

Closing the Word Gap

Scottish Conservative
& Unionist Party

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Foreword

We would invest £1 million in early language skills in nurseries to prevent attainment gaps emerging before children start school.

Lockdown has had a hidden impact on the youngest children, but we must not let it affect their life chances before they even start school.

To ensure disadvantaged children don't fall behind due to the pandemic, we must invest in evidence-based interventions at nursery to help them to catch up and go on to excel at school. Support should be targeted at those who need it most, preventing the attainment gap from emerging.

All children deserve an equal opportunity to succeed, but the impact of COVID-19 has not been felt equally. We must act to stop the 2020 pandemic affecting 2031 exam results.

The SNP are content with an underperforming education system. We want to restore excellence to Scottish schools and nurseries.



Background

- **Due to COVID-19, young children have missed out on attending classes and groups, seeing grandparents, going to nursery and having normal everyday interactions:**

- Activities for pre-school children have been restricted to varying degrees throughout the pandemic. Soft play centres have been vocal campaigners, having been closed since March, and Nicola Sturgeon u-turned on the rules for parent and baby groups as the Rule of Six would have prevented classes from running.

- Nurseries were closed to the majority of children between March and July. Only children of key workers and vulnerable children were able to attend for four months, and attendance is still only around 90 per cent (Tableau Public, CYP attendance timeseries, access 16 November 2020, [link](#)).

- Restrictions on household mixing have also prevented children seeing other children their age, grandparents and other family members or friends.

- **These interactions, particularly attending nursery, are vital to help children develop the social and emotional skills that they need.** The Sutton Trust summarises: 'Attending an early years setting is highly

valuable for all children, leading to positive social and emotional, language, and physical development. The lack of access to provision during lockdown means a further widening of the attainment gap may be occurring and that children's development is being significantly compromised' (The Sutton Trust, COVID-19 Impacts: Early Years, 1 July 2020, [link](#)).

- **Missing out on formal childcare will have had the worst impact on disadvantaged children, widening the gaps which emerge before they even start school.** The early years are a crucial stage for social mobility, with the poorest children already 11 months behind their better-off peers before they start school. Attending high-quality early years provision provides a vital opportunity to narrow this gap, but many have missed out this year (The Sutton Trust, COVID-19 Impacts: Early Years, 1 July 2020, [link](#)).

- **The 'word gap' is the easiest way to demonstrate this inequality, with disadvantaged children who start school with a smaller vocabulary having poorer outcomes.** The original US 'word gap' study found that 'American toddlers growing up in low income households heard approximately 600 words per hour, while those from professional families heard more than 2,100 words per hour. Over time, this resulted in higher-income children hearing over 30



million words more than their lower income peers by the age of 3'. These findings have been replicated in UK studies, including one which found that language skills at age 5 were a better indicator of English and maths ability at age 7 than poverty or parental education. And this trend continues, with children with 'poor vocabulary skills at age 5 [being] four times more likely to have reading difficulties in adulthood, three times as likely to have mental health problems, and twice as likely to be unemployed when they reached adulthood' (EIF, Language as a child wellbeing indicator, [link](#)).

- **Early years education is not the SNP's priority** – they postponed the deadline to implement 1,140 hours of funded childcare at the first opportunity and won't even consult on setting a new date until next month.
- **The SNP have failed to uphold standards in early years education** – they have slashed early learning and childcare teachers by more than half since 2007 (Scottish Government, Teachers - Teacher Numbers, 13 December 2016, [link](#); Scottish Government, Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland no. 10: 2019 Edition, 10 December 2019, [link](#)).
- **Under the SNP, PISA reading scores are now lower than they were in 2003.** Targeted early years support is an important step in restoring Scotland's once great standards (OECD, PISA 2019, 3 December 2019, [link](#)).

Our Solution

The Scottish Conservatives support investing £1 million in targeted early language interventions to ensure no child is disadvantaged by COVID-19.

Following nursery closures early this year, Scotland must look to implement interventions like the Nuffield Early Language Intervention to support disadvantaged children to catch up. Support, delivered one-to-one or in small groups, could be delivered over 4-5 months to ensure children are able to start school on a par with their peers next year. Such interventions have been shown to boost language skills by an additional three months (Nuffield Foundation, News, 1 May 2020, [link](#)).



