

Education and lifelong learning in an independent Scotland



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Summary

This is a summary of the Scottish Government's proposals for education and lifelong learning in an independent Scotland. The full paper:

- sets out how current policies provide the foundations for learning, through an approach to rights and wellbeing which gives children and young people the best opportunities to reach their full potential; and explains how we would build on this in an independent Scotland
- describes what people in Scotland can expect as they move through the education and lifelong learning journey, and how we would be able to improve our educational offer

The report that follows provides more details on these proposals, including the evidence that informs them, as well as references to sources.

Education and Lifelong Learning in Scotland

Scotland's distinct and independent education system predates the devolution era and the international excellence of Scottish education long predates the Act of Union. Indeed, Scotland's first University, St Andrews, was founded in the early 15th century and is the third oldest in the English-speaking world. Glasgow University was founded in 1451 on the petition of King James II of Scotland, and Aberdeen University is Scotland's third oldest. We have a proud tradition of education in Scotland.

Today, Scotland's education system is supported by the work of the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and Scotland's communities in towns and villages the length and breadth of our nation. The universities and colleges that now make up our rich Further and Higher Education sector provide a range of opportunities for our young people to explore. Indeed, the percentage of Scots holding post-secondary school qualifications continues to be one of the highest in Europe.

Independence would give future Scottish governments the ability to make choices not currently available under the devolution settlement; choices that make the conditions and foundations for learning even stronger, so that every young person has the best chance possible of succeeding at school and in post-school education.

Scotland does not currently have full powers over the policy areas that would allow us to fully tackle child poverty. With the full powers of an independent state, future Scottish governments could make different policy decisions about how to tackle child poverty most effectively.

Future Scottish governments could consider improvements to the parental leave and pay system, with higher minimum standards than those currently set by the UK Government. This could include:

- enhancing the length and level of paid maternity leave for mothers
- for fathers/partners, enhancing the current statutory two week leave and pay provision and providing additional weeks of shared parental leave taken at the end of the fifty-two-week maternity period
- ensuring that those who experience miscarriage receive three days paid leave

In an Independent Scotland, the Scottish Government would work alongside Scotland's families to progress this ambition.

Scotland was the first nation in the UK to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) directly into law with the passing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 (the 'UNCRC Act'). The Scottish Government has already demonstrated our commitment to protecting the rights of children. However, the duty does not currently apply to every function or service delivered by public bodies in Scotland.

With the powers of an independent country, the Scottish Government would be able to incorporate – in full – the UNCRC into Scots law, further enhancing children's rights. This commitment, combined with our approach to implementing Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), aims to provide all children and young people with the best possible foundations for learning, regardless of their circumstance.

Furthermore, with full powers over equalities in an independent Scotland, a future Scottish Government could work with the care experienced community to decide if making 'care experience' a protected characteristic is a change that would be welcomed. An action could be taken accordingly to ensure greater legal protections to those with experience of care.

International research shows that high-quality early learning and childcare (ELC) programmes for pre-school children are associated with improvements in later education, employment, and health. There is also evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from these programmes and that investing in high-quality ELC also has important short and longer-term benefits for children's development, education and health.

Since 2021, Scotland has been the only part of the UK to offer 1,140 hours of funded ELC per year to eligible children, regardless of their parents' working status. That's equivalent to 30 hours per week in term time for all three and four year olds and eligible two year olds. With independence, future governments could seek to make improvements to accessing childcare. For example, a future government could make different decisions about the design of currently reserved schemes – Universal Credit Childcare and Tax-Free Childcare – which support parents and carers to pay for childcare.

We are already building a school education system that delivers excellence and equity for children and young people. The OECD independent report on Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence found that it offered 'an inspiring and widely supported philosophy of education' with its design offering 'the flexibility needed to improve student learning further'.

Our tertiary education and research sectors are amongst the best in the world. Scotland's colleges and universities are national assets that contribute across a range of social, economic and cultural impacts. Our student support offering and commitment to free tuition supports around 120,000 students studying in Scotland every year.

Future governments could develop a student loans system that is bespoke to Scotland, which would enable more flexibility in the delivery of student loans and would not be subject to the confines of Treasury approval.

An independent Scotland, as part of the EU, would also welcome students from EU countries to our world class colleges and universities, reversing the decline in students coming to the UK following Brexit and the current policies of the UK Government. Students would once again be able to participate in exchange programmes through the Erasmus+ programme, widening educational opportunities for Scotland's future generations.

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Foreword by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

The Scottish Government is committed to making Scotland the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. The journey towards achieving this ambition has gathered pace since the Scottish Parliament was re-established in 1999, and this paper sets out how we can go further and faster towards making this a reality in an independent Scotland.

Devolution has delivered transformational improvements in the life chances of our children and young people. We can proudly show how decisions made in Scotland have improved the lives of our young people and independence would give us the opportunity to make all decisions in Scotland, rather than leaving far too many of them to a UK Government whose actions are holding us back.

Every child born in Scotland benefits from the offer of a Baby Box, and every family in Scotland has access to the most generous offer of Early Learning and Childcare in the UK. Our schools invest more per pupil than anywhere else in the UK: we've expanded free school meal provision; we have more teachers per pupil and our teachers are the highest paid anywhere in the UK. Our colleges and universities are amongst the best in the world. Making decisions in Scotland has allowed us to make university tuition free and has seen the number of first-time full-time Scottish degree entrants grow by 31%, with record numbers of students from our most deprived communities.

Scotland's approach to education and lifelong learning is distinctly outward looking. That is why being part of the EU and participating in truly collaborative and creative programmes, such as Erasmus+, is so important to this government, our educational institutions and of course, our students.

As we debate Scotland's constitutional future, it is vital that we continue to make sure the voices of children and young people are heard, and influence decision-making – both now, and in the future.

