

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee  
Wednesday 10 December 2025  
19th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

## PE2195: Establish a kindergarten stage in Scottish education

### Introduction

**Petitioner** Willie French and Tam Baillie on behalf of Upstart Scotland

**Petition summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to establish a relationship-centred, play-based kindergarten stage for children between the ages of 3-7 years old.

**Webpage** <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2195>

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 16 October 2025.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 2,067 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered.
6. The Committee has received submissions from the Scottish Government and Petitioner which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

### Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**December 2025**

## **Annexe A: Summary of petition**

### **PE2195: Establish a kindergarten stage in Scottish education**

#### **Petitioner**

Willie French and Tam Baillie on behalf of Upstart Scotland

#### **Date Lodged**

16 October 2025

#### **Petition summary**

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to establish a relationship-centred, play-based kindergarten stage for children between the ages of 3-7 years old.

#### **Background information**

Children in Scotland start school at an earlier age than children in most other countries. Yet, there's no educational advantage to an early start. Research has found that children who are taught literacy skills from the age of five do no better in the long run than those who start at seven – results even out by aged 10. The 'attainment gap' is actually a 'developmental gap'. The major difference in high-quality kindergarten care/education and school care/education is that the former is based on developmentally appropriate, play pedagogy and the latter on age-related, standards-driven educational practice.

We need to delay the school starting age and establish a single setting for play-based activity which will maximise development and nurturing. It's particularly beneficial to children from lower economic backgrounds and fits with the ambition for greater equity in the poverty-related developmental gap.

## Annexe B: SPICe briefing on PE2195



### Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petition is calling for a change to the structure of Early Learning and Childcare and Primary education. It is seeking the Scottish Government to establish a “play-based kindergarten stage for children between the ages of 3-7 years old”. The petition argues that this would support “play-based activity which will maximise development and nurturing”.

### Upstart Scotland

The petition has been lodged on behalf of [Upstart Scotland](#) and reflects the aims of that organisation. One of its aims is—

“to establish a statutory play-based ‘kindergarten stage’ for Scottish children – based on well-established developmental principles and similar to the systems in Nordic countries – with a recognisably different ethos from primary schooling.”

Upstart Scotland also aims to highlight “the extremely early school starting age in UK countries”. However, it states that it does not want to reduce the entitlement to state-funded education; it says:

“The change we propose is to the ethos of education – and the nature of children’s daily experience – until they reach the age of seven. We are campaigning for a developmentally-appropriate, play-based to learning approach during these years, as is already being done in Europe’s most successful education systems.”

### Early Learning and Childcare, School starting age, and the structure of Curriculum for Excellence

#### Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)

Funded ELC is available to all three- and four-year-olds and some two- and five-year-olds. Eligibility for children under three is not currently universal, but is based on parents/carers [being in receipt of certain benefits or the child or parent/carer having experience of care](#). Funded ELC is available for all children up to the start of school and includes some five-year-olds.

National practice guidance for early years in Scotland, [Realising the ambition: Being Me](#), promotes play pedagogy in ELC settings.

## Early level in Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

CfE is intended to be a 3-18 curriculum encompassing ELC as well as all of school education. Progression is illustrated through the CfE Levels. In Broad General Education, there are five curriculum levels - Early, First, Second, Third and Fourth.

The Early Level nominally encompasses both ELC and Primary 1, although the intention is that learning will suit the learner regardless of the school year the learner is in. That is, a pupil in Primary 1 may be working at Level 1 in some aspects of the curriculum, or a pupil in Primary 2 may be working at the Early Level in some areas.

[Realising the ambition: Being Me](#) suggests that there should be greater coherence between the pedagogy between ELC and early primary schools. It says:

“In defining the term, pedagogy, there remains the challenge of the different styles of practice. As we know children moving from an ELC setting to school may have fewer opportunities to play, to choose what they want to play with and when. Children may spend more time sitting listening and following instruction. Achieving a consistent pedagogical approach across the ELC sector and the early primary stages should be a key aspiration. Regular planning discussions between practitioners across both sectors and with children themselves would help to improve continuity of experience and learning.”

