



## **Close the Gap briefing for Scottish Government debate on expanding childcare**

**May 2026**

Close the Gap is Scotland's policy advocacy organisation working on women's labour market participation. We have been working with policymakers, employers and trade unions for 25 years to influence and enable action that will address the causes of the gender pay gap. Our vision is for a Scotland where all women have a good working life.

### **1. Summary and key asks**

Childcare is the most immediate barrier to women being able to work, study and train. Gendered norms around care and the lack of quality part-time work means that many women face penalties to their pay, their career and ultimately their pension because the childcare system does not meet their needs. Close the Gap welcomes Scottish Government's commitment to expand the childcare offer to provide year-round support to children aged nine months to the end of primary school. An entitlement to early learning and childcare, pre-school cover and after-school childcare is a key step towards a wraparound system that meets the needs of all women and their families, especially those on low incomes.

Close the Gap calls on MSPs to urge Scottish Government to:

- a) Prioritise a childcare workforce strategy to address sector recruitment and retention challenges by tackling the undervaluation of childcare work and, in turn, occupational segregation to strengthen the sustainability of the sector.
- b) Designate social care and childcare as growth sectors in Scotland's economy to prioritise policy focus and investment, and support the transition to net zero.
- c) Make childcare more flexible, using key learning from sector leaders on flexible services including [Flexible Childcare Services Scotland](#).
- d) Design a pathway, with a clear timeline, to deliver a universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week of high-quality childcare for children aged 6 months and over to enable women to work full time if they need to or want to.

## 2. Key evidence and data

- Compared to women without children, mothers of primary school-aged children are 11 percentage points less likely to secure high-quality jobs with good work-life balance and hours control.<sup>1</sup>
- A Scottish Women’s Budget Group survey found 55% of women say managing childcare has restricted the paid work they can do; 33% had to reduce their working hours to cope with childcare costs.<sup>2</sup>
- Parents and carers of disabled children pay higher than average costs, and three-quarters have reduced their hours or left their job because of difficulties accessing appropriate childcare.<sup>3</sup>
- Racially minoritised women face additional barriers to accessing affordable, flexible childcare including a lack of culturally competent services, and for migrant women, the lack of informal networks of family or friends creates further barriers.<sup>4</sup>
- Women comprise 96% of the early learning and childcare (ELC) workforce.<sup>5</sup> Paying the Real Living Wage is a welcome step but inadequate to address the deep, sector-wide undervaluation of this profession.

## 3. The context: Women’s employment and childcare

It is difficult to overstate the importance of childcare to women’s labour market participation. The availability of childcare remains the most immediate barrier to women being able to work, study and train. The provision of high-quality, flexible childcare is inconsistent in Scotland, resulting in a postcode lottery for many women and their families. Social norms on who is best suited to do childcare mean that many women reduce their hours, change their job, or leave employment altogether after having children. Women’s unpaid childcare roles drive their concentration in part-time work, which in turn results in them being more likely to be in the lowest paid jobs and sectors where part-time work is prevalent. This represents a loss of women’s skills and talent to employers and Scotland’s economy.

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<sup>1</sup> Kings College London (2024), *Who can ‘have it all’? Job quality and parenthood in the UK*, available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/assets/research/project-upload-2021/who-can-have-it-all-job-quality-and-parenthood-in-the-uk.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Women’s Budget Group (2024) *What’s Wrong With Childcare in Scotland?*, available at: <https://www.swbg.org.uk/news/blog/whats-wrong-with-childcare-in-scotland-a-summary/>

<sup>3</sup> UK Parliament (2014) *Report of the parliamentary inquiry into childcare for disabled children*

<sup>4</sup> Close the Gap (2019) *Still Not Visible*

<sup>5</sup> Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland (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>

The introduction of 1140 hours of funded childcare has created improvements in the system but the funded entitlement at the local level is very often insufficiently flexible to meet the needs of women and their families<sup>6</sup> and does not deliver enough funded hours to enable women to work full-time. Close the Gap therefore welcomes Scottish Government's commitment to expand the childcare offer to provide year-round support to children aged nine months to the end of primary school.<sup>7</sup> An entitlement to early learning and childcare, pre-school cover and after-school childcare is an important step towards the wraparound system that is needed to meet the needs of all women and their families.

