

Free childcare pledge at risk over SNP's last-minute approach

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The risk of the SNP's pledge to expand free childcare falling short "is both very likely" and "will have a very high impact", a report has found.

Audit Scotland has found a number of issues with Nicola Sturgeon's flagship promise to ensure all three and four-year-olds receive 1140 hours of free childcare a year.

With less than a year to go, around half the necessary staff still had to be recruited to provide the care expansion, while just 30 per cent of linked construction projects had been completed.

And the 'Early learning and childcare' follow-up report – which will be published in full tomorrow – stated that half of the new places which would be created through fresh infrastructure projects were due to finish in July and August, the very month the policy is due to come into effect.

Auditors said the risk of the infrastructure challenges jeopardising the policy were "both very likely to occur and will have a very high impact".

The report also said councils would have to recruit more than 2200 full-time staff between April and September to meet demand.

Other problems for the pledge include "increased uncertainty" for those who are meant to deliver it on the ground, and the fact the SNP government hasn't worked out how to measure the success of it in the long-term.

Despite the SNP repeatedly demanding all businesses pay fair wages, the report said its very own scheme may not meet living wage requirements.

And in general, the impact of the overall scheme "poses risks to the sustainability of childminding", auditors said.

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Jamie Greene said:

"This was Nicola Sturgeon's flagship policy, yet the necessary work to make it happen has been left to the last minute.

"As ever, the First Minister wraps herself in flagship announcements but the reality ends up being completely different.

"When judged on her actual record on childcare and education she fails miserably.

"As it stands, the fact we're still waiting for so many buildings to be

finished and staff put in place, there's a huge risk that this won't happen in time.

"Audit Scotland itself states the SNP's planning simply hasn't been good enough.

"The First Minister promised the world to thousands of parents across Scotland when it came to free childcare.

"They will deliver a very damning verdict on her SNP government if this promise isn't up-and-running on time.

"And what ministers seem to have forgotten through all of this is that good childcare isn't just about the number of hours on offer, it's the flexibility within that."