

Improvement Service Written Submission for Education, Children and Young People Committee Ahead of Appearance on 25th May 2022

Introduction

This document is a written submission ahead of the Improvement Service's (IS) appearance at the Education, Children and Young People committee scheduled for 25th May 2022. At that session the IS will be represented by Adam Hall, Programme Manager for Recovery and Delivery. It provides background information on the IS, and details the scope of work related to the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) expansion delivery progress reporting. Given that the session on 25th May will also hear from national membership organisations of private and third sector nurseries, we also include a description of our involvement in the Ipsos MORI national cost collection exercise of funded ELC providers.

About the Improvement Service

The IS was established in 2005 as the national improvement organisation for Local Government in Scotland. We were set up to deliver improvement support that would help councils to provide effective community leadership, strong local governance and deliver high quality, efficient local services.

We take forward our purpose by providing a range of Transformational Change, Performance and Improvement Support, Data and Intelligence Services and Digital Public Services. We ensure that all the work we deliver is firmly focused on achieving our vision and purpose, and on adding value for Local Authorities, for the Local Government family and for our broader group of diverse stakeholders.

The IS has been involved in supporting the ELC Expansion since November 2017 by way of a grant agreement from Scottish Government for personnel to deliver Business Analysis, Workforce and Communications Support to councils as well as the Delivery Progress Reports.

Delivery Progress Reports

Background

To provide information on the implementation of the ELC Expansion, the IS and Scottish Futures Trust (SFT) collect and analyse data on the progress of the delivery of the expansion programmes across local authorities.

The role of the IS was to arrange the distribution and collection of template spreadsheets to all local authorities, before collating all of the data received into national level reports that would evidence the status of the expansion across Scotland. The data was presented without interpretation, only reporting on the statistics as they were returned.

These reports informed the Joint Delivery Board on the national progress in delivering the expansion. Co-chaired by the Minister for Children and Young People and the COSLA Spokesperson for Children and Young People, the Joint Delivery Board was responsible for reviewing progress towards implementation of the 1140 hours offer across all 32 local authorities and for agreeing actions to mitigate risk, respond to emerging issues or put support in place where that may be required.

The data presented in the Delivery Progress Reports were not the sole evidence heard by the Joint Delivery Board in assessing progress, with wider engagement by the Scottish Government's Delivery Assurance Team (of which the IS team was a part) also being considered alongside specific feedback on the progress of the infrastructure programme.

SFT collects ELC infrastructure data on a quarterly basis from local authorities. IS currently collects information at the start of every academic term, though collections were less frequent prior to August 2020, with one taking place at the start and end of the academic year.

Collection Methodology, Uses and Limitations

To collect the data, all 32 Scottish local authorities were issued with template spreadsheets and a guidance document containing instructions for completion and detailed definitions for each of the key readiness indicators to be measured.

Although the IS and SFT liaised with individual local authorities in seeking to ensure consistency of data returns wherever there appeared to be obvious errors, we did not undertake an audit of the data, systems and processes used to capture the data within the 32 local authorities. The data submitted by local authorities was, therefore, presented in good faith without having been audited by the IS or SFT.

In isolation, the data does not offer insight into why forecasts have or have not been met in each authority and it does not necessarily follow that those who have not met the forecast are behind in their project delivery. As such, local authorities were able to provide a free text narrative along with the data, to explain the data findings. Where there were common themes in the free text narrative being raised by a number of authorities, our reports would include comment on this.

Revised Collection Framework in August 2020

Previous to August 2020, periodic data collections reported to the Joint Delivery Board only gathered information on the additionality that was being delivered to support the 1140 expansion. All measurements were relative to a 'baseline' position in academic year 2016/17, before expansion activities began.

In recognition of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ELC sector, the Joint Delivery Board at their meeting in July 2020 supported a recommendation by the IS to undertake a re-baselining of the data being collected. The Joint Delivery Board also recognised that local authorities should be given time to consider how the pandemic might necessitate revisions to their plans for the 1140 expansion.

A revised data collection framework was therefore built which allowed measurement of the status of the ELC sector at its baseline position at the start of the academic year, throughout recovery and expansion to 1140.

The revised framework was based on the same indicators as the previous framework but asked that local authorities report on the totality of the service rather than the additionality from the 2016/17 baseline. Measuring totality in this way removes ambiguity in the interpretation of the measurement of additionality that may have existed in the previous framework.

Results

In our Delivery Progress Reports, published on the IS website¹, we report the nationally collated figures on:

- The number of children accessing funded ELC;
 - Split by age; and
 - Split by the level of provision accessed.
- The proportion of uptake split by provider types (local authority, private and third sector, or childminder). This does not account for blended models and reports only on where children take most of their hours;
- Information on Childminder provision:
 - The number of childminders reported to be in partnership, and the number of children reported to be accessing some level of provision with childminders.
- The local authority ELC Workforce;
 - Total complement; and
 - Breakdown by job type.

In each report we also included a commentary on the progress of the infrastructure programme that was provided to us by SFT – these sections were not authored by the IS, with SFT responsible for monitoring and reporting on the status of the infrastructure programme.

Earlier in the expansion programme we also collected and reported on local authorities' forecasts for the number of children expected to be accessing funded ELC, and the expectations of the workforce. As we moved towards and beyond the day 1 delivery of the expansion, the importance of forecasts necessarily diminished and was therefore given less weight in more recent reports.

All reports gave only the national figures relating to the expansion and did not highlight information from individual local authorities. In all delivery progress reports we observed there to be variability between local authorities and commented on this appropriately in our reports.

ELC Partner Cost Collection Exercise

Building on the experience of local authorities that have undertaken cost collection exercises, the IS was asked to work with CoSLA, ADES, Directors of Finance and Scottish Government to commission an external market research company to undertake a consistent national cost collection exercise in 2021-22, that will provide

¹ <https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/products-and-services/consultancy-and-support/early-learning-and-childcare-expansion/elc-delivery-progress-reports>

each local authority with a dataset on which they can then base local rate-setting exercises in consultation with funded providers.

The IS commissioned Ipsos MORI to undertake the collection, taking direction from a steering group, comprised of representatives of CoSLA, ADES, Directors of Finance and Scottish Government in organising the exercise. Data collection took place between late February and late March 2022. Cost data was collected from a range of provider types in each local authority area, with appropriate groupings undertaken across statistical neighbours should response rates be lower than would be required for statistical significance in any individual authority.

This collection only did not include a survey of childminders, who will be surveyed separately in the coming weeks.

The purpose of the cost data collection exercise is to support local authorities to set local sustainable rates that reflect the costs of delivery in their local area. Following on from the cost collection exercise, the IS is also supporting local authorities to share practice on rate-setting processes for 2022-23. This includes a programme of workshops focused on encouraging local authorities to share practice. These workshops have included presentations from some local authorities regarding their approach to setting sustainable rates. In this capacity, the IS is providing a forum for local authorities to discuss their processes in the setting of rates – we are not acting as external consultants in directing, or in any way advising, local authorities on setting their rates.