

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Education and Children's Services Committee
DATE	25 November 2025
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Report on Options to Rationalise Early Learning and Childcare Settings
REPORT NUMBER	F&C/25/223
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CHIEF OFFICER	Shona Milne
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TERMS OF REFERENCE	1.1.1 & 1.2

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present options to the Education and Children's Services Committee on rationalising Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) provision in order to meet demand, maximise resources and achieve best value.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:-

- 2.1 Considers the options presented and approves the amended Early Learning and Childcare delivery models, set out in Appendix 3 of this Report, from August 2026, based on demand.

3. CURRENT SITUATION

- 3.1 As part of the Council's statutory duties under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, we are required to consult with parents and carers every two years on the provision of ELC. The Early Years team consulted with parents and carers in May 2025 and the results can be found at Appendix 1. Key headline data includes:

- 81% of respondents secured their first choice of funded ELC provision.
- 68% of respondents had been able to secure a funded ELC place in their local area / Associated School Group (ASG). 26% of respondents had not yet applied for a place or had not applied for an ELC place in their local area.
- 34% of respondents told us that a fully flexible Funded Provider was the best model of ELC to meet their family's needs. This was closely followed by 9am-3pm term-time model at a Local Authority School ELC / Nursery setting with 31% of respondents saying this best met their needs. 18% of respondents said that the 2.5 days model at 46 weeks provision best met the needs of their family.

- Of those who currently access 46 weeks provision (either mornings, afternoons or 2.5 days), 61% confirmed that they use their ELC place during holiday periods. 22% of respondents' children did not attend ELC provision during holiday periods. Around 17% of respondents said they accessed their ELC place during either Easter or Summer holiday periods.
- A significant majority of respondents (83%) said they are aware that they can use their 1140 hours funded ELC entitlement at a private, voluntary or independent (PVI) Funded Provider ELC setting.
- Furthermore, 81% of respondents are also aware that they can use their 1140 hours funded ELC entitlement with a childminder, either in full or as part of a blended placement.
- The vast majority of respondents (89%) confirmed that their child(ren) attend one ELC / Nursery setting. Only 11% of respondents use a blended placement for their child(ren).
- 84% of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with the current location of ELC services. 11% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- 68% of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied with the times ELC services are currently available. 21% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- 68% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the snacks and / or meals their child is offered whilst attending ELC. 21% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- 87% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their child's experience of ELC to date. 10.4% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- 86% of respondents are aware that Aberdeen City Council offers Eligible 2's funded ELC places.
- 78% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the ELC application process. 16% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- 39% of respondents reported that they feel they are better off (e.g. more money / disposable income) as a result of receiving 1140 hours of funded ELC.
- 55% of respondents anticipated that they would require wraparound care once their child(ren) starts Primary School.

3.2 Responses to the Consultation did not indicate a need to amend our approach to the provision of a mixed model of ELC across the city. On that basis, the review of delivery models to rationalise our offer has sought to maintain a mixed model of ELC across Associated School Groups (ASGs) to ensure families continue to have choice.

Review of Early Learning and Childcare Delivery Models

3.3 One of the key actions in our ELC Delivery Plan 2024-26 is to continue to monitor demand across the city and in individual ASGs. This is in order to meet the needs of families and to achieve best value. Recent detailed work on capacities shows that, similar to previous years, we continue to have an oversupply of 'afternoon' places available and Officers have taken this learning into account in planning proposed delivery models for 2026/27. The team continue to receive applications for ELC placements on a daily basis as families move into the city and care has been taken to factor this into proposals.

