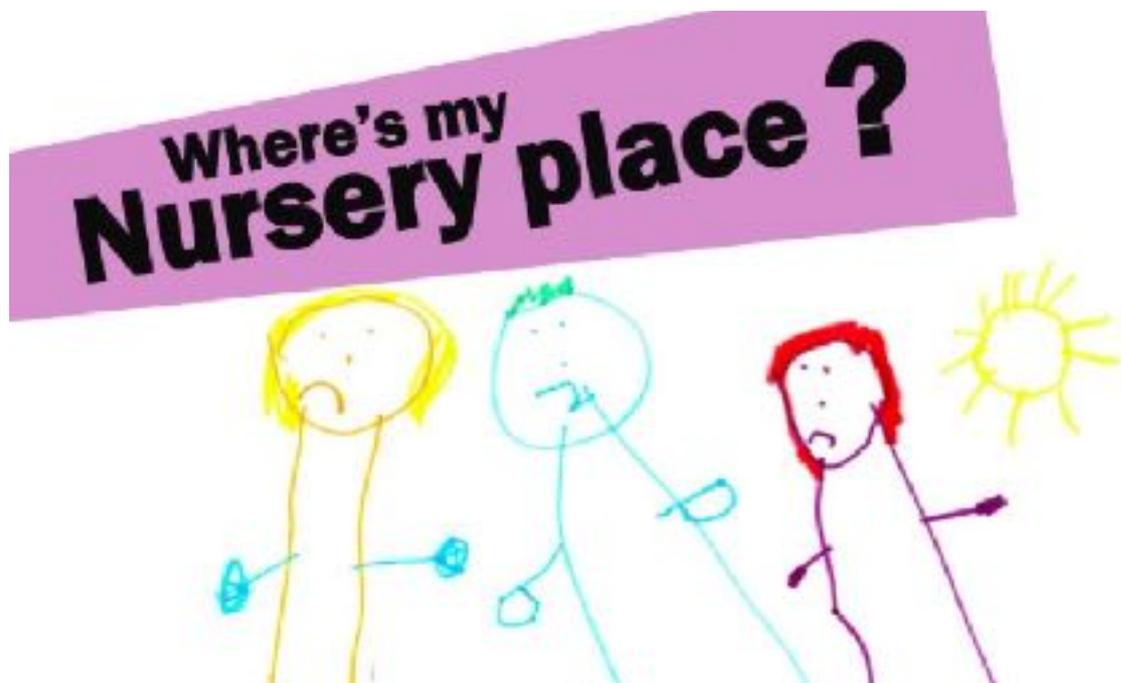


**FAIR FUNDING FOR OUR KIDS REPORT**  
**OVER THE BORDER:**  
**CROSS-BOUNDARY ACCESS TO FREE NURSERY PLACES**



## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2014, the Scottish Government increased the entitlement to free childcare for 3-5 year olds from 475 to 600 free hours per year.

The Fair Funding for our Kids campaign was set up in 2015 by parents frustrated at being unable to access their entitlement. Many of us found that local authorities would only offer us half day places at council nurseries, and would not allow us to pay for our child to remain at that nursery for the rest of the day. This is an impossible situation for many working parents. Many of us also found that, while we could place our children in private nurseries which would take care of them for the full day, local authorities were not always prepared to fund these places, even where the nurseries were in partnership with the local authorities.

As well as the issues above, Fair Funding for our Kids often hears from parents who live in one local authority area but need their children to go to nursery in another. This is usually because they cannot get home from work in time to pick their children up before nursery closes. Parents tell us that in these circumstances, it can be very difficult to access the free hours to which they are entitled.

We used Freedom of Information legislation to ask all local authorities about their policies on funding nursery places for children from other council areas, and about other issues of interest.

## **KEY POINTS**

- Three non-island councils have no reciprocal agreements with other councils to fund nursery places
- Three councils have reciprocal agreements with just one other council
- Twenty-two councils had reciprocal agreements with at least one other council
- Four councils had reciprocal agreements with every other council
- Almost two-thirds of councils who responded pay for funded places in arrears: making it harder for poorer parents to access their place, since they must pay upfront
- Nine councils had an occupancy rate of 75% or less
- No council holds any data on the number of mums who return to work when their child starts nursery

## **METHODOLOGY**

We submitted Freedom of Information requests (FOIs) to all 32 of Scotland's local authorities on 8 December 2016. There is a legal time limit of twenty working days to respond to FOI requests, so responses were due by 11th January. We began analysing responses on 17th February, by which point four local authorities (Clackmannanshire, East Renfrewshire, Highland and North Lanarkshire) had not replied.

## **THE LEGAL POSITION**

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 says that local authorities must ensure 600 hours of early learning and childcare is made available for each eligible pre-school child belonging to its area. It does not specifically state that they must provide funded places for children from other areas.

However, the statutory guidance underpinning the Act recommends that all local authorities should implement a uniform cross-boundary no charging policy.<sup>1</sup> It also recommends that local authorities “meet on a regional or neighbouring basis to identify movement and places across boundaries and reach sustainable and mutually beneficial arrangements.

The guidance concludes,

“Reciprocal cross boundary arrangements are therefore fundamental to realising the social and economic benefits of early learning and childcare for families and society”.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government, Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 [statutory guidance](#)

## OUR ANALYSIS

Twenty-two local authorities reported that they had reciprocal cross-boundary agreements with at least one other council. Four local authorities did not reply to our FOI request: discounting these councils and the three island authorities, this means that 88% of councils have such agreements.

