

Indefinite delay on childcare expansion ‘not unexpected’

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The Scottish Conservatives have called the SNP's removal of the August 2020 deadline for local authorities to provide 1140 free hours of childcare "extremely disappointing but not unexpected".

The Scottish government has, last night, announced their decision to indefinitely delay the expansion of free childcare to 1140 hours as Covid-19 has "made it impossible" to recruit staff or finish the required infrastructure projects.

This announcement comes less than a month after Audit Scotland warned that hitting the August deadline was already in jeopardy due to slow progress on the infrastructure required to fulfil the commitment, namely shortages of buildings and staffing levels.

Audit Scotland said around half the extra staff needed by the autumn had yet to be recruited and three-quarters of the extra building work was still incomplete. They suggested that delivering on both elements by August this year would, under any circumstances, be extremely difficult.

In addition, the Scottish government was defeated in the Scottish Parliament by a Scottish Conservative led debate forcing them to urgently address the concerns of the Audit Scotland report.

Jamie Greene, Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary said:

"This is extremely disappointing but not entirely unexpected news – prior to the Covid-19 outbreak Audit Scotland had warned that the Scottish government would struggle to meet this deadline.

"Parliament reaffirmed these concerns in a cross party debate which forced the government to concede that August 2020 was always going to be difficult due to slow progress, long before the current crisis outbreak.

"Of course we should focus on the immediate task in hand of supporting key workers with childcare during this critical period, but the Scottish government must do what it can to support the very survival of the childcare and nursery sector in the long term.

"The Scottish Government has explained the reasons for axing the 1140 commitment is its inability to recruit staff and complete infrastructure projects – the two risks Audit Scotland identified earlier this month.

"Whilst we are all currently dealing with the immediate threat of this virus,

as soon as practical, the Scottish government must make good on their original promise of 1140 hours of free childcare which many parents will desperately be relying on in future.”