A Scotland where every child and young person grows up loved, safe and respected needs to be a Scotland which has the freedom to use all the levers of legislation and policy available to an independent country to deliver on its vision.

Despite the UK being one of the wealthiest nations in the world, we know that too many lives are impacted by the scourge of poverty – impacting on outcomes for our children, and their future life chances. Making Scotland the best place to grow up means continuing to build on the strong action we have taken to date, including investment in the game-changing Scottish Child Payment. We know that our actions are making a difference, with Scottish Government policies expected to keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024-25, according to recent modelling.

This paper sets out just some of the opportunities open to future independent Scottish Governments. It shows the potential that can be unlocked for our children, young people and our families; the best start in life in a fair and prosperous independent nation.



Jenny Gilruth MSP

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

What our proposals mean for Scotland

With independence, there would be an enhanced approach to education and lifelong learning. The proposals in this publication could allow **Scotland** to:

- tackle child poverty at source with the full powers of an independent nation, making the conditions and foundations for learning even stronger, so that every young person has the best chance possible of succeeding at school and at college, university or training
- enhance children's rights, allowing the protections in the UNCRC Act to apply to the full breadth of functions over which our Parliament would have control
- fully re-join the EU, allowing Scottish students to benefit from Erasmus+ once again, opening up opportunities for new collaborations for university and college staff

What our proposals mean for you

The full powers of independence could help strengthen the conditions and foundations for an education and lifelong learning journey that works for everyone in Scotland. The proposals in this publication are designed to benefit **individuals** by allowing:

- voting rights for 16 and 17 year olds to be extended to every election
- re-joining the EU, allowing students to benefit from participation in international exchange programmes delivered through Erasmus+
- consideration of improvements to the parental leave and pay system, with higher minimum standards than those currently set by the UK Government
- international graduates of Scottish universities to apply to stay in Scotland for a further five years, after which they would become eligible for settlement, potentially leading to naturalisation as a citizen

Introduction

The full powers of independence would enable Scotland to realise its ambitions for children, families and young people – indeed for all of us as we take up opportunities to learn throughout our lives. Unlocking the legislative, financial and economic powers of an independent country would allow future governments to make decisions that could unleash transformational change for Scotland’s education sector. While decisions on funding would be for future governments to take, full control over key powers, such as tax and security, would give those governments the ability to make choices not currently available under devolution.

This paper sets out how new powers could be used to make the conditions and foundations for learning even stronger, so that every young person has the best chance possible of succeeding at school and in post-school education; and all of us have the opportunity to continue learning through our lives.

In an independent Scotland, the Scottish Parliament would be able to make bold decisions for Scotland’s current and future generations. Full powers over employment and social security could be used to improve the lives of children and young people by furthering existing action to: tackle child poverty and other inequalities, provide extra help for those with additional support needs, and ensure whole family support is available to all who need it.

Scotland could ensure children’s rights are upheld, protected and respected with the full incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law.¹

Scotland already has in place a system of high quality, funded early learning and childcare (ELC). We have an internationally recognised school education system that provides equity of opportunity for all, and world class colleges and universities² where access to education is based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. The full powers of independence could further enhance education and lifelong learning, benefitting people of all ages, communities and the economy.

Scotland is an outward looking nation that welcomes students, workers and their families from across the globe. An independent Scotland would seek to re-join the European Union. As an independent country, and part of the EU, students and staff would be able to participate in exchange programmes through Erasmus+. Scotland would continue to welcome students from EU countries to our world class colleges and universities. EU students would, once again, enjoy the same access to higher education as Scottish students, which this Scottish Government has prioritised to include free tuition for those domiciled in Scotland.

This government set out its commitment to taking a responsible approach to fiscal sustainability and sound public finances with independence in the [Building a New Scotland paper on the Economy](#). Future decisions about implementing proposals set out in this paper would therefore reflect this approach.

Although it will be for future Scottish Governments to decide and implement their policy priorities under independence, independence would allow those governments to make the choices needed to deliver on our collective ambition to make Scotland the best place to grow up, to study and to work.

The structure of this paper

This paper sets out how our **approach to rights and wellbeing**, which gives children and young people the best opportunities to reach their full potential, could be further enhanced in an independent Scotland.

The paper also sets out what people in Scotland could expect as they move through the **education and lifelong learning journey** in an independent Scotland.

A **conclusion** provides closing remarks. At the end of the paper is a list of acronyms, and a set of references.

Rights and Wellbeing: The Foundations for Learning

Children's rights and wellbeing

The Scotland we are working towards is a country where children's rights are recognised and protected, where we strive to get it right for every baby, child, young person and family, and where we deliver on our commitments to support those that need the most help. This means a strong and unwavering commitment to wellbeing through preventative approaches and early support, with action to tackle child poverty and other inequalities, as well as ensuring help is available to those who have faced disadvantage or trauma, such as care-experienced or disabled children and young people. It also means ensuring that those families facing adversity and vulnerability in our society, are protected, and receive early and responsive support, for as long as this is needed.

Scotland's 'Getting it right for every child' (GIRFEC)³ approach is internationally recognised, influencing the development of children and families policy in several countries, including Iceland,⁴ Finland⁵ and Sweden.⁶ GIRFEC provides the foundation for the design and delivery of key public services, including those which form our education and learning offer to children and young people. As Scotland's national approach to safeguarding, supporting and promoting wellbeing, GIRFEC focuses on proactive and early support through the universal services of education and health, as well as whole-family support across children's and adult services, where needed. GIRFEC provides a shared framework for everyone involved in the education of children and young people to consider their needs, including additional support needs; it promotes inclusive practice throughout the learning journey and across all learning environments.