- 3.4 We know from parent and carer feedback that a large majority of respondents to the recent Consultation (84%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the current location of ELC providers within their local area/Associated Schools Group (ASG). 81% of respondents were able to secure their first choice of funded ELC provision and 68% were able to secure a funded ELC place in their local area/ ASG (with 26% either not yet applied or had not applied for an ELC place in their local area). However some delivery models continue to be more popular than others, are dependent on family circumstances and there are slight changes in demand across each ASG.
- 3.5 We also know that the number of ELC age children (age two to five years) in Scotland was seven per cent lower in 2022 than was projected at the beginning of ELC expansion, and is expected to continue to fall over the next 10 years (*National Records of Scotland (NRS) population projections*). This will have an impact on the demand for ELC places in the longer term. We are now starting to notice a reduction in the number of ELC applications and the numbers of children attending ELC, which is the first indication of the falling birthrate.
- 3.6 At the time of the 2025 ELC Parent and Carer Consultation, fully flexible (34%), term-time (31%) and full day all year round placements (18%) were most popular in terms of best meeting the needs of families. For half day placements, morning places still continue to be more highly sought after than afternoon places (6%), with afternoon placements being the least popular out of all the delivery models offered (2%). This has been triangulated through recent work on ELC capacities (Appendix 2).
- 3.7 A number of our Local Authority settings continue to operate under capacity, particularly in the afternoon sessions of the 8am-6pm all year-round model and during holiday periods:
- Broomhill School ELC – currently operating at 50% capacity in afternoons. And between 18-52% in holiday periods.
 - Braehead School ELC – currently operating at 50% capacity in afternoons. And between 40-68% in holiday periods.
 - Cornhill School ELC – currently operating at 20% capacity in afternoons. And between 25-65% in holiday periods.
 - Culter School ELC – currently operating at between 30-50% capacity in afternoons. And between 19-63% during holiday periods.
 - Dyce School ELC – currently operating at 50% capacity in afternoons. And between 20-75% during holiday periods.
 - Forehill School ELC - currently operating at between 40-50% capacity in afternoons. And between 13-75% during holiday periods.
 - Heathryburn School ELC – currently operating at 33% capacity in afternoons. And between 12-63% during holiday periods.
 - Kittybrewster School ELC – currently operating at 40% capacity in afternoons. And between 0-66% during holiday periods.
 - Loirston School ELC – currently operating at 46% capacity in afternoons. And between 21-66% during holiday periods.
 - Tullos – currently operating at 64% capacity in mornings, 8.5% capacity in afternoons and 12.5% during holiday periods.

- 3.8 As a result of this analysis, we have identified one ELC setting which could change from a mixed model to a fully term-time model:
- Cornhill School ELC (St Machar ASG) – 60 places
- 3.9 As a result of this analysis we have also identified two ELC settings across two ASGs which have sufficient capacity to offer a mixed model which includes 8am-6pm x 46-week provision and 9am-3pm term-time provision. These are:
- Heathryburn School ELC (Northfield ASG); and
 - Tullos School ELC (Lochside ASG)
- 3.10 We propose to offer a mixed model at both ELC settings from August 2026 with 24 x 9-3 term-time places and 16 x 8-6 places. This will reduce the number of surplus afternoon places and better balance the demand for more term-time places whilst continuing to meet the needs of families who require full days and all year-round provision.
- 3.11 Within the other ELC settings, we do not propose to change the current delivery models, as we would not have enough places to move to a fully 9am-3pm term-time model. It would also remove some of the ELC options delivered across each of our ASGs which we have given a commitment to offering. We therefore propose to keep the numbers at each of these settings under review meantime and will realign the number of places offered in the mornings and afternoons, where possible, to balance attendance. Based on current uptake, this will have minimal impact on our service delivery. However, where demand exists and where spaces allow, we will also look at an option to sell afternoon places at these ELC settings. In order to maximise resources and achieve best value, Officers will also closely monitor staffing levels and recruitment requests for those ELC settings operating under capacity.
- 3.12 Furthermore, in order to meet the demand for morning places and to reduce the number of surplus afternoon places, we also propose a change to the 2.5 full days model. We propose that it is stipulated that the ½ day is taken as an afternoon session for new applications. This will ensure that more whole week morning places are available for those who wish to choose 5 x mornings, more afternoon places are filled and thus attendance is more evenly balanced out across the day.
- 3.13 Holiday uptake has increased again slightly in 2024-25, compared to between 2021-22 and 2023-24, however attendance remains significantly lower than during term time weeks. In order to accurately demonstrate and quantify this, Officers monitor attendance numbers on a daily basis during holiday periods. 27 ELC settings were open during the 2025 summer holiday period (-2 from 2024) and they were requested to submit their attendance figures on a daily basis. In the majority of cases, ELC settings operated at approximately 50% or less and the actual numbers were usually lower than the estimated numbers, which were based on ELC teams speaking to parents and carers in advance of holiday periods about their intentions.