## School starting age

The petitioners argue that “we need to delay the school starting age and establish a single setting for play-based activity which will maximise development and nurturing.”

A child is of school age at five years. However, the practicalities of when pupils start school is complicated and often children may start school before their fifth birthday. The legislation around school start dates is set out in section [32 of the Education \(Scotland\) Act 1980](#). Parents can choose not to send their child to school if they are not five years old at the start of the school year – this is called deferring entry and has become more common in recent years.

## Regulatory structures and the cost of delivering education in different settings

ELC and other childcare providers must be registered with the Care Inspectorate. The provision of ELC is regulated by both the Care Inspectorate and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE). Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate recently agreed to a [joint Quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors](#).

The [Care Inspectorate sets out expectations](#) of the adult/child ratios in daycare settings (e.g. nurseries). For children aged three to eight, the expectation is one adult to eight children, when the session is a full day, or 1:10 when children attend settings for fewer than four hours in any one day.

Staff in ELC settings are registered with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). [Scottish Government guidance notes that](#) “Staff registered at practitioner level will be expected to have or be working towards a relevant SCQF level 7 [e.g. a HNC] and those registered as manager or lead practitioner will be expected to have or be working towards a relevant SCQF level 9 qualification (degree-level).”

The duty to secure the delivery of both ELC and school education sits with local authorities. Local authorities have a role in supporting quality improvement in both types of setting. In schools, HMIE provides external oversight. All teachers in schools are required to be registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland.

In [answer to a parliamentary question in April this year](#), the Scottish Government said that, in 2023-24, the average cost per place in pre-school education was £12,000 and in primary education it was £7,487.

## **Scottish Government Play Strategy, Vision Statement and Action Plan**

Supporting children’s opportunities to play has been a longstanding policy aim of the Scottish Government.

In 2013, the Scottish Government published a play strategy. This aimed “to ensure all children and young people can access play opportunities in a range of settings which offer variety, adventure and challenge”.

In March 2025, the Scottish Government published [a vision statement and action plan 2025 to 2030](#). This said—

“Our vision for Scotland is that play is welcomed, celebrated and nurtured. That every child is able to play across all stages and aspects of their life to support their social development, resilience, language and communication development, health, physical and mental wellbeing.”

The Action Plan is set out in three parts, or “Primary Drivers” which relate to parents, places and practitioners. In relation to practitioners, the Government’s aim is that practitioners “have the knowledge and the confidence to support and promote children’s play opportunities”. One of the actions is:

“Support the use of play pedagogy in ELC settings and schools, with a continued focus on consistent alignment of practice with the Realising the Ambition: Being Me guidance. This should support teachers and schools to use play pedagogy as children transition to early primary and throughout their time in school.”

The Government set out some of the funding it is making available to support play in answer to a recent parliamentary question ([S6W-41225](#)).

## Petition at UK Parliament

There is [currently a petition on a similar topic at the UK Parliament](#). This seeks to “Make Play and Continuous Provision statutory in England's Key Stage 1 Curriculum”.

**Ned Sharratt**  
**Senior Researcher**  
11/11/2025

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at [spice@parliament.scot](mailto:spice@parliament.scot)

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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## **Annexe C: Written submissions**

### **Scottish Government written submission, 13 November 2025**

#### **PE2195/A: Establish a kindergarten stage in Scottish education**

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**

### **Petitioner written submission, 24 November 2025**

#### **PE2195/B: Establish a kindergarten stage in Scottish education**

##### **Introduction**

The response from the Scottish Government to Petition 2195 addresses two primary areas relevant to the petition: the implementation of Realising the Ambition and the significant structural changes that would result from introducing a kindergarten stage into Scotland's education system. This expanded commentary will address each of these points directly. Furthermore, there are several crucial aspects underpinning the argument for a kindergarten stage that have not been addressed in the Government's response. These are highlighted for the Committee's consideration.