The science of early childhood development tells us that the foundations for learning are built early in life, as early experiences shape the developing brain. The wellbeing of children is directly tied to the quality of their caregiving environment and family circumstances.⁷ Poverty is associated with various factors leading to poor academic achievement, including limited language development, and a greater likelihood of experiencing food insecurity.⁸

Despite the progress Scotland has already made towards these goals, there are current limitations on the actions the Scottish Government can take to fully realise our ambitions to get it right for every baby, child, young person and family. Matters reserved to the UK Government include immigration, equalities legislation, parental and family leave and pay, much of taxation, social security and employment. With the full powers available in an independent Scotland, a future Scottish Government could make decisions to improve parental and family leave, for example, or to take a radically new approach to social security which better supports our families. Having full power over these levers will allow future Scottish Governments to better look after generations yet to come.

Voting rights for 16 and 17 year olds

As we debate Scotland's constitutional future, it is vital that we continue to make sure the voices of children and young people are heard and that they influence decision-making. In the 2014 independence referendum, young people aged 16 or 17 were granted a vote for the first time. This was the first election or referendum anywhere in the UK where this opportunity was extended to under 18s. The Scottish Parliament made the right to vote for 16 and 17 year olds permanent with the passing of the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015,⁹ which lowered the minimum voting age to 16 for all Scottish Parliament and Local Authority elections.

University of Edinburgh research published in 2023 found that Scotland maintained a boost in electoral engagement among first-time voters enfranchised at 16 at the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections.¹⁰

Those aged 16 and 17 can vote in Scottish national and local elections, but they cannot currently vote in UK General Elections, where the voting age is 18. With independence, 16 and 17 year olds would be able to vote in every election covered by Scottish legislation, removing this inequality and further encouraging young people to engage in constitutional issues. As the Electoral Reform Society has pointed out, embedding voting behaviours early can have lifelong positive effects; furthermore, ‘extending the right to vote would allow a seamless transition from learning about voting to putting it into practice’.¹¹

UNCRC

In January 2024, Scotland became the first nation in the UK to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) directly into law with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 (the “UNCRC Act”) receiving Royal Assent.¹²

The intention behind the UNCRC Act is to deliver a proactive culture of everyday accountability for children’s rights across public services in Scotland. Once fully commenced, it will require all Scotland’s public authorities to take proactive steps to ensure the protection of children’s rights in their decision-making and service delivery. It will also make it unlawful for public authorities, including the Scottish Government, to act incompatibly with the UNCRC requirements as set out in the Act when delivering functions using powers derived from Scottish Parliament legislation or common law. Children, young people, and their representatives will have a new ability to use the courts to enforce their rights.

Article 28 of the UNCRC sets out the right to education and that States should work towards this right being achieved progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity. Article 29 sets out what education should provide to develop children and young people to their fullest potential.

Although the passing of the UNCRC Act is a significant achievement that offers new protection for children’s rights which is not available in other parts of the UK, the scope of the protection is more limited than the Scottish Parliament first hoped to achieve due to the Supreme Court’s adverse judgment¹³ following a reference by the UK Government, and the subsequent need to take remedial action to amend the Bill.

This means children will not be able to take action under the UNCRC Act to enforce any breach of their rights by public authorities acting under functions derived from Acts of the UK Parliament, even in devolved areas. Similarly, under the UNCRC Act, courts cannot consider whether provisions derived from a UK Act are compatible with UNCRC requirements under the Act or use their interpretative or strike down powers if they were found to be incompatible. There are many existing Acts of the UK Parliament in devolved areas that impact on children’s rights including the Education (Scotland) Act 1980.¹⁴

With the powers of an independent country, the Scottish Government could incorporate – in full – the UNCRC into Scots law. The UNCRC requirements specified in the Act could be expanded to include previously reserved matters. An independent Scotland could place a duty to act compatibly with the UNCRC on all of its legislation, including all legislation related to the delivery of education in Scotland.

Independence would enhance children’s rights, allowing the protections in the UNCRC Act to apply to the full breadth of functions over which our Parliament would have control.

Supporting those with care experience

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care 2022¹⁵ has made proposals to include 'care experience' as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.¹⁶ This recommendation was made following testimony from care experienced people sharing their stories of the discrimination they have experienced, similar in nature to other groups that have a legally protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. This option is not currently available to Scotland as equalities is a reserved matter determined by the UK Government.

With full powers over equalities in an independent Scotland, a future Scottish Government could work with the care experienced community, building on the existing unwavering shared commitment to Keep the Promise, to decide if making 'care experience' a protected characteristic is a change that would be welcomed. If so, action could be taken accordingly to ensure greater legal protections to those with experience of care.

Pre-birth to three

The period of a child's life from before they are born and during the earliest years is the most unique and critical period of development.¹⁷ The actions governments take in this period can create a strong foundation for all future learning, healthy social and emotional development, and physical health.

Currently we offer all families and parents high-quality and accessible maternity care, our universal Baby Box¹⁸ offer and support from a Health Visitor or Family Nurse to build their parenting skills and understand what helps with early child development. We provide information to all new parents through our publication 'Ready Steady Baby',¹⁹ which provides information on their health and their baby's health and development, through dedicated on-line advice via the NHS Inform website, and through the Parent Club website, which complements the support provided through core universal services.

Our ambition to improve early child development was reinforced recently through the launch of the Transformational Change Programme²⁰ – to drive connection, awareness and action across and between existing systems, removing silos and barriers to change to meet the needs of families with young children.

Enhancing parental leave

The very earliest days in a child's life from pre-birth to pre-school are a unique period when the foundations of optimum health, growth, and neurodevelopment across the lifespan are established.²¹

A child's development of a secure attachment to one or more caregivers provides the foundation for achievement of developmental milestones and sets the child on a trajectory for social and emotional wellbeing.²² UNICEF states that fathers or partners who bond with their babies from the beginning of life are more likely to play a more active role in their child's development and that research also suggests that children who experience positive early interaction with their fathers or other parents are more likely to have positive longer-term outcomes, including better psychological health, self-esteem and life satisfaction.²³

Powers over parental leave and pay are currently reserved to the UK Government. Future governments in an independent Scotland could decide to take action to improve the offering to parents.