#### **4. The urgent need for a childcare workforce strategy**

The workforce is indivisible from the services it delivers, and the challenges with availability of childcare are in part driven by the undervaluation of the workforce. Work that is seen as 'women's work', such as cleaning, care and retail, is systematically undervalued in the labour market because this work is done by women. The concept of undervaluation underpins gendered experiences of low pay, occupational segregation and the gender pay gap.<sup>8</sup> Women account for 96% of the ELC workforce in Scotland and, as a result, this work is undervalued in the economy with the ELC sector characterised by low rates of pay.<sup>9</sup>

Scottish Government previously committed to produce a Strategic Framework for Scotland's Childcare Profession in 2022<sup>10</sup>, however, this was not delivered. If the expansion is to be realised, Scottish Government must now prioritise a workforce strategy. Improving pay rates and the terms and conditions of the childcare workforce must be central to the expansion delivery. Core to this is reducing the occupational segregation that characterises the sector. If more men are to work in childcare, which is a prerequisite to meeting the sector's recruitment and retention challenges, reducing occupational segregation and closing the gender pay gap, there needs to be an economic imperative to do so. This requires appropriately remunerated jobs with clear progression pathways as evidence that it is a good career choice. Previous work to pay ELC workers who are delivering the funded entitlement the Real Living Wage

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<sup>6</sup> Audit Scotland (2018) *Early Learning and Childcare*

<sup>7</sup> SNP (2026) *On Scotland's Side: SNP Manifesto 2026*, available at: [2026-05-0120SNP20The20Scottish20Parliament20Election2020262072pp20COMPLETE20no-crops.pdf](https://www.scotlandsclosesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/CtG-and-OPFS---A-childcare-system-for-all-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Grimshaw, Damien and Jill Rubery (2007) *Undervaluing Women's Work*, Equal Opportunities Commission

<sup>9</sup> Close the Gap and One Parent Families Scotland (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>

<sup>10</sup> Scottish Government (2022) *Best Start – Strategic early learning and school age childcare plan 2022-2026*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/best-start-strategic-early-learning-school-age-childcare-plan-scotland-2022-26/documents/>

are welcome but ultimately piecemeal and insufficient to drive the level of change needed. Scottish Government must use state wage-setting powers to increase the pay of all childcare workers to the Real Living Wage, with a more ambitious target set thereafter.

## **5. Childcare is vital social infrastructure essential to a fair and just economy**

Mainstream economic policies fail to value ‘women’s work’ such as childcare, do not recognise women’s unpaid work in caring for children at home, and do not meaningfully engage with gendered labour market injustices such as occupational segregation. Despite childcare being skilled and demanding work, it is underpaid and undervalued because it is seen as low skilled and something women are naturally better at.

A just and fair economy means investing in a care economy. Care is as essential to our economy as bricks, steel, and fibre optic cable. Spending on childcare and social care should be viewed as infrastructure investment as it is an enabler of paid work, but also supports the realisation of women’s equality and rights, and children’s rights.<sup>11</sup> It is of particular economic and social benefit to the poorest families, including those headed by single mothers.<sup>12</sup> Designating childcare and social care as key growth sectors would drive the policy focus and allocation of resources necessary to grow these sectors, and address the systemic undervaluation of ‘women’s work’.

## **6. There needs to be flexible delivery that enables women to access childcare when they need it.**

Women need childcare that is available at the times that they need it, and it should be responsive to their work patterns. Many work atypical working hours or do shiftwork, and many have variable working hours. A flexible childcare setting is vital to help women in lower-income households to navigate the ongoing demands of paid work and childcare. It allows women with unpredictable or fluctuating working patterns to find childcare that suits their individual needs, at the same time as minimising their childcare costs and maximising the time they spend with their

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<sup>11</sup> See: De Henau J, Himmelweit S, Lapniewska Z, Perrons D (2016) *Investing in the Care Economy: A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries*. International Trade Union Confederation. Available at: [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/care\\_economy\\_en.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/care_economy_en.pdf) and Lapniewska Z (2016) *Growth, Equality and Employment: Investing in Childcare in Scotland*. WiSE Research Centre, Glasgow Caledonian University. Available at: <https://www.gcu.ac.uk/wise/media/gcalwebv2/theuniversity/centresprojects/wise/98178%20WiSE%20BRIEFING%20PAPER%204%20August.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Women’s Budget Group (2020) *2020 WBG Briefing: Childcare and gender*. Available at: <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/uk-policy-briefings/2019-wbg-briefing-childcare-and-gender/>

children. Flexibility at work and flexible childcare are essential to help women in low-income households, particularly single parents, remain in employment after having children.

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