

Item 12: Question Time

To the Leader of the Council

“Over a period of several months several parents and parent councils have raised concerns regarding what they perceive as anomalies in their Flexible Childcare invoices and statements. Many of these reports cite instances where invoices/statements are issued many months in arrears and are very difficult to understand. Parents have also claimed that Highland Council customer service representatives do not appear to be familiar with the systems.

This has resulted in lack of confidence in the system amongst parents who are paying for the services and the number of overpaid by significant amounts but met with resistance when he tried to claim the overpayments back from Highland Council.

Do you feel that the Flexible Childcare accounting and reporting systems used by Highland Council are in need of an urgent review?”

Response to Mr K Gowans

- Many of the initial issues have been associated with user inputting errors in the school setting which has meant that statements had been unable to be issued timeously until data cleansing occurred over the summer for all the 60 settings offering flexibility. Training, guidance, funding for additional clerical hours in the school and support from the childcare managers and business support have been put in place.
- Parents are able to spread their childcare costs over the year and the system requires direct debits to be adjusted quarterly by parents to ensure that they do not continue to overpay if their predicted childcare needs reduce. This has not always occurred which has meant that parents have then built up overpayments and credit. Parents are advised to check their Direct Debits to ensure that they're not overpaying.
- Some parents have entered into contracts with voucher companies who have transferred large amounts of vouchers to Highland Council to pay for childcare. HC are able to accept vouchers for payment however, the transferring of any funding for this is an agreement between the voucher company and the parent and not with HC. Therefore any refunding of vouchers is a separate issue with the parent and the voucher company.
- The first point of contact for parents is the school and the relevant childcare manager, unfortunately some parents have gone to HC service points and have spoken to generic staff who have no knowledge of the system or ELC.

- The system has been part of a LEAN review and the commercial and efficiency team have continued to support C&L with a handover of the system in progress.
- The Highland Council audit and scrutiny team have been asked to review the database and systems as part of a review of elements of ELC, this is in progress.
- The Scottish Government are working with SEEMIS to develop a NAMS module for all authorities to use and once this is ready we will move to this system.