Rates of pay for maternity and paternity leave in the UK are low. In comparison to OECD countries, maternity payment rates in the UK are amongst the lowest, with less than one-third of gross average earnings replaced by the maternity benefit. Despite lengthy maternity leave entitlements, full-rate equivalent paid maternity leave in the UK lasts only eleven weeks on average.²⁴

Father (or partner) specific leave in the OECD is often well-paid when short, although payment rates tend to fall once entitlements last longer than one month or so (4.3 weeks). In the UK, only two weeks of paternity pay is paid whereas Norway offers 15 weeks and payments replace 100% of gross earnings for an average earner.²⁵

Families with a child under the age of one are also at considerably greater risk of living in poverty than average.²⁶ Addressing rates of pay for maternity and paternity leave could help to address this inequality and drive down the number of children who live in poverty at the start of life.

Future Scottish governments could consider improvements to the parental leave and pay system, with higher minimum standards than those currently set by the UK Government. When circumstances allow over the longer term, this could include gradual improvements by:

- enhancing the length and level of paid maternity leave for mothers
- for fathers/partners, enhancing the current statutory two week leave and pay provision and providing additional weeks of shared parental leave taken at the end of the fifty-two-week maternity period
- ensuring that those who experience miscarriage receive three days paid leave

To progress this, once independence has been secured, the Scottish Government would work with families to consider change. In considering what enhancements could be made, we would be able to draw on examples from comparable European countries and internationally where they have progressive policy innovations to share.

Supporting kinship carers

The Promise states that ‘Kinship carers must be supported to continue to care for the children they are looking after’,²⁷ and that Scotland must ‘ensure that children living in kinship care get the support they need to thrive’.²⁸ The Scottish Government has subsequently called on the UK Government for an urgent update of statutory leave recommendations for kinship carers.

With full control over parental leave legislation in an independent Scotland, future governments would have the power to implement the 2022 Independent Review of Children’s Social Care’s recommendation that kinship carers receive paid employment leave on a par with statutory adoption leave.

Tackling child poverty

With the full powers of an independent country, future Scottish governments could accelerate action to tackle and reduce child poverty in Scotland, improving the lives and outcomes of Scotland’s children and young people, their families and wider communities.

We know that experience of poverty lies at the heart of many of the challenges we face as a nation, driving inequalities in outcomes, including in relation to health and education. Through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017,²⁹ Scotland remains the only part of the UK to have set in statute ambitious income-based targets to significantly reduce child poverty.

The Scottish Government’s second Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, ‘Best Start, Bright Futures’, outlines how we will work together with partners to drive forward reductions in poverty. This includes action focused on increasing household incomes, reducing the cost of living, improving the wellbeing of families, and supporting children and young people to reach their full potential.³⁰

Despite the limited powers available under devolution, Scottish Government policies, such as the Scottish Child Payment, are anticipated to keep around 100,000 children out of relative poverty in 2024-25, with relative poverty levels ten percentage points lower than they would have otherwise been.³¹

Modelling estimates that, were the UK Government to introduce an Essentials Guarantee and remove the two-child limit, together with reinstating the family element in Universal Credit, a further 40,000 children could be lifted out of relative poverty in 2024-25.³²

For the past 20 years, Scottish child poverty rates have been consistently lower than the UK average,³³ with investment in key measures, including our Scottish Child Payment, expected to increase this gap further in future years.³⁴

Scotland does not currently have full powers over all of the policy areas that would allow it to fully tackle child poverty. With access to the full powers of an independent state, future Scottish governments could make different policy decisions about how to tackle child poverty most effectively.

For example, in the [Building a New Scotland paper on social security](#), ten key actions are set out in the early years of independence that would help families with children on low incomes. These include:

- **removing the two-child limit, and scrapping its ‘rape clause’, to increase family incomes and lift some families out of poverty.** The evidence shows that the two-child limit has had very little impact on family size but has increased the number of children in larger families who are living in poverty and/or material deprivation³⁵
- **removing the benefit cap** that limits the amount of benefits that a household can receive each year – again, this primarily affects families with children. We are already investing in mitigating the benefit cap, but independence would give Scotland the full powers to lift the benefit cap
- **replacing Universal Credit ‘budgeting loans’ with grants** to help individuals and families in the first weeks of claiming the new benefit. This would ease the five-week wait for a first payment and mean that Universal Credit was paid at its full rate, without the deductions and the debt that people face just now
- **ending the current benefit sanctions regime** to make sure that people are supported into sustainable employment and better long-term outcomes, creating a fairer, more dignified and respectful approach to social security
- **ending the young parent penalty in Universal Credit** would ensure that parents under 25 receive the same amount of financial support for their family as those over 25. Rent and food cost the same no matter your age
- **strengthening and investing in more support with the costs of moving into work**, including the likes of up-front childcare costs, travel and clothing. We would also transform the delivery of existing support, including through Job Centre Plus work coaches and Access to Work, to ensure that services are responsive and meet the needs of those who rely on them.

The previous [Economy paper](#) sets out how **control of employment powers** would enable future governments to create fairer workplaces, enhance workers’ rights in Scotland and increase access to flexible working opportunities. This is particularly significant for low-income workers as it can help raise income levels and ultimately help them and their families escape poverty.

With the full powers of an independent nation, we could use all the levers other governments have to tackle and reduce child poverty, helping to ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Education and Lifelong Learning

This section of the paper sets out what people in Scotland can expect as they move through their education and lifelong learning journey and how that experience could be enhanced through independence.

