

Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise

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Your Reference: AD/MH

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Dear Ann,

Thank you for your letter to the First Minister of the 10th of December regarding East Dunbartonshire Council's motion in relation to Early Years Childcare – Eligibility for 3 Year Olds. As responsibility for Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) falls within my remit as the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise, I have been asked to reply.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that children have access to high quality funded ELC in order to receive the support they need to reach their full learning potential, and to give them the best possible start in life. This is why since 2021, we have invested around £1 billion each year to fully fund the statutory entitlement of up to 1140 hours of ELC per year for all three- and four-year-olds, as well as eligible two-year-olds.

Arrangements for when children become eligible for funded ELC are set out under the Provision of Early Learning and Childcare (Specified Children) (Scotland) Order 2014. Three-year-olds are eligible to start funded ELC from the relevant start date, which is usually the term after their 3rd birthday. At the time the 2014 Order was drafted and considered by the Scottish Parliament, the stated reason for having three start dates was to enable small groups of children to start at phased points and help to keep the system manageable and sustainable.

As you will be aware, your local authority already has existing powers and the discretion to prioritise existing funding to enable earlier access if you choose to do so, which I understand was the case in East Dunbartonshire until recently.

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Tha Ministearanna h-Alba, an luchd-comhairleachaidh sònraichte agus Rùnaire Maireannach fo chumhachan Achd Coiteachaidh (Alba) 2016. Faicibh www.lobbying.scot

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Scotland continues to face one of the most difficult public spending environments that this devolved parliament has ever seen. Given the difficult financial context, we are prioritising our current commitments and maintaining the overall profile of eligible children.

At a national level, we fund earlier access to ELC for eligible two-year-olds based on a range of research which shows that while attending high quality ELC improves outcomes for all children, children facing the most disadvantage, benefit the most. We continue to work with local authorities to maximise uptake of our existing offer for eligible two-year-olds, with a focus on families most at risk of poverty and on areas with some of the lowest take up rates.

To ensure local authorities have the capacity and resources required to deliver any new policy commitments, all new policy or changes to existing policy that have a financial cost for local government will be discussed and agreed through the formal financial governance process which requires agreed recommendations from the joint Scottish Government and COSLA Officers' Settlement and Distribution Group and political sign-off from Scottish Ministers and COSLA political Leaders.

Decisions on future local government finance settlements, will be the subject of negotiations with COSLA on behalf of all 32 local authorities and announced as part of the outcome of future Scottish Budgets.

I hope this information provides reassurance that the Scottish Government remains fully committed to funding the delivery of high quality ELC and keeping children in Scotland out of poverty.

Yours sincerely



NATALIE DON-INNES

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