

Council urged to stop plans to change childcare for commuters

Parents have urged Edinburgh Council to halt “brutal” plans to phase out childcare places in private nurseries for people living outside the city.

They warned that the move, which will affect commuters living in the Lothians and Fife, could cost families thousands and “increase the number of children growing up in poverty”.

The City of Edinburgh Council said funded places will still be available in local authority-run nurseries for anyone affected.

The change – taking effect from August – will only impact new placements, with existing funded children continuing to be supported.

Council leader Cllr Cammy Day said it was unfortunately “no longer possible to justify paying private businesses £1.2 million for cross boundary places when vacant spaces are available within the local authority settings” due to a £6 million cut to the early years budget by The Scottish Government.

Mum Fiona Donnachie, who lives in Winchburgh just a few miles from the local authority boundary and travels into Edinburgh for work, said if the cut goes ahead “I would need to consider

my working hours”.

She said due to “huge” waiting lists for private and independent nurseries in West Lothian getting a local funded place for her son Flynn would be unlikely and council-run options would not be able to provide the hours needed.

Ms Donnachie told the LDRS: “I’ve got a full time job, so it’s an added stress. I don’t know what we would do. My husband might have to drop a day [at work], or we might have to rely on the support of others which I don’t really want to do.

“We couldn’t justify paying for him privately without that funding – we absolutely could not afford that.

“They’re not thinking about children or working families, they’re thinking about numbers on a piece of paper. It feels quite brutal to me. It’s the wee kids being affected.

“I get we need to save money somewhere but they’re going for the most vulnerable in society, our wee kids who are in the most important years of their lives in upheaval.

“The waiting lists for private nurseries in West Lothian are huge, we had to wait months for Flynn to get a place in Edinburgh. He’s now settled and loves it and we’re going to have to pull him out of it.

“They’ve done no research into the spaces available. Really there should be a holistic approach and the Scottish Government should be looking at it for every council and seeing what they can do. If the money is coming from the Scottish Government it should be able to be distributed per child as opposed to per council, it just seems like a flawed system.”

Flora Ranachan, who lives “just on the other side of the boundary”, is also set to be impacted when her 15-month-old daughter turns three.

She has launched a petition urging the council to scrap the proposal she says will “cause significant disruption to children who have to adapt to new childcare settings, as well as potentially increasing parents’ commute times” which has so far gathered 1,457 signatures.

She said waiting lists in West Lothian are “horrendous,” adding: “They’re often into 2025 so God knows how you’re supposed to obtain a space. The only one we could get was in Edinburgh.

Foregoing funding and keeping her daughter where she is would cost around £8,000 a year whilst moving to a council nursery would add 30 miles to her commute every week, she said.

“We shouldn’t have to do that or change nurseries in the year before school which is a really important developmental year.

“It would also significantly increase my commute and that’s if we are able to find a space – and that’s an incredibly big if.

“I feel this is quite a worrying precedent that if Edinburgh Council progress this other councils may follow suit.

“It’s either going to affect us financially by increasing our bills or I reduce my hours at work and it affects us financially that way, and it also would have an impact on my career.

“I don’t actually understand why this would save Edinburgh Council money, I really don’t. It’s such a short-sighted measure that it’s maybe been a bit of a knee jerk reaction to save some funding.

“It’s a real step backwards, it’s going to exclude people from the workforce, increase the number of children growing up in poverty and ultimately it takes choices away from parents.”

Councillor Day said: “Unfortunately, due to the £6m reduction in our early years budget allocation from the Scottish

Government, and the additional costs of £4.5m for the 7% annual increase in places in private provider settings since August 2021 (from 35% in our early learning and childcare (ELC) delivery plan to 42%), it is no longer possible to justify paying private businesses £1.2m for cross boundary places when vacant spaces are available within the local authority settings.

“We therefore need to ensure best value in line with our original ELC delivery plan for 1140 hours.

“We will continue to fund existing cross boundary places in private settings but will phase this option out from August 2024.

“Existing funded children who are not Edinburgh residents will continue to be funded. If they have a younger sibling who attends the setting and will be eligible for funding during session 2024-25, we will also fund this child to prevent the need for the parent to use more than one ELC setting.

“Parents who are not Edinburgh residents and require full day all year-round provision to work in the city will be able to access this in one of our full year 8am – 6pm local authority settings. If they need additional hours beyond their funded entitlement, they will also be able to purchase these from a local authority setting.”

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