Early learning and childcare and school age childcare

International research shows that high-quality early learning and childcare (ELC) programmes for pre-school children are associated with improvements in later education, employment, and health.³⁶ Many studies find evidence that high quality ELC positively affects children's emotional, behavioural, and cognitive development.³⁷ There is also evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from ELC programmes.³⁸ Research also shows that ELC can help mitigate the impacts of developmental risks, acting as a form of early intervention for children who are at high risk of developing Additional Support Needs.³⁹ There is less evidence at population level about the impacts of ELC provision on children aged two and under, and what evidence there is tends to be more mixed.⁴⁰ However, consistent with findings for older children, there is agreement across the literature that the quality of the care and learning provided is vital in making a difference for younger children.⁴¹

For parents and carers, international research suggests that high-quality, affordable and flexible ELC can improve standards of living and reduce child poverty through reducing pressures on family income and enabling parents and carers to participate in work, education or training.⁴²

Since 2021, Scotland has been the only part of the UK to offer 1,140 hours a year (equivalent to 30 hours per week in term time) of funded ELC to all three and four year olds and eligible two year olds regardless of their parents' working status, putting children first.

We also know that the cost of childcare for primary school age children, both round about the school day and in the holidays, presents major barriers to many parents and carers taking up or sustaining work, training or study. There are particular families who struggle more with this, typically families on the lowest incomes but including specific groups, for example lone parents.⁴³

The evaluation of our Access to Childcare projects and the preliminary feedback from our early adopter communities shows that subsidising or funding childcare within local communities can enable parents to take up or, importantly, stop them falling out of sustainable employment. It can also reduce the stress associated with otherwise chaotic childcare situations, improving wellbeing. Children can also benefit from access to a range of activities round about the school day.⁴⁴

Best Start is the Scottish Government's strategic early learning and school age childcare plan for Scotland 2022-26.⁴⁵ It explains the approach to realising the benefits of our ELC expansion programme and expanding our childcare offer, including building a system of school age childcare. We know that investing in designing a more affordable and accessible childcare system for families in Scotland will help support parents and carers to enter and sustain employment, and that this is particularly important for those on low incomes. This work is important in progressing our mission to tackle poverty.

We are currently working to expand our childcare offer. That includes starting work with COSLA and other partners to develop an expanded national offer for two year olds and progressing work with our six early adopter communities to develop the local infrastructure and services needed to provide all-age childcare, focusing on those who will benefit most in six council areas. We have also started work to design and develop a digital service which would help parents and carers to find, access and better manage their childcare arrangements in Scotland in the future.

The Scottish Government's record on expanding early learning and childcare is set out in Box 1 below.

Box 1 – Expanding early learning and childcare

Successive Scottish governments have decided to:

- provide 412.5 hours of funded pre-school education for three and four year olds in 2002, increasing to 475 hours in 2007
- increase the entitlement to funded ELC again to 600 hours in 2014, and extend it to two year olds who need it most
- deliver a landmark expansion to provide all eligible children with an entitlement to 1,140 hours of high quality funded ELC from August 2021
- progress new legislation – in effect from August 2023 – which means that all families with eligible children who choose to defer their start date for primary one will automatically be entitled to access funded ELC for a further year.

Quality has been at the centre of Scotland's ELC expansion programme as the evidence tells us that this is crucial to positive outcomes – with particular benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.⁴⁶ Quality of provision is influenced by a wide range of factors, including staffing levels and aspects of working conditions; staff qualifications and development; the relationships and interactions between staff and children; the physical environment; and the curriculum. The quality of ELC provision remains high – with 90.1% of services providing funded places holding Care Inspectorate evaluations of good or better for all four quality themes at the end of 2022.⁴⁷

We recognise the critical importance of play-based, child-centred, and outdoor approaches to learning in the early years.⁴⁸ There has never been a stronger focus on ensuring that the early learning and childcare experience is of high quality and meets the developmental needs of our youngest learners. The early level of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) purposely spans ELC and primary schooling. It is designed to support the implementation of a responsive, continuous, play-based curriculum for children from age three until the end of P1 (for most children).

The 1,140 hours per year of high quality funded ELC also make an important direct contribution to reducing household costs. If eligible families were themselves to purchase the equivalent number of hours of funded ELC that are provided by the Scottish Government, it would cost them around £5,800 per eligible child per year.⁴⁹

The Scottish Government's [Building a New Scotland paper on the economy](#) emphasises that measures to support work-life balance can have economic benefits in relation to higher productivity. Similarly, the Scottish Government's National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET)⁵⁰ emphasises that childcare is a vital element of Scotland's economic infrastructure. The strategy focuses on the importance of childcare in enabling parents and carers to return to work or increase their working hours. The international evidence indicates that ELC provision can help to address gender inequality in pay, as well as supporting parents and carers to combine caring for their children with seeking or returning to work or taking part in education or training.⁵¹ Economic analysis also suggests that some systems of early learning and childcare can have positive long-term returns through increased fiscal revenues.⁵² As noted above, evidence tells us that investing in high-quality ELC also has important short- and longer-term benefits for children's development, education and health.

With independence, future governments could seek to simplify and improve access to schemes designed to contribute to parents' and carers' childcare costs. For example, a future government could make different decisions about the design of currently reserved schemes – Universal Credit Childcare and Tax-Free Childcare – which support parents and carers to pay for childcare.

School years

We are building a school education system that delivers excellence and equity for children and young people. The OECD and the International Council of Education Advisers have highlighted the excellent international reputation of Scotland's school system. The International Council of Education Advisers' report states that 'Scottish education exhibits many strengths. It values equity as well as excellence which has been recognised internationally, investing effort and resources to narrow attainment gaps, working with and strengthening the teaching profession'.⁵³

Curriculum for Excellence helps our children and young people gain the knowledge, skills, and attributes needed for life in the 21st century. The OECD independent report⁵⁴ on Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence found that it offered "an inspiring and widely supported philosophy of education" with its design offering "the flexibility needed to improve student learning further."