- 3.14 In terms of uptake during holiday periods, we have undertaken more detailed analysis this year. We asked parents and carers during the recent ELC Consultation about their use of ELC during these times as we were keen to better understand the reasons for decrease in uptake:
- 30% of respondents stated that the primary reason for their children not attending ELC during holiday periods is due to having other children of school age at home;
 - 22% of respondents confirmed that their family did not require ELC during the holiday periods;
 - 15% of respondents advised that a term-time model was their first choice of ELC provision but was not available; and
 - Other reasons for not attending ELC during holiday periods included one or more parents working term-time (12%).
- 3.15 In putting forward these proposals, based on current supply and demand data, and the views of parents and carers, Officers have considered the full ELC offer across each ASG with all areas still having a good mix of 8am-6pm all year round ELC provision and 9am-3pm term time provision (Appendix 3). Our ELC Funded Providers also continue to offer fully flexible funded ELC across the city and can meet the needs of families who require wrap around care and additional hours.
- 3.16 It is proposed that the amended delivery models outlined are implemented from August 2026 and that applications for ELC placements be opened in February 2026, in keeping with established practice and enabling effective forward planning by families.
- 3.17 There will be no staffing changes in the remainder of the current 2025-26 session. Officers will work with People & Citizen Services and Trade Union colleagues to consider any impacts on ELC staff contracts, as a result of the proposed changes to some of the ELC models, in advance of the new ELC session commencing in August 2026. No immediate reductions in staffing are proposed, as some ELC settings require enhanced staffing allocations. Staff turnover and vacancies will be monitored closely with any required adjustments in future staffing allocation achieved via staff turnover.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Aberdeen City Council, as primary guarantor of quality and key enabler of flexibility and choice, is currently funded by the Scottish Government to deliver ELC, as part of Grant Aided Expenditure (GAE).
- 4.2 Officers continue to work with finance colleagues to ensure that our plans work towards realisation of a sustainable ELC provision. The options presented in this report will help to achieve best value by rationalising ELC provision to match the Scottish Government Grant, whilst continuing to deliver on our statutory duties, if approved.
- 4.3 Reciprocal arrangements are in place via a Cross Boundary Agreement with Aberdeenshire Council. This means that an equal number of ELC places will

be provided by each neighbouring Local Authority. For example, if Aberdeen City Council provide more funded ELC places than Aberdeenshire Council, the additional places will be recharged to Aberdeenshire Council in line with the Reconciliation and Payments part of the Cross Boundary Agreement on a termly basis. This ensures equity and best value for both Authorities, whilst offering flexibility and choice to families from both Authorities.

- 4.4 The selling of ELC places pilot at Culter School ELC is also generating additional income for the Council. In 2025/26, six new families are purchasing additional sessions. This is in addition to five continuing families from 2024/25. Officers are now exploring the potential for selling ELC places at other ELC settings.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The expansion of ELC has brought a number of duties on the Local Authority under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014:

- The provision of 1140 hours of Early Learning and Childcare for eligible two year olds and all three and four year olds.
- Aberdeen City Council will retain the statutory responsibility for ensuring that funded ELC entitlement is available to all eligible children in the city.
- Aberdeen City Council will continue to be the primary guarantor of quality and key enabler of flexibility and choice, ensuring that there is a range of options for all families in the city.
- Aberdeen City Council is responsible for engaging and consulting with parents and carers on a regular basis (minimum of every 2 years) on the provision of ELC delivered locally.
- Aberdeen City Council is responsible for preparing and publishing an Early Learning and Childcare Delivery Plan every 2 years.

- 5.2 The proposed amended Early Learning and Childcare delivery models, based on demand, will assist the Council to continue to develop and deliver high quality ELC in the city.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 No negative environmental impacts have been identified. A cornerstone of the ELC expansion programme was the investment in outdoor learning, and this is keenly reflected in the establishment of two new outdoor nurseries at Duthie Park and at Hazlehead. Both have an outdoor focus in their education and provision, but each will offer unique and varied experiences for children, families, staff and the wider communities. The establishment of the two new outdoor nurseries is a first for Aberdeen city and a pioneering provision for the Early Years sector. Across all ELC settings, good use is also made of outdoor and green spaces where practicable and feasible to do so.

7. RISK

Category	Risks	Primary Controls/Control Actions to achieve Target Risk Level	*Target Risk Level (L, M or H) *taking into account controls/control actions	*Does Target Risk Level Match Appetite Set?
Strategic Risk	No risks identified	N/A	N/A	N/A
Compliance	Risk of not meeting statutory obligations around 1140 hours.	Mitigated through delivery of the Expansion Programme and subsequent monitoring of supply and demand of ELC places.	L	Yes
Operational	Risk of not attracting enough new practitioners into the workforce.	Mitigated through the ongoing activities being undertaken to support workforce development, as outlined in ELC Delivery Plan 2024-26.	L	Yes
Financial	Risk of building a financially unsustainable model.	Care has been taken to redesign ELC around improving quality rather than simply doubling to reflect the additional hours and a more sustainable staffing model has been put in place. Officers are monitoring supply and demand on an annual basis in order to maximise resources and achieve best value.	M	Yes
Reputational	Risk of not delivering on legal obligations	Mitigated through delivery of the Expansion Programme and subsequent monitoring of supply	L	Yes

		and demand of ELC places.		
Environment / Climate	No risks identified	N/A	N/A	N/A

