

PE2195/A: Establish a kindergarten stage in Scottish education

Scottish Government written submission, 13 November 2025

The Scottish Government's goal is for Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up by improving outcomes for children and reducing inequality. The Scottish Government recognises the critical importance of play-based, child-centred, and outdoor approaches to learning which are already being delivered across the early years as part of the Curriculum for Excellence. This approach is underpinned by “Realising the Ambition”, our internationally recognised national practice guidance for the early years in Scotland. We are working with a range of stakeholders to understand how progress in embedding it might be accelerated at every level of the school curriculum.

The early level of the Curriculum for Excellence purposely spans early learning and childcare (ELC) and the early years of primary schooling. It is designed to support the implementation of a responsive, continuous, play-based curriculum for children from age three until the end of P1 for the majority of children.

Since its introduction in 2020, Realising the Ambition has been embraced by the early years sector in Scotland, across ELC and primary school settings, and is being used by educators in a wide variety of ways to support improvement and develop high quality practice through critical reflection and self-evaluation in their own settings.

Raising the school starting age and introducing a ‘kindergarten stage’ would represent a fundamental change in the scope of early years, primary and secondary education in Scotland and a significant structural change to the provision of education. There would be a number of significant delivery implications for raising the school starting age including the ELC and school workforce, infrastructure, legislation and the curriculum framework that would need to be fully analysed and costed.

Background: Scotland's current offer for Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)

High quality early learning and childcare that is flexible, accessible and affordable plays a critical role in our society. It is vital to giving children the best possible start in life, to supporting families to thrive, and to ensuring that parents and carers can work, train or study.

Scotland is the only part of the UK to already offer 1,140 hours a year of funded ELC to all three and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds regardless of their parents’ working status – putting children first. This offer has been in place since August 2021 and equates to 30 hours per week term time, or 22 hours per week if used all year round. If families paid for our funded ELC offer themselves, it would cost them more than £6,000 per eligible child per year.

The Scottish Government has also legislated to ensure that since August 2023, all children who defer starting primary school have been able to access an additional year of funded ELC, allowing families to make decisions for their child without the financial barrier of ELC costs. This legislative change aligned the funded ELC entitlement more closely with the existing right to defer for children in this age group. This is an important step in supporting parents to make decisions in the best interests of their child, without the concern of additional costs.

Early Learning and Childcare Directorate