



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Scotland's  
**Futures Forum**  
Fòram Alba air Thoiseach



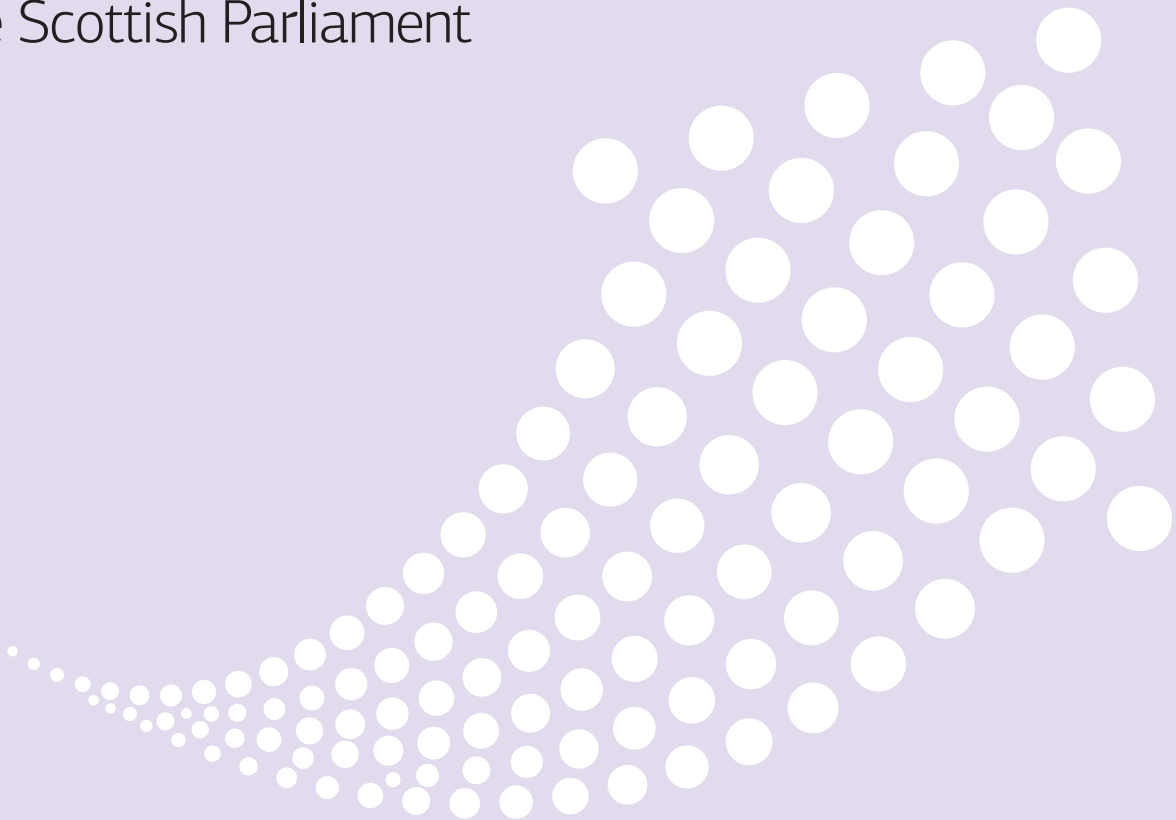
**Goodison Group**  
in Scotland

INFLUENCING LEARNING

# Scotland's Futures Forum / Goodison Group in Scotland **Forum Debate**

**Wednesday 14 March 2018**

The Scottish Parliament



## Background

The Goodison Group in Scotland 2018 programme focuses on exploring future schooling, education and learning approaches in 2030 and beyond. An outline of the project can be found at [www.scotlandfutureforum.org/scotland-2030-programme/future-schooling/](http://www.scotlandfutureforum.org/scotland-2030-programme/future-schooling/) The output from this work will contribute to Scotland's Futures Forum's broader programme, which is considering Scotland's aspirations for society and culture in 2030 and beyond.

## Future Schooling, Education & Learning Approaches: 2030 and Beyond

Last year, the Goodison Group and Scotland's Futures Form held a series of debates which explored how macro environmental factors, such as the economy, might influence or disrupt schooling, education and learning in 2030 and beyond. Out of those discussions, a straw scenario was developed which imagined what Scotland's education system might look like in the future.

