

Engender Parliamentary Briefing for the Scottish Government Debate: Expanding Childcare

May 2026

BACKGROUND

Engender is a leading feminist policy and advocacy organisation working to secure women's social, political and economic equality and realise women's rights in Scotland. We aim to make visible the impact of structural inequalities on women and wider society, and work at Scottish, UK and international levels to produce research, analysis and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and policy.

Our work exposes women's deep financial inequality and increased risk of poverty due to the intersectional gender inequalities they face. A key driver of women's financial insecurity is the current lack of childcare provision in Scotland. The availability of affordable, appropriate childcare determines whether women have jobs, the types of jobs they can access, the hours they can work, and the level of pay they can earn.

Alongside many of our sister organisations and partners across Scotland, we are calling for the next Scottish Government to go further and faster towards providing affordable, flexible, universally available childcare. This is a necessary step to reduce child poverty and advance women's equality.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

1. A lack of childcare drives women's inequality

Childcare costs in the UK are amongst the highest in the world, totalling almost a third (29%) of parents' income. This compares with an average of 10% across OECD countries.¹ The lack of affordable childcare is the most immediate barrier to women's paid work, education, and vocational training.

In a survey of 11,000 families in Scotland, half of all mothers said that it does not make financial sense for them to work after factoring for childcare costs.²

¹ One Parent Family Scotland and Close the Gap (2023) A childcare system for all: A vision that puts gender equality at the centre of Scotland's childcare strategy. Available at:

<https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/CtG-and-OPFS---A-childcare-system-for-all-FINAL.pdf>

² Pregnant then screwed Scotland (2026) 2026 State of the Nation Survey. Available at:

<https://pregnantthenscrewed.com/childcare-costs-more-than-income-of-scottish-mums/>

The situation worsens for the most marginalised groups. Three-quarters of parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities have had to give up their jobs or reduce hours due to the lack of appropriate services, with 40% forced to stop paid work altogether.³ Costs are steeper, places are more limited, and services are less accessible in remote and rural areas of Scotland, particularly during school holidays.⁴ Single mothers, BME women and disabled parents are also disproportionately impacted by prohibitive prices.⁵

2. A roadmap for a universal childcare system

Scottish Government's funding for 1140 hours of early learning and childcare (ELC)⁶ is a welcome step towards improving this outlook. However, it falls far short of the wrap-around childcare that women need. The disruption this causes negatively affects women's earnings, career progression, pensions, and financial security throughout their lifetimes.

Research highlights the lack of available places, prices that squeeze women out of work, and the urgent need for provision for school-age childcare, as school holidays vastly outstrip annual leave entitlements.⁷ The lack of comprehensive and affordable childcare, provided elsewhere in Europe,⁸ is driving women's poverty in Scotland.

In 2018, the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls recommended that the Scottish Government 'provide 50 hours per week of funded, good quality and flexible education and childcare for all children between six months and five years old'.⁹ However, commitments to expand free ELC for younger children and to build a system of year-round school-age care have been slow to progress. Nor are these proposals adequate to address the scale of the problem for women who cannot afford to work.

³ SEND (2024) Fighting for your SEND child: The hidden costs survey. Available at: <https://www.learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk/news/two-in-five-parents-of-children-with-send-forced-to-give-up-work/>

⁴ Coram (2024) Childcare survey 2024. Available at: https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Childcare%20Survey%202024_5.pdf

⁵ TUC "TUC poll: 1 in 3 parents with pre-school children spend more than a third of their pay on childcare". Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/tuc-poll-1-3-parents-pre-school-children-spend-more-third-their-pay-childcare>

⁶ This covers 3-4 year olds, and 2 year-olds on a means-tested basis, for 30 hrs a week during term.

⁷ One Parent Family Scotland (2022) Living without a lifeline: Single parenting and the cost of living crisis. Available at: <https://opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Living-without-a-lifeline-full-report.pdf>

⁸ UNICEF (2021) Where do rich countries stand on childcare? Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/5431/file/UNICEF-Where-Do-Rich-Countries-Stand-on-Childcare-2021.pdf>

⁹ NACWG (2018) 2018 First report and recommendations. Available at: <https://onescotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2018-Report.pdf>

The new Scottish Government must replace the 2022-26 childcare plan¹⁰ with a flagship policy on childcare that would be transformative for women’s labour market equality and financial security.

3. Our recommendations

We ask MSPs to join us and our sister organisations across the sector, in asking for the Scottish Government to design a roadmap for a universal childcare offer in Scotland that:

- Offers an entitlement of 50 hours’ early learning and school-age childcare, free at the point of use for children 6 months and over.
- Sets out a clear timeline for delivery.
- Delivers high-quality and inclusive services consistently across Scotland.
- Embeds intersectional gender equality in design and delivery at the local level.
- Adopts principles for a universal system developed by gender equality advocates, including on the childcare workforce and economic development.¹¹

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

Engender is Scotland’s feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women’s social, political and economic equality, enable women’s rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international level to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

¹⁰ Scottish Government (2022) Best Start: Strategic early learning and school age childcare plan for Scotland 2022-26. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/best-start-strategic-early-learning-school-age-childcare-plan-scotland-2022-26/>

¹¹ One Parent Family Scotland and Close the Gap (2023) A childcare system for all: A vision that puts gender equality at the centre of Scotland’s childcare strategy. Available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/CtG-and-OPFS---A-childcare-system-for-all-FINAL.pdf>