Since 2007, the number of schools in Scotland in good or satisfactory condition has increased from 61% to over 90%, partly thanks to direct investment from the Scottish Government in the school estate.⁵⁵ The £1.8 billion Schools for the Future programme, which started in 2009 and was completed in 2021, delivered 117 new or refurbished school buildings across Scotland.⁵⁶ Our current Learning Estate Investment Programme is being delivered in partnership with local authorities and invests £2 billion in improving the school estate, benefitting tens of thousands of pupils across Scotland. This shows the benefits of taking decisions in Scotland, for Scotland. We continue to face capital budget challenges that stem from the UK Government, and independence would enable us to unlock further investment for Scotland's school buildings.

We know from the Scottish Government and Education Scotland's Equity Audit that the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted children and young people experiencing poverty.⁵⁷ For example, data from the Equity Literacy Institute (ELI) suggested that children from areas with high socio-economic deprivation were more likely to have home responsibilities during the day, affecting their learning. It is, however, reassuring to see promising signs that the attainment gap is, once again, beginning to narrow. This is evident in the data published in December 2023,⁵⁸ which shows the poverty-related attainment gap in primary literacy is the narrowest on record. Whilst for numeracy it has narrowed since 2021-22 although remains slightly wider than it was prior to the pandemic.

Scottish schools have historically benefitted from partnerships across Europe and further afield. In 2018, Scottish students participated in the PISA⁵⁹ study into global competence, ranking amongst the best nations assessed on this measure, which reflects the ambitions of Curriculum for Excellence to, amongst other things, create "responsible citizens who are able to develop knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it".⁶⁰ Before Brexit, Scottish schools benefitted from the Erasmus+ programme.⁶¹ Erasmus+ is the European Union's programme for education, training, youth and sport which, before Brexit, enabled over 2,200 Higher Education students in Scotland every year to study or work abroad.⁶² By re-joining Erasmus+ as an EU member state, Scottish students would once again have access to the opportunities and benefits of the programme. Re-joining Erasmus+ would also allow staff to learn from partners across Europe, and especially to participate in programmes to improve language programmes and so support language learning in the terms of Scotland's 1+2 policy. The UK Government's replacement for Erasmus+, the Turing Scheme, does not match the breadth or scope of Erasmus+ with no provision for teaching staff exchanges. Re-joining Erasmus+ would once again allow teachers in Scotland to benefit from the multilateral network across Europe for staff mobility and development, and virtual exchange.

Brexit risks impacting on Scotland's long-term ability to attract language teachers, as many of the recruitment paths are closed or partially closed to EU nationals, and EU students now require to pay international fees to study in Scotland. There has been a fall in the number of candidates training to become language teachers in Scotland,⁶³ and while the reasons for this are complicated, the lack of freedom of movement is an important factor. With the restoration of free movement for EU nationals in an independent Scotland, we would be able to attract and recruit workers to meet the needs of our public services, including the education workforce.

Financial support

Scotland's colleges and universities are amongst the best in the world. Making decisions in Scotland has enabled university tuition to be free and has seen the number of first-time full-time Scottish degree entrants grow by 31% since 2006-07,⁶⁴ with record numbers of students from our most deprived communities.⁶⁵

The universities and colleges that now make up our further and higher education sector provide a range of opportunities for our young people to explore. Indeed, the percentage of Scots holding post-secondary school qualifications continues to be one of the highest in Europe.⁶⁶

The Scottish Government's steadfast commitment to free tuition means that, unlike elsewhere in the UK, Scottish students studying in Scotland do not incur additional debt of up to £27,750. Average student loan debt for Scottish students is the lowest in the UK.⁶⁷ Our student support offering and policy on free tuition supports around 120,000 students studying in Scotland every year.⁶⁸

Future governments could develop a student loans system that is bespoke to Scotland and built on the already established Glasgow branch of the Student Loans Company, ensuring the continued operation of this facility and ensuring the needs of Scottish students are prioritised. Dependent on the fiscal conditions, independence could also enable a shift in the student support offering, ensuring Scotland maintains the lowest levels of student loan debt by aspiring to provide enhanced bursary support to those students who need it most. This would include estranged students, disabled students and those with caring responsibilities, giving careful consideration to the interaction between student support and benefit entitlements.

This government is committed to the right to free education. As we set out in [Building a New Scotland: Creating a modern constitution for an independent Scotland](#), this Scottish Government would enshrine economic, social and cultural rights – including the right to education – in the interim constitution, effective from day one of independence.

The Scottish Government would propose that our policy on free university tuition continues in the permanent constitution of an independent Scotland, subject to the deliberations of the Constitutional Convention.

International education and research

International students, staff, and researchers have an overwhelmingly positive impact in Scotland bringing social and cultural diversity to our communities; enriching the overall learning experience; supporting local economies, businesses and jobs; and making a substantial contribution to the sustainability of our universities.⁶⁹ The Scottish Government's distinct approach to international education is set out in our International Education Strategy, which was developed in collaboration with our universities and colleges.⁷⁰

A multinational learning environment is beneficial for all students, staff and researchers who participate in it, raising cultural awareness and a global perspective. Students who choose to stay in Scotland to work are appreciated and valued across all sectors of our economy; those who return home or move elsewhere in the world remain valuable friends and ambassadors for Scotland.

The net contribution in 2021-22 of international students in Scotland to the UK economy was estimated to be £4.21 billion.⁷¹ Those who choose to stay can contribute valuable skills to our workforce, support the sustainable growth of our economy, and enrich society.

Scotland has proved popular as an international student destination with numbers increasing since 2013.⁷² In 2021-22, more than 82,000 students from over 160 different countries⁷³ came to study at Scottish universities, and international students made up a quarter of the total student population.

