

Discussion and moving forward

- 1.14. The Scottish Government is clear in its ambition that all children and young people will get the support they need to reach their full learning potential. However, while some parents outlined a very happy experience of ELC for both themselves and their child, the overall picture from this research is one where, despite the best of intentions, we are simply not getting it right for every child. Proper resources will be a fundamental aspect of improving the situation for children with learning disabilities
- 1.15. While there is no silver bullet that will solve this complex issue, SCLD believes that on the back of this research, there are a number of actions to be explored in the short and medium term which could move us closer to getting it right for children with learning disabilities in the early years. To that end, SCLD has put forward a number of recommendations:
- Ensure children with learning disabilities are visible within the ELC Census
 - Provide clear, accessible information for parents about Enquire services
 - Ensure provision of early years support programmes specific to the needs of families raising a child with learning disabilities
 - Equip health visitors with knowledge to enable them to support and signpost families to information and advice
 - Reconsider how inclusion is assessed in the benchmark qualification for early years lead practitioners
 - Create an Open Badge for working with children with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) in mainstream settings
 - Early Learning and Childcare settings should introduce a more structured parental engagement process
 - Include children with learning disabilities in the first phase of the ELC expansion for 1- and 2-year-olds
 - Ensure all local authorities' 'split/blended placement' offer provides maximum flexibility, including a mix of mainstream and specialist provision
 - Replace the Early Learning and Childcare Inclusion Fund with ring fenced funding for local authorities for reasonable adjustments in early years settings
- 1.16. The COVID-19 pandemic has left people with learning disabilities and their parents and carers isolated and struggling to cope over the past 18 months. But their struggle is not new. This research has served to highlight that inequalities begin in the earliest years. And despite the best policy intentions, more information, support and resources are required for families and children with learning disabilities to enjoy equitable access to ELC settings, and, in turn, improved life-chances and better outcomes.
- 1.17. While the recommendations in this report could potentially move us closer to getting it right for children with learning disabilities in the early years, it is clear that the wholesale change that is needed to address the issues outlined in this report will require a concerted effort on behalf of policy makers, staff working in and around the early years sphere, as well as other professionals involved in the lives of children with additional needs.
- 1.18. Moving forward from COVID-19, the Scottish Government has committed to learn lessons from the pandemic, redouble efforts to tackle the wider inequalities that pervade our society, and embed equality, inclusion and human rights across Scotland. On this journey towards Scotland's recovery and renewal, we must make sure the voices of those who already experienced inequalities long before COVID-19 are front and centre. When it comes to ELC, these voices are telling us that we need wholesale change. Now is the time to listen. Now is the time to make them a priority. Now is our opportunity to create the fairer, more inclusive Scotland we all aspire to.



BUILDING BLOCKS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Executive Summary

Background, policy context and research aims

- 1.1. The Scottish Government has long acknowledged the vital importance of the early years for a child's development, improved educational outcomes, as well as better health and employment outcomes in later life. Indeed, the policy landscape in relation to the early years in Scotland is well developed, with several legislative frameworks in place, and a stated ambition of giving every child the best start in life. Funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) is an important aspect of this, as well as a key enabler for parents to return to work. The numbers of funded hours parents are entitled to recently increased to 1140. Within this context, and against the backdrop of the passage into Scots law of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), SCLD was keen to understand more about the specific experiences of parents of children with learning disabilities in accessing – or not – their funded ELC entitlement, to see if there were areas that should be the focus of changes to policy and practice.
- 1.2. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach, comprising:
 - A freedom of information request sent to local authorities regarding levels of uptake of funded ELC places for children with learning disabilities
 - Semi-structured interviews with parents and carers of children with learning disabilities
 - Semi-structured interviews undertaken with local authority early years leads
 - Semi-structured interview with a child development centre worker
 - A self-complete survey of childcare providers

Setting the context

- 1.3. A freedom of information request supported the fact that current data collection does not allow us to assess the extent to which parents of children with learning disabilities are accessing their funded entitlement of ELC. Early years leads we spoke with were hopeful that health visitors would alert them to families who were not accessing their entitlement, though acknowledged that there was no way to know this for certain.
- 1.4. Early years leads we spoke with were passionate and dedicated to ensuring all children could benefit from funded ELC places, including children with learning disabilities. They identified unclarity on the part of ELC setting about their statutory duties of inclusion, inadequate resources for reasonable adjustments and the reduction of places within specialist provision as specific barriers for parents of children with learning disabilities taking up their funded entitlement. Factors that facilitated the uptake of places were engaging with families early to identify support needs, good relationships with NHS and social work teams to work together and get the right support in place, and utilising discretionary early entrant places for children with learning disabilities.
- 1.5. The research found that 57 % of local authority or partnership providers and 64 % of childminders who responded to a self-complete survey were confident in their ability to cater for children with learning disabilities. Those who felt confident cited previous experience, good training and good relationships with external specialists as key factors. Settings identified more training, more support from specialists and more staff as pivotal to instilling confidence, while inappropriate facilities were seen as a key difficulty in catering for children with learning disabilities.

Parents' perspectives

- 1.6. While a small qualitative study cannot do justice to the unique experience of each family, there were a number of common themes uncovered throughout the interviews with parents that serve to highlight the main experiences and challenges faced by parents when trying to find suitable early learning and childcare provision.
- 1.7. **Difficulties finding information about support and entitlements in a complex system:** Parents faced significant challenges finding out about their rights and what support was available to them, in a system that is complicated by the necessary involvement of many different services.
- 1.8. **The challenge to get the right support in place:** Parents spoke about how difficult it was to get the right support in place for their child to access and thrive in an ELC setting. This was down to a number of factors including the reduction in specialist provision and lack of one-to-one support for children attending mainstream settings.
- 1.9. **Inequity of provision for children with learning disabilities:** Parents detailed the lack of equity in provision available for children with learning disabilities. These included specialist nurseries not offering wraparound provision or access outwith term time, the unavailability of 'eligible 2s' places in specialist provision, local authorities not funding one-to-one support within the extended hours or allowing split/blended placements to include a mix of mainstream and specialist provision.
- 1.10. **The importance of good leadership and staff attitude in the setting:** Parents who reported that they and their child had a good experience within a mainstream ELC setting found that this was predicated on good leadership and staff attitude towards inclusion.
- 1.11. **Open, honest, equitable dialogue with parents:** It was clear from speaking with parents that openness and honesty on the part of the provider was a key component of a good ELC experience for parents and children. Parents appreciated feeling listened to and respected as an expert in their child's needs.
- 1.12. **The importance of well-trained staff:** Parents were clear that well-trained staff who understood their child's needs were an important factor in ELC settings. This was the reason some opted for specialist provision. Some worried that there was no mandatory training on inclusion for early years practitioners and that one-to-one support staff had no specific training to work with children with learning disabilities.
- 1.13. **Appropriately sized settings with the right staff ratios:** Another fundamental aspect of a good ELC experience for parents was finding a setting where class sizes were relatively small. Specialist nurseries by their nature are intimate settings with lower staff to child ratios, and this was a draw for parents when opting for this type of provision. However, some mainstream nursery classes can be very large, with parents feeling concerned that their child would not be happy, or indeed safe in such a setting.