This year, the Goodison Group in association with Scotland's Futures Form will build on that work to consider each of the different stages of education in more depth, to develop further insights and build another set of scenarios.

The first debate of this year's series focused on early years education with presentations from Juliet Hancock, Director of Professional Learning at Moray House School of Education, and Sue Palmer, Chair of Upstart Scotland.

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### **Juliet Hancock, Director of Professional Learning, Moray House School of Education**

Juliet said she was delighted that this series of debates was starting with the early years, which neuroscience has confirmed as the most significant stage of a child's development.

In considering what works and what our aspirations should be for early years, Juliet proposed that we should start with values. While there is much talk of children's rights, she questioned whether we are seeing that translated into practice. In order to adopt a child centred approach, she suggested we have to step outside our experience as an adult and consult children. This can deliver unexpected results, as she illustrated with an example from Moldova where, after being consulted about how funding should be spent on improving their nursery school, the young children said they wanted a set of large gates – to keep out the wild dogs, which scared them.

In developing a vision for early years, Juliet suggested that we need to hold on to those aspects of policy and practice which have been shown to work. She also suggested that we need to look at the evidence which shows that good outcomes for children are linked to: adult-child interactions that involve open-ended questioning; formative feedback; practitioners having good curriculum knowledge and understanding of child development; educational aims being shared with parents.

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A reimagining of education also involves rethinking the role of the educator; Juliet argued that we need to provide environments and adults that can support children to go after their own aspirations. As suggested by Malaguzzi, 'Our task is to help children climb their own mountains.'

A new vision also requires us to challenge the tendency to separate 'education' from 'care'. In a similar vein Juliet noted the fear of talking about 'love' in early years as if, in doing so, we will lessen the importance of the work taking place or, as Dali said, 'disempower early childhood practitioners from claiming professional status.'

Juliet also highlighted the work of Angela Underwood who has demonstrated that placing the child at the centre (as advocated by Getting it Right for Every Child) not only benefits the child, but also allows the child to positively influence outwards.

Rather than talking about the current 'attainment gap', Juliet suggested that we should be referring to all the 'gaps' (employment, inclusion, accessibility, poverty) which tell us about the complexity of where Scotland is today. Against this context, Juliet suggested that we cannot afford to wait longer than the government's target of 2020 before we see affordable, accessible and high quality childcare. She also said she hoped the future would not see us move towards a more prescriptive-based education system.

In terms of how children should engage with technology now and in the future, Juliet noted that many parents have a difficult and uncomfortable relationship with digital technology. The result, she said, is that there is a lack of understanding about what constitutes too much or too little 'screen time'.

Referring to the concept of the 'Education incubator' that had been used in straw scenario, Juliet reflected that while the term has negative connotations, it is also used in academia and enterprise as offering a safe space to develop and nurture new ideas. She suggested that the real incubator is the child and concluded that for Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up, we need to ensure we are developing an education system not *for or on behalf* of children, but *with* children.

## **Sue Palmer, Chair of Upstart Scotland**

Sue opened her presentation with an overview of Upstart which campaigns for a play-based kindergarten stage in Scotland for all children aged 3–7, based on the Nordic model which places an emphasis on the outdoors.

While the Curriculum for Excellence's 'Early Level' (for children from 3–6) offers a good basis for this stage, very few Scottish primary schools have introduced play-based pedagogy in Primary 1/2. Sue blamed this on a number of factors including: cultural expectations that school is where children learn the 3Rs; the 'schoolification' of nurseries taking place in England and the USA; and the professional divide between early years and primary educators. All of these are underpinned by Scotland's early school starting age.

## **Sue Palmer, Chair of Upstart Scotland** *(continued)*

Apart from ex-British Empire countries, there is a worldwide consensus that the best age to start school is 6–7 and the United Nations defines ‘early years’ as 0–8. In addition, the international evidence suggests that children who spend longer in kindergarten before starting school do better educationally. According to Sue, these benefits arise from an educational ethos that is rooted in maximising a child's developmental potential before the introduction of age-related standards of achievement. Such an approach demands a change in: emphasis; flexibility; how literacy is approached; and opportunities for children's self-directed play as well as teacher-initiated activities.