##### **Realising the Ambition**

The Scottish Government acknowledges the vital role of play-based learning and notes that the approach is underpinned by the principles set out in Realising the Ambition. We concur with this recognition and affirm that Realising the Ambition is an excellent and valuable document. However, it is insufficient on its own. Five years after its publication in 2020, the Government is still investigating how to accelerate progress in embedding its principles. Although the Government claims that Realising the Ambition has been embraced across early years, early learning and childcare (ELC), and primary schools, there is no published evidence regarding the extent to which the guidance has been implemented. In contrast, evidence from Upstart members—mainly early years and primary education practitioners—suggests that the adoption of Realising the Ambition is inconsistent and that other policy drivers may hinder its implementation. Importantly, the proposal for a kindergarten stage in Scottish education represents a more fundamental change than simply implementing Realising the Ambition.

##### **Need for Structural Change**

Currently, Scotland's education system includes a transition period for children aged four or five, during which they move from nursery settings focused on play to Primary One, where the centrality of play in the curriculum varies. There is a pressing need for structural change in early years and primary education to fully harness children's natural inclination to learn through play and nurture, which will also facilitate a single ethos required for the focus on play centred activity. These objectives can best be achieved by establishing a kindergarten stage for children aged three to seven



years, allowing them to remain in a single setting during these formative years. Should this approach be adopted, a comprehensive costing exercise would be required to account for the necessary changes, bearing in mind that significant resources already exist within the current system.

## **Key Points Not Addressed by the Scottish Government**

### **Early School Starting Age**

Scotland's children begin formal schooling at an earlier age than most of their international peers. This practice originated during the industrial revolution, when factory owners in England established the school starting age at five, primarily to facilitate women's return to the workforce. Scotland adopted this standard, and it has since become the norm that formal education commences at age five. Presently, only 12% of countries worldwide start school at such an early age, and, except for one, all are former members of the British Empire.

There is no educational advantage to starting school early. Research consistently demonstrates that children who begin formal literacy instruction at age five do not outperform those who start at age seven by the time they are over ten years old. The results even out in the long term. Conversely, an early start to formal education has been linked in numerous studies to social, emotional, and mental health issues as children grow older. Developmental and mental health concerns are increasingly prevalent among Scotland's young people.

### **Testing**

Most schools in Scotland begin formal instruction in literacy and numeracy as soon as children enter Primary 1. This approach is reinforced by the introduction of assessments for P1 pupils, placing pressure on P1 teachers to cover experiences and outcomes relating to literacy and numeracy. This is inconsistent with the philosophy set out in *Realising the Ambition*. Such early testing is particularly detrimental for children whose developmental foundations are insecure - often those from low-income households. Introducing formal learning too soon disadvantages these children, frequently resulting in feelings of failure and anxiety at a highly formative age. This can sometimes lead to a dislike of school and behavioural issues that currently disrupt classrooms throughout the system.

### **Child Poverty**

Eradicating child poverty is the top priority for the Scottish Government. Nonetheless, a report by Audit Scotland (*Improving Outcomes for Young People Through School Education*, 2021) found that the poverty-related attainment gap remains significant, and inequalities have worsened due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the report's publication, there has been no sign of recovery in these figures.

At its core, the poverty-related attainment gap is a developmental gap. Five-year-old children from high-income households are, on average, twelve months ahead of their peers from low-income households in spoken language and problem-solving, not academic attainment. These essential skills develop naturally through positive,

nurturing interactions with adults and active social play with other children; they cannot be explicitly taught at this stage.

To bridge this gap, children from low-income households require a relationship-centred, play-based environment to foster spoken language and problem-solving skills. They also need several years of exposure to literacy and numeracy-rich environments, similar to those experienced by their high-income peers from birth.

### **Development Gap**

While the Scottish Government invests significant resources in reducing poverty, addressing the attainment gap through the Scottish Attainment Challenge, and enhancing early years provision, measures which are all commendable, it has not paid enough attention to the underlying causes of the attainment gap in the early years. In reality, this is a developmental gap rather than an attainment gap. A developmental perspective prompts reconsideration of what the transition from nursery to primary school should entail. Establishing a kindergarten stage would align better with the priority of reducing the poverty-related attainment gap and would meet the developmental needs of children more effectively than current arrangements.

### **Petitioners**

Willie French, Chair of Upstart

Tam Baillie, former Commissioner for Children and Young People and Upstart Trustee