

# **Social Justice & Social Security Committee: Inquiry into addressing child poverty through parental employment Submission from Save the Children in Scotland (April 2023)**

Save the Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit to the inquiry being carried out by the Social Justice and Social Security Committee on addressing child poverty through parental employment.

Our submission aims to amplify the voices, stories and experiences of the parents and families we have been working with over the past year across Scotland. As part of our engagement with this inquiry, we worked with a group of parents to explore the topics covered in the inquiry questions. We brought together a group of parents to meet with the Convener and vice-Convener of the Committee to have an open discussion about the topics. This meeting took place on 21 February 2023 and involved 12 parents with experience of living on a low income.

Save the Children's work in Scotland focuses on reducing child poverty and its impacts on children in the early years. Given our focus on early years, our submission mainly focuses on early learning and childcare (ELC) rather than school age/wraparound childcare.

Our response reflects that key themes that parents have raised with us rather than answering all the Committee's questions in order.

## **Key themes:**

### **1. Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) provision**

High-quality, affordable childcare is a vital service for parents and children alike. When it works, it provides a lifeline for many parents, enabling them to work, to increase their family's income, and move out of poverty. High-quality childcare is also essential to children's early learning and development and has a significant impact on children's outcomes in the early years and beyond.

Save the Children believes that issues with current early years childcare provision remain a significant barrier for many families on low incomes who wish to work or return to work. Although we have welcomed the significant action taken by the Scottish Government in the form of the expansion of early learning and childcare in recent years, there remain inadequacies with delivery and accessibility, where for many parents, what is available simply doesn't fit their needs.

Parents living on lower incomes have consistently told us that the very high costs and inflexibility of childcare available to them can make working impossible. Childcare costs can erode any increase in income from employment.

“Childcare is still as much as a salary; I gave up my work because I was paying for nursery and a childminder for wraparound care. More has to be done.”

“I worked part-time and had to pay £1000 to cover childcare.”

“I work 3 part-time jobs to manage childcare.”

Based on what parents in Scotland have told us in the past 12 months, we think the following changes need to be made to early learning and childcare across Scotland:

### ***Affordability (parents)***

Childcare should enable parents to increase their incomes enough to lift or help lift them out of poverty. This means maximising the uptake of the 1140 hours for 3–4-year-olds and eligible 2-year-olds, but also expanding hours for 1–2-year-olds. Beyond the funded hours, it is important that the cost of any additional hours of childcare are affordable and free or affordable at the point of use for families. There is currently a huge disparity between the prices charged by local authority and private nurseries. Many parents have told us that the cost to them of childcare – in addition to their funded hours – makes the options open to them simply unaffordable.

"I had to pay the upfront cost. So, the first month, without getting anything back from Universal Credit, I had to try and get the money from somewhere in order to put him in, or he wasn't allowed to start in September. And then, I had to wait to get that back, but it was six weeks."

### ***Flexibility***

Wrap-around childcare should be available for those who work non-standard hours – such as shift work, irregular or flexible working patterns. Parents on low incomes - especially mothers - disproportionately work in sectors with irregular hours, such as hospitality and care.

### ***Availability***

The number of funded hours available per child must be generous enough to allow parents to work the hours required to lift or help lift them out of poverty should they wish to work, and to ensure their additional income is not swallowed up by high childcare costs.

### ***Accessibility***

There must be childcare providers close to where families live to minimize travel time and cost; and there should be childcare available that suits the needs of all children, especially

those with additional needs.

### **Accessibility**

Parents often find it difficult to navigate the system or to find out what support is available. More should be done to make the system easier and to promote uptake, including information on all local providers. This information needs to be provided to parents in good time.

“Private day care supplies flexibility. But private day care supplies the big bill at the end of the week that you can’t afford. So, even though they are in partnership now with the council and you can access your two or three year old or whatever. But you still have to top it up. And if you’re on a higher-level education, you don’t get that top up because you’ve got SAAS instead. So, it’s mind-boggling”.

Addressing these issues would support parents to make choices about balancing work and caring for their children and provide the security and stability needed to take up employment or increase their hours. None of this should be done at the expense of ensuring services are high quality as we also know high quality early learning and childcare can boost children’s emotional and cognitive development and help overcome early inequalities. All types of early learning and childcare settings should have sufficient numbers of well-paid, highly skilled and trained staff.

## **2. Changes to ELC provision**

We believe any extension of free or subsidised childcare should be offered to families in poverty/ on lower incomes as a priority – both early learning and childcare and out of school care. If existing gaps and issues are not addressed for those on the lowest incomes meeting the child poverty targets in 2030 will be at risk. Save the Children believes that the childcare system across Scotland is not working for families on low incomes, and that it needs to be reformed. Any improvements, changes or extensions to the current provision need to have the needs of low-income families front and centre. Families living on low incomes face the most barriers to finding childcare and moving into/or back into employment so next steps need to focus on them.

At its heart, a high functioning childcare system must offer choice to parents to enable them to balance employment and caring for their children in a way that works best for their family. This should be a right for every family not just those that can afford it. Early learning and childcare should also be high quality if it is to help children reach their potential and development outcomes. In this way early learning and childcare can play a role in preventing poverty in the longer-term.