Sue expressed her disappointment that despite a growing interest in play-based pedagogy in P1 around Scotland, we have now brought in literacy and numeracy testing for that age-group. While recognising the context within which testing has been introduced (i.e. concerns about the poverty-related attainment gap), she pointed out that testing narrows the curriculum, encourages ‘teaching to the test’, and also increases anxiety amongst teachers, parents and children. In addition, Sue suggested testing has thus further added to the Early Level divide between ‘nursery’ which is seen as childcare, and P1 which is seen as ‘school’.

What we want from early years education, according to Sue, is to develop the capacities that will make children successful learners and confident individuals, especially self-regulation and resilience. She noted that young children are biologically adapted to develop these capacities through play and, at the age of 4 or 5, the self-regulatory powers of many (possibly most) children are insufficiently developed to cope with a formal school environment. A failure to recognise this means that we have had to adopt behaviour management systems to achieve the behaviours the education system demands.

Sue suggested that children who are not paying attention or not controlling themselves in school should be viewed as exhibiting ‘distressed’ rather than ‘challenging’ behaviour. This damages the relationships between teachers and children, which – at this stage – should be caring and supportive. She suggested that what we have created is an education system that relies on creating compliant people pleasers who may be good at passing exams but are not necessarily intrinsically motivated to learn.

Sue highlighted the many benefits of outdoor play during the early years, including literally giving children the space to learn to get along with their peers. She noted how the decline in outdoor play over recent years has coincided with increases in physical problems, such as obesity, as well as an alarming increase in mental health problems among children and young people.

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## **Sue Palmer, Chair of Upstart Scotland** (*continued*)

While there are some great projects around Scotland promoting the importance of play, Sue argued that young children's opportunities to play freely outdoors have now declined to such an extent that we need to reintroduce play via universal services, in the form of a kindergarten stage. She also pointed out that there is now widespread interest in research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) which shows that early experiences of difficult or abusive relationships have a lifelong impact on health and mental well-being; and that longitudinal research on the effects of early formal schooling suggests that this too may be an ACE.

She concluded by noting the fantastic range of work that is being undertaken in Scotland that is informed by a child's rights approach which would complement her vision of a kindergarten stage for all children.

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## **DISCUSSION**

### **Use of language**

The discussion started with a note on the role of language with the suggestion that the variety of terms used for early years (childminder, childhood, nursery, playschool, kindergarten) may obscure the issues at stake, particularly for parents and politicians. It was suggested that given language and culture are intertwined, the bewildering array of terms in this area may reflect the confusion around what we want from our early years.

It was also noted that there is a debate to be had around whether we change some of the language used in early years – for example 'childminding' – or whether we take ownership of these terms.

### **Resilience and mental health issues**

A question was asked about whether the significant rise in university students presenting with mental health issues could be traced back to their early years experiences. It was suggested that it would be difficult to draw such a straightforward correlation in such a complex issue.

While neuroscience shows that love and play are key to a child developing resilience, it was noted we also need to recognise that resilience is not something fixed after a certain point. It was also suggested that we have to acknowledge that as a society we are now better at recognising mental health issues.

# DISCUSSION *(continued)*

## **The care/education divide**

There was discussion about how the divide between 'care' and 'education' in early years could be addressed. It was suggested that we need to unpack and make visible what is happening in early years and support those who work in this area to articulate how their 'care' provides the foundations for education and learning.

There was also a suggestion that we need to move away from the idea that 'play' is only something we do when we are not working.

## **Joining up research, policy and practice**

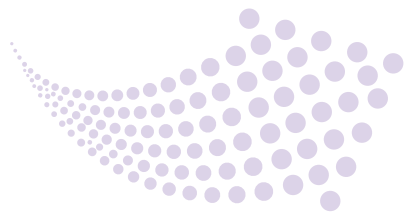
Questions were raised about how we can bring together research, policy and practice to improve Scotland's education system, given that policy decisions are often taken which are not based on the evidence of what works best for the child. It was noted that Moray House does bring together researchers, policy makers and practitioners but that more of these spaces are needed and that teachers, particularly those working in primary and secondary schools, need to engage in these discussions to identify the practical steps needed to implement what we see as important.

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## **Next steps**

Following the discussion, participants were given space to reflect on what they had heard before being asked to write a 'postcard from the future' with their vision for Scotland's early years in 2030. The scenario set out in the appendix summarises different aspects of the vision that people put forward on their postcards.

