

Briefing on Draft Budget 2018-2019

Save the Children welcomes the opportunity to submit views to the Education and Skills Committee on priorities for the Draft Budget 2018-19. Our comments are in response to the exchange of letters between the Committee and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

Prioritisation

We welcome Scottish Government's focus on closing the educational attainment gap. However, given the importance of children's early learning outcomes in shaping future attainment, Save the Children believe that support for children's early cognitive and language development; at home, in early learning and childcare settings and schools, and in the wider community, should be a greater priority for action and investment.

Children's early cognitive development includes developing the skills used to think, read, learn, remember, reason and pay attention. Along with early speech, language and communication, these skills form the pre-cursor to future learning. They are critical to children's understanding of the world around them and enjoyment of learning. Early cognitive development has a lasting effect on future learning and later educational attainment.

Children who struggle to develop these foundational skills in their early years may find it harder to understand others and express themselves, to control their emotions or to concentrate. These are core development skills that children need to gain in order to go on to reach their potential and participate fully in society. The gap in learning outcomes is evident from an early age^{1,2}, and remains persistent as children grow up³. It is the basis of the poverty-related attainment gap that has such a damaging effect on children's achievement at school and into adulthood.

In his letter to the Committee, the Cabinet Secretary highlights equity in education as a key priority for the Scottish Government. We believe that if we are to ensure that *"every child has an equal chance to fulfil his or her potential and to deliver the best possible outcomes for all of our children"*, greater focus must be given to the crucial and foundational early years.

Early learning and childcare

We believe that funding that supports the quality, as well as the quantity, of early learning and childcare provision, must be evident in the forthcoming budget. This includes funding that adequately supports the full delivery of the Quality Action Plan and additional graduate commitment.

¹ Information Services Division (2017), [Child Health 27-30 Month Review Statistics: Scotland 2015/16](#)

² Growing up in Scotland (2015), [Tackling inequalities in the early years: Key messages from 10 years of the Growing Up in Scotland study](#)

³ Save the Children (2016), [Ready to Read: Scotland](#)

We welcome the Cabinet Secretary's commitment to continue the focus and investment on early learning and childcare – plans to expand funded provision will help to support family incomes. However, as the Cabinet Secretary notes in his response, the expansion “*must be delivered efficiently whilst ensuring that a high quality service is provided*”. The expansion will inevitably put additional pressure on already stretched services, potentially compromising quality, but we believe it also provides a golden opportunity for the government to set out its ambitions for the difference it wants this very significant investment in our youngest children to make. We believe that government needs to commit to not just maintaining existing quality provision, but significantly enhancing it to achieve strong early learning outcomes for children, including closing the gap between children experiencing poverty and their peers.

There is clear and compelling evidence that attending early learning and childcare services can have long-standing benefits for children's language development and educational outcomes, especially for those children experiencing poverty, but crucially, only where services are high quality. It's therefore crucial that strengthening quality remains the top priority as services expand and the workforce grows. There is a real danger that the planned rapid expansion in provision could prove detrimental to the quality of the service should there not be a concurrent focus on and investment in those things that support quality, including the skills of the early years workforce.

To drive continuous improvements, early learning and childcare settings must be supported to offer the opportunities and environments for learning that can make the biggest difference to children's development, and be able to access the training, development and support they need to provide a world-class service. To do this, existing commitments that strengthen the quality of existing provision must be funded and implemented in full. This includes the recently published Quality Action Plan⁴, and plans for additional graduates to support children's learning in settings in our most disadvantaged communities. Government should also consider plans for further developing a world class early learning service, including ensuring the affordability of non-funded provision, and linking with other services to provide a network of holistic support for children and families.

Targeted funding and support in schools to help close the attainment gap

We want to see sufficient additional, targeted funding available to enable schools to introduce the necessary package of additional support for pupils experiencing poverty that will make a significant difference to their education.

Save the Children believes that additional resources for schools to support children in poverty to succeed is one part of the solution to address the educational achievement gap. We have therefore welcomed the provision of targeted funding to help close the poverty related attainment gap via the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding, and we want to see it continued, improved and built upon. Such funding must be additional to existing school funding, and while decisions on how to use the funding schools should be at the discretion of headteachers, schools should be able to access

⁴ Scottish Government (2017), [A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland: Quality Action Plan](#)

support and guidance on evidence-based approaches to improving the achievement of disadvantaged children.

Furthermore, the levels of funding available should be sufficient to enable schools to introduce the necessary package of additional support for pupils experiencing poverty that will make a significant difference to their education. Finally, strong monitoring and evaluation must exist to ensure best value for money and to help to build the national evidence base of what works (see further comments below).

Targeted funding for the pre-school years

We would like to see a commitment in the budget to specific and targeted funding for early learning and childcare settings to support work to close the gap in early language and cognitive development between children living in poverty and their peers.