Scotland must be able to attract and retain talented people without excessive barriers and migration policy should support mobility, collaboration and innovation. It is therefore of grave concern that current UK immigration policy is making it increasingly difficult for Scotland to keep welcoming international students.⁷⁴ We are working closely with colleges and universities in Scotland to gather evidence on the impact immigration policies have on the sector. We know that Brexit and UK Government policies have already resulted in a reduced number of students from Europe opting to study in Scotland, with UCAS Acceptance Statistics 2023 Cycle showing 880 EU students were accepted to Scottish providers. This is a drop of 81% between 2016 and 2023.⁷⁵

The Scottish Government believes that people who are entitled to live in Scotland should be able to bring their family with them. Family visas support our economy and would help our communities prosper by encouraging families to settle in Scotland.

An independent Scotland, as part of the EU, would continue to welcome students from EU countries to our world class colleges and universities. EU students would, once again, enjoy the same access to further and higher education as Scottish students, which this Scottish Government has prioritised to include free tuition for those domiciled in Scotland. Conversely, students who live in Scotland would once again be able to enjoy the same access to further and higher education at institutions in EU countries as students living in those countries.

An independent Scotland would also maintain membership of the Common Travel Area (CTA).⁷⁶ The 2021 Memorandum of Understanding on Education between the UK and Irish Governments sets a clear precedent that eligibility conditions apply for student funding. In Scotland, this means that students from other parts of the CTA are eligible for support where they meet residency criteria. This approach will continue, and we will continue working with the other members of the CTA, including the UK and Irish governments, to ensure opportunities to study in other CTA countries can continue post-independence.

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of both inward and outward international educational exchanges. International exchanges can help students and staff make global connections and build networks,⁷⁷ take them out of their comfort zone, and support them in becoming more globally aware, adaptable and employable.

As set out in the [Building a New Scotland paper on Migration](#), the Scottish Government would offer visas supporting population objectives and economic growth across five categories, including study. This managed, discretionary immigration system would support Scotland in attracting the best global talent, retaining students after graduation and helping them enter into the workforce.

As part of this new immigration system, a five-year Scottish Connections visa would provide a route for people with a connection to Scotland, including graduates of Scottish universities to stay in Scotland after their studies. This would offer graduates longer after their studies than the two-year post-study visa the UK Government currently offers.⁷⁸

International graduates of Scottish universities would be able to apply at low cost, straight after their studies, to stay in Scotland for a further five years, after which they would become eligible for settlement, potentially leading to naturalisation as a citizen. This would also mean graduates who live overseas can return to Scotland on this route.

Scotland's research base has a global reputation for excellence. It contributes to impacts across the globe and has significant international reach – over 170 countries and territories in the world.⁷⁹

There is evidence of world leading (4*) research in every Scottish Higher Education Institution, and Scotland delivers world-leading research in each of the 34 disciplines (Units of Assessment) assessed in REF2021.⁸⁰

Scotland's research drives transformation and innovation to solve global problems, such as climate change, food poverty and gender equality, and aligns with the outcomes in the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework⁸¹ and UN Sustainable Development goals.⁸²

Initiatives like Interface, the Alliances for Research Challenges, Innovation Centres and Research Pools have allowed us to establish a critical mass of excellence and harness our research and knowledge exchange capabilities.

The strength of expertise, infrastructure and regional, national, and international networks make Scotland highly competitive at leveraging in additional funds – for example, winning more funding per head in Scotland in Horizon Europe's predecessor programme Horizon 2020 than the rest of the UK (around 11% of the UK's overall funding⁸³ with 8% of the population share⁸⁴).

Investment in Higher Education Research and Development has consistently ranked highly internationally over the last 20 years – Scotland was first among the OECD countries for its Higher Education Research and Development (public and private) spend as a percentage of GDP in 2021 (0.98%), above 0.42% in the OECD, 0.64% in the UK, and 0.47% for EU27.⁸⁵

Fraser of Allander Institute analysis⁸⁶ has estimated that in 2019, all research and development spending in Scotland supported nearly 60,000 FTE jobs and £3,225m in gross value added (GVA), and that output, GVA, and employment multipliers for university research funding are typically higher than the average sector in Scotland.

Through continued investment in core research and innovation funding, the Scottish Government remains committed to ensuring that levels of public investment in university research enable researchers and universities to remain internationally competitive in an independent Scotland.