The next debate in this series will take place on Tuesday 19 June and will focus on primary education.



## Appendix 1

### School, Education and Learning in 2030

A vision of how education is positively contributing to our culture and society

## WHEN

### The early years education system

Scotland is a place where childhood is celebrated. An ongoing national conversation on, 'What is school for?' continues to place a focus on young learners in recognition of the fact that education has the greatest impact in the early years.

A kindergarten system of 'hubs' has been established for all children between the ages of 3 or 4 and 7 or 8, which is developing well-rounded individuals who will go on to contribute to a more altruistic society. It is a system that links well to the rest of the education system and lays the foundation for today's children to become encouraging parents for the next generation.

Communities are encouraged to work together to care for their children, through building on and enhancing family life. Care experienced siblings are kept together and additional support is offered for families who need it to give their children the best start in life.

## WHAT

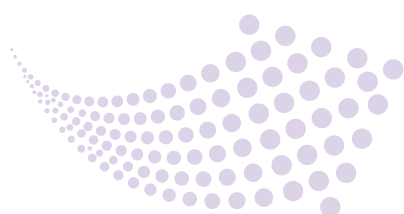
### The curriculum

Children learn and develop in multi-age and multi-ability teams through mutual support and encouragement. Much of pre-school education involves the outdoors as well as outings in the community in order to foster resilience, to encourage risk-taking and to help children develop relationships with their peers. Children are largely left to their own devices to choose what and how they learn, though they are encouraged to tidy up at the end of the day, an activity which is made fun, through the singing of songs etc.

A one-size-fits-all approach to learning is not applied but developed according to needs. Teachers are encouraged to develop individual responses to each child, based on an understanding of relevant research. For example if a child is showing an interest in books or numbers, this is encouraged. There is no divide between education and care.

Children can leave kindergarten aged 7 or stay on for another year until they are deemed 'ready' for school; testing for this age group, as happened in the past, is now viewed as a form of abuse.





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### WHERE

#### Kindergartens

Kindergartens, or early learning hubs, have great outdoor space with many play areas, where children are encouraged to spend the majority of their day, building dens to imitate homes or to hide away on their own. Inside there is a lot of colour and spaces are clean, though they can be very messy at times. Kindergartens have a 'buzzy' feel and emanate a sense of fun and are at the heart of the community alongside retirement housing, encouraging intergenerational learning.

The kindergartens are open every day including at weekends and operate a flexible timetable, so younger children do not have to spend long periods of time there. There is also support for parents who want to opt their children out of long hours outside the home.

### HOW and WHO

#### Early years profession

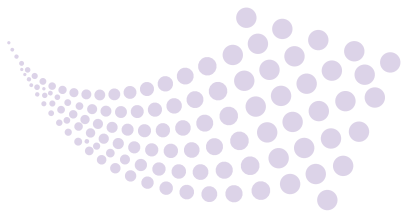
Early years learning is delivered by high-quality staff trained in play-based pedagogy who understand what children need to thrive. Much of their training has been practice-based rather than university led. There is an equal number of male and female staff.

Scotland's economic, social and employability policies and practices are such that intergenerational learning is the norm, and parents, grandparents and carers are able to spend time at the kindergarten hubs. They work alongside staff to read stories, to sing songs and to talk about the games they used to play. The adults also regularly go off and undertake their own activities such as crafts, which children can join in with if they choose.

The focus has shifted away from policy and finance to working with colleagues from health and social work. One member of staff, nominated as the 'safety officer', has a remit to encourage children to take and assess risks.

Staff are viewed as kind and friendly by the children and, when necessary, encourage children to do better rather than labelling behaviour as 'naughty'.





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## SUCCESS

### Qualifications and competences system

Success is measured in terms of the child's happiness and the developmental stages of self-regulation and resilience. Children are also asked what they believe has made their learning successful.

## VALUES and BEHAVIOURS

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as children's digital rights, are upheld, and there is a shared understanding that children treated with human dignity will have higher levels of confidence and learning.

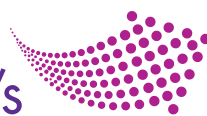
Children's views on their learning and their learning environment are routinely sought and acted upon.

Children's instincts and emotions are respected, and there is a collective desire to draw out an individual's potential. The following qualities are particularly encouraged within the early years system: love, creativity, enterprise and connection.



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