In his letter to the Committee, the Cabinet Secretary states that *“The Scottish Attainment Challenge was the first in the world to take an early intervention approach to reducing the gap by focussing on children in primary school. We have subsequently extended the programme to include secondary school, but we remain clear that early intervention and prevention are the cornerstone of our approach to delivering better outcomes for our young people.”*

Building on this, we believe there is a compelling case for similar funding to be made available to early learning and childcare settings to enable them to deliver additional support for young children at risk of falling behind in their early cognitive development. We know that in some cases Pupil Equity Funding has been used by primary schools to work with feeder nurseries on transitions, which is very welcome. However, a more systemic approach is required to ensure that all young children experiencing poverty can benefit, and that early learning and childcare settings, regardless of sector or setting type, are able to access funding to support evidence-based interventions.

Supporting learning at home

We look forward to seeing provision made in the Draft Budget to support implementation of the National Action Plan on Parental Engagement and Family Learning

Supporting equity in educational attainment and outcomes requires a focus on support for children’s learning before and beyond the school gates. There is a strong and growing body of evidence demonstrating the ways in which a strong home learning environment, and parents who are engaged in their child’s learning, can make a significant difference in helping children to reach their educational potential. But the stress and anxiety caused by struggling on a low income can make this so much harder for parents to achieve. For some families this is compounded by parents struggling with their own literacy challenges, or negative childhood experiences of education. Efforts to close the attainment gap will only be successful if we also invest in helping parents to develop the skills and confidence they need to support their child’s learning at home. In some cases, Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding has been used to support programmes and interventions that work with families to achieve this, and this should be encouraged.

However, we believe that delivering a broader framework to support parental engagement in children's learning could help to drive further progress. We therefore welcome the proposed National Action Plan on Parental Engagement and Family Learning⁵ and provisions in the forthcoming Education (Scotland) Bill⁶ to support parental engagement in learning. We believe these could provide an opportunity to develop a robust framework to drive action; challenging all agencies working with families to play their role in supporting parents to engage in their children's learning, and ensuring that parents who would benefit from additional support are able to access it.

A focus on preventative spending

We believe that supporting the crucial foundational skills children learn in their early years should be a much greater focus for efforts to close, and ideally prevent, the gap in children's learning.

Focusing action and investment in children's early years is cost-effective, and action and investment at this stage is most likely to take a preventative or early intervention approach and therefore likely to have greatest impact. Scottish government has made a welcome commitment to closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and there is clear and growing evidence of the importance of children's early learning outcomes in shaping future attainment.

Value for money, evaluation and outcomes

Pupil Equity Funding

We urge the Committee to press the Scottish government for further details of its plans to evaluate the impact of Pupil Equity Funding, and to ensure the learning is shared with all stakeholders to best inform future spending.

The Committee highlights a specific interest in the impact of Pupil Equity Funding, how this is being evaluated and how it will inform future rounds of funding. We agree that there needs to be robust evaluation of the programmes and interventions funded by Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Funding to ensure that funding is being used appropriately to support efforts to close the gap, to help build the evidence-base in Scotland of what works and to ensure that learning can be shared across the country to inform future plans.

We urge Scottish government to ensure that schools can access the data, evidence, guidance and support they need to understand which children and young people would most benefit from targeted support, what approaches might be the most effective in their setting, and how best to monitor and evaluate impact. Local authorities, Attainment Advisers, new Regional Improvement Collaboratives and

⁵ Scottish Government (2017) [A Nation with Ambition: The Government's Programme for Scotland 2017-18](#), p74

⁶ Scottish Government (2017), [Empowering Schools: A Consultation on the Provisions of the Education \(Scotland\) Bill](#), p18

Education Scotland all have a role to play here. Anecdotally, we have heard concerns about very different information and advice being given to and used by schools about effective approaches. While schools should be free to respond in the most appropriate way to their local circumstances, to achieve the intended outcomes for children, these decisions should be based on the best available evidence.

Early Learning and Childcare

We urge the Committee to commit to consider the extent to which the expansion of early learning and childcare meets the needs of all children, and particularly how well it supports children's learning and cognitive development outcomes.

Given the crucial role that high quality early learning and childcare can play in supporting children's early cognitive development, and helping to close the attainment gap, we welcome the Scottish government's commitment to undertake monitoring and evaluation of the expansion programme, and agree that this must provide evidence on the long-term impact of the expansion on children's outcomes. Alongside robust, longitudinal data on children's developmental outcomes, this should include timely monitoring of quality indicators which are known to be correlated with children's development.

This data should be used to inform practice as the expansion takes place to ensure that opportunities for improvement are maximised and threats to progress are addressed. For example, a recent report from the Care Inspectorate⁷ highlighted concerns that the care provided for two year olds could be improved in a fifth of early learning and childcare settings. This is concerning and requires urgent action. To drive a culture of continuous improvement, monitoring and evaluation findings must be shared in an open and timely manner, and should inform the future development and delivery of the expansion.

Further information

We hope the Committee finds this information useful to its consideration of the Draft Budget 2018-19 and would be happy to provide any further information that might be helpful.

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⁷ Care Inspectorate (2017), [Scotland's Early Learning and Childcare – Report on the progress of expanded provision during 2015-16](#)