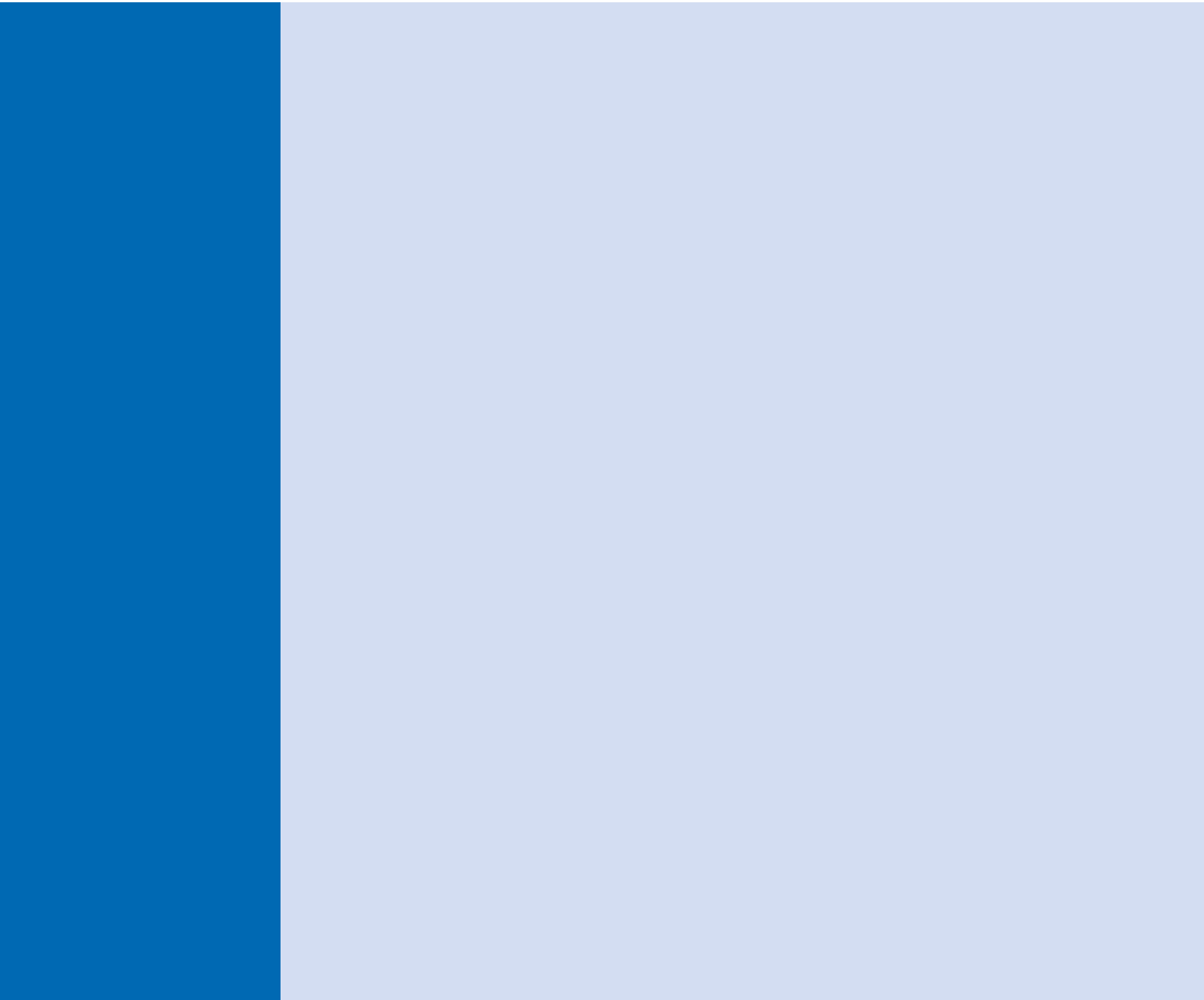
The UK operates as a common research area, ensuring no barriers to collaborative research and access to facilities for researchers throughout the UK. We recognise the benefits – for the academic community, business and research charities – of maintaining long-term stability in research funding and systems that support initiatives of scale and of researchers working together across boundaries. Recognising that it is in the interests of both Scotland and the rest of the UK, the Scottish Government will maintain a collaborative approach including shared research councils, access to facilities, and peer review.

Similarly, the international partnerships and collaborations we build help to drive our strength and excellence in research and we will continue to look to maximise opportunities available, such as those through the Horizon Europe programme. The scope, scale and prestige of the €95.5 billion European Research & Innovation Framework programme, Horizon Europe, is globally unparalleled. Scotland has benefited greatly and performed extremely well in Horizon initiatives to date, with Higher Education Institutions securing around 75% of the total funding awarded to Scottish organisations under Horizon 2020 over the period 2014 to 2020.⁸⁷

The Scottish Government recognises visas and mobility are a barrier to international collaboration. As set out in the [Building a New Scotland paper on Migration](#), the UK immigration system currently offers limited temporary work visas in a number of specific categories, such as charity workers and religious ministers. In an independent Scotland, these routes would be consolidated and simplified, while ensuring that all currently available categories of worker are able to access equivalent routes in the Scottish immigration system.

Academic staff (including researchers) are highly skilled and globally mobile. Scottish universities recruit staff from across the world, whilst many Scottish researchers work in institutions in other countries. This Scottish Government would, with independence, develop an approach to immigration through schemes to live and work in Scotland that would help our institutions attract international talent, supporting their research goals and establishment and development of high-growth potential companies.

Conclusions



This paper has set out how taking decisions in Scotland, for Scotland, could improve the lives of the people who live here.

The Scottish Government is committed to making Scotland the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up, and the journey towards achieving this ambition has gathered pace since the Scottish Parliament was re-established in 1999.

This paper has explained how we could go further and faster towards making this a reality in an independent Scotland. But still, too many decisions impacting our young people are being left to the UK Government – from social security policies pushing children into poverty, to cuts to capital budgets limiting investments the Scottish Government can make, decisions made at Westminster are holding back Scotland's young people from meeting their full potential.

Making decisions on education in Scotland, for Scotland has seen a transformation in the life chances of our children and young people: from the offer of a baby box, to the most generous ELC offer across the UK, to investing more per pupil than anywhere else across the UK, to free tuition fees. Building on our achievements to date, this paper has set out the actions the Scottish Government could take in an independent Scotland to enable every child and young person, and every learner whatever their age, to flourish.

Independence would place the normal economic levers that other countries enjoy in Scotland's hands and, crucially, open up a range of opportunities to do things differently. As this paper has described, different choices could be made on a range of key issues, like children's rights, tackling child poverty, support for childcare costs and parental leave.

Independence would mean Scotland could apply to rejoin the EU as a Member State in its own right. Re-joining the EU at the earliest opportunity represents the best future for Scotland. This paper sets out how EU membership would widen educational opportunities for future generations, including through access to Erasmus+.

The shape of future Scottish governments, and the decisions they take, would be solely up to the people of Scotland. Ending the democratic deficit which sees decisions made at Westminster would improve the life chances for our children and young people, giving future governments real power to enact the transformative change needed to protect our future generations.

Acronyms

| | |
|----------------|---|
| CfE | Curriculum for Excellence |
| CTA | Common Travel Area |
| ELC | Early Learning and Childcare |
| ELI | Equity Literacy Institute |
| GIRFEC | Getting it Right for Every Child |
| GVA | Gross Value Added |
| NSET | National Strategy for Economic Transformation |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| PISA | Programme for International Student Assessment |
| REF2021 | Research Excellence Framework 2021 |
| UNCRC | United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child |

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at
The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
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