners don't have any contractually protected non-contact time to fully utilise their expertise in planning and preparing learning activities. Any discretionary non-contact time that did exist was pretty much wiped out with the implementation of the existing 600-hours entitlement.

Why encourage practitioners to pursue professional qualifications and not contractually protect the necessary time for staff to in fact deploy that knowledge in their planning and preparation activity? Our own member survey reveals that many employers rely on the goodwill of staff to work unpaid overtime. Half of practitioners report that they work unpaid overtime on a regular basis – and those pressures will inevitably increase during the implementation of 1,140 hours.

What incentive is there for individuals, regardless of gender, to financially and emotionally invest in qualifications for a wage readily available in other low-paid jobs (and with no need to incur the cost of Scottish Social Services Council registration)? Individuals who do wish to take on the debt associated with obtaining higher qualifications will likely instead choose to invest in subjects that are more likely to lead to careers with better financial prospects.

Eye-watering pay disparity

So even if we put to one side the poor perception of the sector as a career option and the associated recruitment difficulties, the lack of parity in financial terms and conditions is another glaring issue that cannot be swept under the carpet.

The recent financial review of ELC in Scotland highlighted a number of interesting trends. Almost all practitioners are female, ranging from 93 per cent to 96 per cent depending on the setting. The median age of an early years practitioner in the private sector is 28, which doesn't exactly suggest that the sector is perceived as a long-term career path.

The greatest issue, however, is the eye-watering disparity in staff pay when comparing public and private sector provision. The average full-time annual salary cost for practitioners in local authority settings is about £28,000; the private sector partner providers' salary cost is £15,000 for the same job. Such a disparity is not sustainable if we want all children to enjoy a quality pre-school educational experience and not some postcode-lottery early years system.

It's clear that the government's ambition of the introduction of the living wage won't sufficiently narrow the gap in terms and conditions offered by the public and private sectors. It also presumes that any additional government funding to support this will, in fact, make it into the pockets of practitioners.

Private sector employers will potentially be developing their premises to meet increasing demand – and that will carry a cost. If the current position of practitioners holding a BA in childhood practice is anything to go by, the government expects that employers would want to voluntarily offer an appropriate rate for those working as managers; the reality is that, in private settings, salary cost for managers currently averages a mere £23,000 per annum.

'Race to the bottom'

Staff costs are the main expenditure in providing early years services and, on the basis of the government's commitment to the living wage, the cost will continue to be significantly cheaper in the private and third sectors. Why wouldn't a local authority, already strapped for cash and being told to almost double local early years provision, be tempted to achieve this by farming out as much of the service delivery to private providers paying the lowest wages they can, thereby creating a "race to the bottom" across Scotland?

Early years expansion should not be done on the cheap. That would only compromise the quality of experience for our children.

Voice Scotland believes that a national pay-and-conditions framework for early years practitioners must be the foundation for expanding and delivering consistently high-quality services. Only when all professional early years practitioners enjoy terms and conditions that reflect their educational responsibilities will society's perception of careers in the sector improve and the range of potential candidates widen.

A national terms-and-conditions framework setting out parameters for the sector to operate within would enable all practitioners to feel secure in the knowledge that their skills

were indeed valued, no matter where they worked. A bold vision requires a bold commitment from the Scottish government.

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