

Official Response

Petition PE1648 – Voice Scotland response

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SUBJECT

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to abolish or freeze business rates for nurseries.

As the only education-specialist and non-striking trade union in Scotland that represents the Early Years Sector, Voice Scotland have a unique perspective on the demands and challenges of delivering a successful, effective and joined up education system for Scotland's children and young people. Voice Scotland are grateful to be given the opportunity to comment upon this petition and call for an urgent review of the imposition of higher business rates on nurseries.

Our organisation is supportive in principle of Scottish Government's aim to further expand early years services to 1140 hours. We support the aim of achieving a high quality early years and childcare service, which will require a high quality and valued workforce, together with high quality premises from which services are to be delivered. Scottish Government's vision will require to be adequately funded to avoid compromising on the quality of the experiences of children.

Scottish Government have advised that "quality", including the value of early years professionals, is one of the four guiding principles for this service expansion, recognising that high quality learning and care at an early years level contributes significantly to closing the attainment gap. That is a view shared by Professor Iram Siraj in her 2015 Independent Review of the sector's workforce. Unfortunately, Professor Siraj's

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recommendation of a national pay scale for early years professionals was rejected by Scottish Government. A modest commitment to the Living Wage instead hardly matches Scottish Government's aspirations in relation to qualifications to be held by the workforce. The fact that the position on pay will not significantly change as part of the expansion of services, thereby maintaining a wide disparity in terms and conditions between public and private settings, means that the intended national early years recruitment campaign in autumn 2017 will remain hindered by the perception of the practitioner role as being poorly paid and therefore of low status, with limited future career prospects.

Our organisation's disagreement with the sufficiency of the Living Wage commitment aside, should Scottish Government wish to ensure that the Living Wage is indeed paid to staff, the financial pressure upon private settings through the application of business rates must be addressed. Additionally, if a high quality experience for children is indeed Scottish Government's aim, then the encouragement of the improvement of premises where required will be necessary rather than penalisation through the application of higher business rates.

A near doubling of early years services will require the full support of the private sector to ensure success. In turn, private settings

will require as much support as is possible to be able to play a full part in the expansion to 1140 hours as noted above. In helping to deliver Scottish Government's commitment to a near doubling of funded hours, it seems inappropriate to impose business rates upon private nurseries as though they were not helping to deliver a public service, such as the restaurant sector.

Local authorities themselves are increasingly challenged in balancing their books and, as the 1140 hours expansion is being driven at a national level, we would submit that the position on business rates for nurseries requires to be reviewed and the cost of doing so factored into the 1140 expansion implementation plans in terms of the funding to be provided by Scottish Government. In order to ensure that the planned expansion in services in fact achieves its aim of contributing to closing the attainment gap, it would be entirely inappropriate in our view for the burden of business rates to be passed on to parents; to do so will disproportionately impact upon the most disadvantaged.

If private nurseries are put off from forming partnerships with local authorities, the success of the 1140 hours expansion will be in jeopardy.

Jennifer Barnes

Senior Professional Officer (Scotland)