There is currently a disconnect between the end of statutory maternity pay and the

Scottish Government funded hours. Currently funded provision for some low-income families starts when a child is 2 (with an eligible 2s place) or aged 3 for other families. This leaves many parents – especially mothers and single parents – with impossible choices about how best to provide and care for their children in a way that works for their family when their children are young. All efforts should be made to increase uptake of the eligible two-year-old places using existing evidence on the barriers to take up those places and how they can be removed.

### **3. Barriers to employment**

Employability and removing barriers to employment can only do so much if parents are going into an economy that does not work for them. We need to move away from an assumption that it is parents who have to bridge all the gaps between themselves and good work – and move to an economy that brings good work closer to them. We believe that the Scottish Government's priority should be moving the job market closer to parents on low incomes, focusing on the availability of well-paid, flexible, good jobs and encouraging employers to make the shifts required to help support more parents into/back into work.

Parents who want to move into employment, especially those moving back into work after having a baby, or some time away from employment need tailored, holistic support to help access employment opportunities as well as support to navigate the systems and processes inherent in the benefits and childcare systems. Integrating personalised employment and childcare support has been proven to work well and should be at the heart of all employability support. Parents we work with stress the importance of this:

"Because we've been out of it for so long, out of that rhythm and everything, it's almost like, even if you try to get a job, there's that barrier where it's like, well, they've been out of work for X amount of time. They wouldn't suit this job."

"I want to go back to work, how can I go back to work, what will I be able to have that will be good childcare. I have the older one with disability and younger one in primary. I am being caged. I am a lone parent, I am helping them dropping them off and picking them up, attending appointments so this is a really hard task."

We believe that the childcare system in Scotland needs to have choice and quality at its heart and be flexible enough to support parents in a range of circumstances. For parents in employment, seeking employment, or in education and training, this means good quality childcare options, conveniently located that are flexible enough to work around different working patterns and that are affordable. Quality and trust are key in this, not just for the outcomes of the child but for uptake – parents need to value the childcare options on offer and see them as a positive choice for them and their child.

“I feel overwhelmed at work and I’m trying to do more hours to get by.”

"With childcare, I think they really need to get a grip and realise that working parents want to stay working. It's not fair."

## **4. Scottish Government’s role in improving employment options**

For employment opportunities to be sustainable for parents in the long term, there is a need for employers to consider the practical and cultural shifts needed to encourage a more active and diverse workforce that includes parents – especially mothers - and encourages and values part-time work. This includes offering employment that work around caring responsibilities, for example hours that work around the school day and allowing parents time to drop off/pick up their children in childcare.

Parents we work with feel strongly that it is also necessary that employers better understand and are more willing to accommodate the varying needs of all families, for example single parents and parents with a younger child may have more intensive caring responsibilities. Employers should be incentivised to consult and work with their employees to assess how they could adjust their working conditions to allow parents to do their jobs flexibly, maintain employment and work enough hours to make ends meet.

Parents have told us how they feel that some employers don’t want to hire those with caring responsibilities and/ or have been discriminated against on the basis of their caring responsibilities. One parent said:

“Employers don’t want to hire single parents or parents with disabilities.”

Parents on low incomes frequently have insecure contracts and work irregular shifts which leads to precarity of income and uncertainty, but also challenges with arranging childcare to suit these irregular work patterns. We believe there is a role for the Scottish Government to incentivise more flexible employment practices. This could be through a ‘family friendly employer’ type accreditation scheme where companies achieve a ‘parent friend’ status. We also think there is value in exploring a Parents Guarantee, like the Young Person’s Guarantee. Providing incentives to employers to create living wage jobs for parents or those with caring responsibilities could also be explored through funding streams, other financial incentives or benefits.

"At some point in the future I would still have a career instead of just having whatever wee job fits in around the children. I just don’t know how I could do that just now."

"I've missed out on an opportunity to become a manager [...] because I had to reduce my hours because of childcare."

## 5. Transport

Extending free or subsidised bus travel to low-income parents/ carers with children should be considered. We welcome free bus travel for children and young people which helps reduce costs to families and believe extending this to parents on lower incomes would be a real help in supporting employability. When using public transport parents, especially mothers, can be on and off buses/trains multiple times per day (dropping off their children, getting to work, pick-up, travel home, shopping, etc.). This is a significant cost, even if using the same provider. However, parents often have to use multiple providers which further increases costs. Integrated day tickets across several providers could be explored to help to mitigate costs.

"Even though kids have free travel the parents/ carers don't, and you're restricted on taking kids out and about".

"I have to spend £84 for a monthly bus pass to get to nursery."

This can impact in multiple ways, a parent told us that she was not able to accept the funded childcare hours she'd been offered because the nursery was too far to walk and get to her place of work on time, but it was too expensive to get the bus.

"When we were looking at getting P in at between two and three, there were only certain nurseries that did it. And you have to travel for miles to get to that nursery, which is bumping up the cost as well. They're just not local enough."

Improvements should also be made to make public transport more reliable, suited to the needs of families, and available at times that are needed, especially in areas with currently poor transport links, e.g., rural areas.