8. OUTCOMES

<u>COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN 2025-26</u>	
	Impact of Report
Aberdeen City Council Policy Statement	<p>The proposals within this report support the delivery of the policy statement “<i>Aberdeen – A place where all people can prosper</i>”.</p> <p>The provision of funded Early Learning and Childcare has the potential to be transformational for many families, but especially for those with the lowest incomes in the city, and will contribute to our high level priority to reduce child poverty.</p>
<u>Aberdeen City Local Outcome Improvement Plan</u>	
Prosperous People Stretch Outcomes	<p>74% employment rate for Aberdeen City by 2026 (Stretch Outcome 2)</p> <p>The Early Learning and Childcare Delivery Plan 2024-26 will continue to have a positive impact on this priority theme and will help to deliver the LOIP.</p> <p>The workforce has increased significantly in order to deliver the increase in ELC provision and will not be detrimentally impacted by the proposals contained within this report.</p> <p>63 Aberdeen City Council employees retrained as Early Years Practitioners over 3 cohorts of a Retraining Programme, gaining an SVQ Level 3 qualification. We also recruited 110 Early Learning and Childcare Support Workers.</p> <p>In addition, we introduced a Modern Apprenticeship position into our ELC staffing structure. This involves training young people to become Early Years Practitioners as part of our ‘Grow Our Own’ workforce strategy. This is a new role in our Local Authority ELC settings and provides a positive destination and career pathway for our young people as well as strengthening our workforce. We currently have 30 Modern Apprenticeships working across the city.</p>

	<p>There will continue to be ongoing opportunities to join the Early Learning and Childcare workforce in Aberdeen and to retrain, to upskill and for career progression.</p> <p>95% of all children will reach their expected developmental milestones by their 27-30 month review by 2026 (Stretch Outcome 3)</p> <p>Our work in partnership with families and communities including through a Peep offer in all settings as part of a partnership Family Support offer will support children to reach their expected milestones. It will also increase the number of parents and carers who have awareness of how to support their children's learning and development at home.</p> <p>Furthermore, every child who attends Early Learning and Childcare over a lunchtime period receives a minimum of one free meal per session attended as part of their statutory entitlement, as well as a portion of milk and fruit or vegetables daily via the Scottish Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme.</p> <p>Early Learning and Childcare can improve long term outcomes for children and families.</p> <p>95% of children, living in our priority neighbourhoods (Quintiles 1&2), will sustain a positive destination upon leaving school by 2026 (Stretch Outcome 6)</p> <p>The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare has contributed positively to supporting positive destinations.</p> <p>We have introduced a Modern Apprenticeship (MA) position into our ELC staffing structure. This involves training young people to become Early Years Practitioners as part of our 'Grow Our Own' workforce strategy. This is a new role in our Local Authority ELC settings and provides a positive destination and career pathway for our young people as well as strengthening our workforce. We currently have 30 Modern Apprenticeships working across the city and are in the process of recruiting 2 new MA's.</p> <p>34 young people completed their training in 2023-2024 and 13 completed in 2024-2025.</p>

Regional and City Strategies Strategic Development Plan Children's Services Plan National Improvement Framework Plan	The proposals within this report support the Strategic Development Plan by supporting the workforce. The provision of high quality Early Learning and Childcare will: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Support families to take up employment and training opportunities; 2. Develop the Young Workforce; and 3. Support business to recruit and retain staff. The Early Learning and Childcare Delivery Plan 2024-26 is aligned to the Children's Services Plan and the National Improvement Framework Plan and work to address poverty in the Child Poverty Action Plan.
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9. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Integrated Impact Assessment	Previous Integrated Impact Assessment relating to the provision of Early Learning and Childcare has been reviewed and no changes are required: ED-07R~1.PDF
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required as no personal information will be shared.
Other	None

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 Best Start: Strategic Early Learning and School Age Childcare Plan for Scotland 2022-26 (Scottish Government: October 2022)
- 10.2 Aberdeen City Council Early Learning and Childcare Delivery Plan 2024-26

11. APPENDICES

- 11.1 Appendix 1 – Early Learning and Childcare Consultation with Parents and Carers – Spring 2025
- 11.2 Appendix 2 – Analysis of uptake of ELC Placements – October 2025
- 11.3 Appendix 3 – Early Learning and Childcare Models Proposed from August 2026

12. REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

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