Three non-island councils told us they had no reciprocal agreements: they were Dumfries and Galloway, Renfrewshire and South Lanarkshire.

Three councils had reciprocal agreements with only one other council: they were Aberdeen City (agreement with Aberdeenshire), Fife (agreement with Edinburgh) and North Ayrshire (agreement with East Ayrshire).

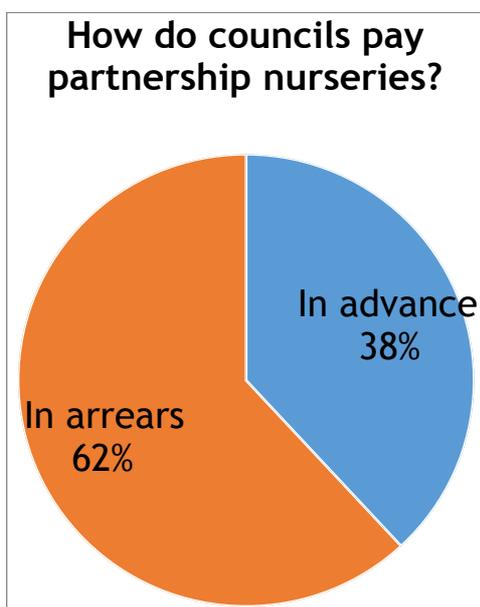
Four councils reported reciprocal agreements with all other councils in Scotland. They were Edinburgh, Falkirk, West Dunbartonshire and West Lothian. South Ayrshire reported that it had reciprocal agreements with all councils except East Ayrshire, because of an imbalance between children seeking cross-boundary places in either area.

We also asked whether each local authority funded all children from neighbouring areas. Fourteen answered yes, unequivocally. Eight said that they did but attached a proviso: for example, that there had to be a reciprocal agreement with the neighbouring authority, or that they would do so as long as they had capacity after accommodating all children resident in their own area.

It is worth noting that we hear from parents living in areas which report that they have reciprocal arrangements, who are being told that they are unlikely to receive any funding. There appears to be a mismatch between some councils' formal arrangements and the real-life experiences of parents.

### In advance or arrears

We asked local authorities whether they funded places in advance or in arrears.



Where payment is made in arrears, parents may have to pay upfront for several months before receiving any funding back from the council. This can amount to an outlay of well over £1000 and makes it harder for less well-off parents to access their 600 hours entitlement, as they may be unable to afford the initial outlay. Note most councils pay partnership funding to nurseries, who then pass it on to parents.

Seven councils did not give clear answers. Of the 21 who did, 8 paid in advance and 13 in arrears.

## Occupancy rate

We also asked local authorities what the occupancy rate of 3-5 year olds was for their nurseries. We were interested in understanding how well-used the nursery estate is. The lowest occupancy rate was Dumfries and Galloway Council at just 44%. Four councils had an occupancy rate of 100%. Average occupancy was 81%.

Local Authority	3-5 occupancy rate
Dumfries and Galloway	44%
Midlothian	53%
Argyll and Bute	54%
Scottish Borders	70%
Fife	71%
Dundee City	73%
East Ayrshire	74%
Shetland Islands	74%
North Ayrshire	75%
West Lothian	76%
South Lanarkshire	79%
Stirling	79%
South Ayrshire	82%
Angus	83%
East Lothian	86%
East Dunbartonshire	89%
Glasgow City	90%
Falkirk	93%
Aberdeenshire	96%
Inverclyde	97%
Renfrewshire	99%
Aberdeen City	100%
City Of Edinburgh	100%
Moray	100%
West Dunbartonshire	100%

## Other information

Finally, we asked a series of questions to find out what socioeconomic data councils held on the children they looked after, and on their parents. Given that one of the original aims of free nursery places was to help parents return to work, we felt it was reasonable to expect that some councils would hold data on this.

Most simply stated that they did not hold this data. A few said that they held anonymous Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation Area data, based on postcodes. Eilean Siar said it was aware of the circumstances of those two year olds who qualified for a free place and Renfrewshire reported that it held information relating to priority banding. Glasgow was the only council to provide detailed information, stating that 87.7% of parents/carers of 3-5 year olds attending for more than the 16

free hours or 0-2 year olds paying for places were from households where both parents were working. No council held any data on the number of mums who returned to work when their child started nursery.

## **CONCLUSION**

Cross-boundary difficulties are among the most frequent issues that parents raise with us. And it's clear that there is a patchwork of different arrangements across Scotland, with little consistency or, frankly, logic applied. It's not unusual for parents to be dealing with three different local authorities: often each parent will work in a different council area, while the family resides in a third. Too often, we hear of parents being passed from pillar to post, with no council willing to take responsibility for ensuring the child receives the funding he or she is legally entitled to.

This report demonstrates that, like so much else in our childcare system, the ability to access cross-boundary funding is a postcode lottery. It's yet another hurdle for parents to negotiate, and it's simply unnecessary. Legal guidance makes clear that all local authorities should implement a uniform cross-boundary no charging policy.

Fair Funding for our Kids is calling on all local authorities to do just that, immediately, and on COSLA and the Scottish Government to play a co-ordinating role.

Fair Funding for our Kids

2017