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Scottish
Childminding
Association

committed to quality childcare

SCMA ELC Audit 2021 Executive Summary



INTRODUCTION

The findings of our latest annual independent audit of progress on the inclusion of childminders in the delivery of funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) may make stark, challenging or uncomfortable reading. We do not under-estimate the scale and complexity of implementing the expansion of ELC and '1140 by 2020' (or '1140 by 2021' as it became); nor do we under-estimate the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and the disruption which this has caused. However, the reality for childminding is that many of the problems which childminding has faced with ELC expansion were deeply embedded before COVID-19 emerged and have not been adequately addressed.

The childminding workforce has declined by 26.4% (1457 childminders) in the last five years - and this has accelerated in parallel to ELC expansion. This cannot be sustained and has significant implications for families, access to childcare and parental choice.

It could also threaten the Scottish Government's ability to deliver on its commitments in the Programme for Government to extend ELC downwards to one year-olds and to develop a new system of wraparound school-age childcare - both areas in which childminders are heavily involved and will play a vital role. As such, a step change in action is now urgently required.



OUR FINDINGS

Having decided not to conduct an audit last year during the pandemic, this year's audit presents both a snapshot of where we are in 2021 and a report on progress of over five years of national and local implementation activity to support ELC expansion.

Our audit attracted a strong response with returns received from all 32 local authorities in Scotland. Its key findings included:

- **while progress has been made in local authority approval of childminders to participate in delivering funded ELC, significant differentials continue to exist between the numbers of childminders approved and the number of childminders actually delivering funded ELC.** This is a fundamental distinction often involving lengthy delays in which childminders continue to lose children/business from their settings;
- **progress in involving childminders in delivering funded ELC for Eligible Two Year Olds (a Scottish Government priority area linked to support for low-income families) has stalled with only 4.1% of the childminding workforce in Scotland involved in delivery and with little change in numbers since 2019.** This is of significant concern;
- **an additional 510 childminders are now involved in delivering funded ELC to Three and Four Year Olds. This is due to the work of both SCMA and local authority staff who understand the unique nature of childminding, the range of outcomes which this can provide for families and its value in increasing parental choice.** However, with only 17.5% of the childminding workforce involved in delivering funded hours for Three and Four Year-Olds and only 2% of children receiving funded hours accessing them through childminders, this cannot be considered a success after five years of national and local implementation activity.

To increase understanding and enhance the value of this year's audit, we also conducted parallel snapshot surveys of childminders' (n=464) and parents' (n=276) experiences of funded ELC.

While recognising their small sample size, the survey findings are consistent with the audit returns and provide triangulated data from three distinct perspectives, confirming and enhancing understanding of these issues.

These collected data sources report a number of issues about ELC implementation including:

- **the founding ELC principle of ‘provider neutrality’ (through which parents should be able to choose to access their funded ELC from a range of childcare providers and local authorities should support this approach) is not working as it should.** There is clear evidence through the parent and childminder surveys, audit returns and, indeed, on local authority websites, that a number of local authorities continue to prioritise their own nursery provision and are not promoting childminding equitably to parents, alongside their own nurseries, as an option for their funded ELC entitlement;
- **too many offers for funded ELC made by local authorities to parents are inflexible.** These can often involve only a single option, to be taken on fixed days or at fixed times, and/or including a requirement to take some or all of the funded ELC hours with a local authority nursery;
- **while the number of childminders delivering funded ELC for Three-and-Four Year Olds has increased, both the parents’ and childminders’ surveys confirmed the vast majority of childminders are only doing so at a lower level of hours through blended placements (in which childcare is split with a nursery).** Several local authority audit returns also confirmed that it can be normal practice to base hours firstly around nursery needs;
- **many childminders believe delivering funded hours is very important to their business sustainability, but there is often a weak match between the offers made by local authorities to parents and childminders’ business viability.** This can particularly be the case when there is requirement to take the majority of hours in a local authority nursery and parents are only offered a much-reduced level of hours with a childminder;
- **delivering funded hours and wider ELC expansion has led to a very significant increase in bureaucracy and additional paperwork for childminders, including duplicative quality assurance systems at a national and local level, which is not sustainable.** This has been causing childminders to stop delivering funded hours, leave the childminding workforce and also now appears to be putting off more childminders from wishing to become involved in funded ELC delivery;
- **more encouragingly, the results of the snapshot surveys would indicate that a majority of parents are receiving their first choice of childcare provider.** However, this needs to be qualified with concern about the lack of choice and options available locally, with more than half of parents reporting they only received a single option for accessing their funded ELC within the offer from their local authority. As such, preferences could clearly differ if parents were presented with more options and the ability to make an informed choice. Encouraging satisfaction ratings were also reported by parents (higher in those accessing funded ELC through a childminder than in those not accessing their entitlement through a childminder), qualified by parental recognition that this is a free offering.

These findings confirm that as we have moved beyond the August 2021 date of implementation considerable work remains to be done to ensure that the principles of ELC are upheld and that it is implemented consistently and equitably throughout Scotland.

As things stand, the implementation of ELC to date has largely failed childminding and an urgent step change in action is required to maintain this unique form of childcare and family support and to maintain and increase parental choice.

To support this process SCMA has made a series of informed recommendations to the Scottish Government, including to direct further research and audit.

Graeme

Graeme McAlister, Chief Executive
November 2021





RECOMENDATIONS

The gap between the development of national standards and consistent local implementation:

1

The principle of Provider Neutrality is not working in practice. This principle should be replaced as a matter of urgency, to incorporate a minimum childcare provider mix which all local authorities must meet, guaranteeing equitable opportunity to participate in funded ELC delivery (and taking into account remote and rural challenges).

All 32 local authorities should be required to report on this and to evidence annually their equitable inclusion of childminders and other childcare providers alongside their own provision. If the principle of Provider Neutrality is to be maintained, then it is essential that the Scottish Government and local authority representative bodies accept responsibility to ensure this is implemented fairly, equitably and consistently and that local authorities who fail to implement this principle in practice are held to account.

If the Scottish Government is unable to guarantee this, the Scottish Government should take responsibility for developing an approach of affirmative action or special measures, 'Childminder Plus', in which it will take national responsibility for setting, monitoring and delivering meaningful annual increases in childminder inclusion in funded ELC delivery to redress the current imbalance.

2

It is clear that much work remains to be done in ensuring all local authorities promote childminding equitably to parents, alongside local authority nursery provision, as an option for receiving their funded ELC entitlement. While the promotion and encouragement of good practice has been the favoured approach to date, this has not been working as much as hoped and there is a need for the Scottish Government to step in, to move beyond encouragement to requiring and ensuring that this now happens.

The flexibility of ELC funded hours offered to parents:

3

Triangulated data from SCMA's 2021 ELC Audit and accompanying snapshot surveys of parents and childminders has found significant concern about the lack of flexibility in funded ELC offers made to parents (and other providers). Future offers of funded ELC need to become more flexible and based more on parental need rather than developed from a preferred nursery operating perspective.

4

Building on the data already gathered by our audit and snapshot surveys, we believe that there would be value from a public accountability and scrutiny perspective, for a specific follow-up audit to be undertaken independently (by Audit Scotland or the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee) examining the flexibility of the funded hours offered to parents, given the loss of public expenditure which could arise if the current practice, in some areas, of allocating fixed 10-hour days to parents - regardless of their need and preference - and for the ease of local authority nursery administration and operation, is replicated widely around Scotland.

5

We recognise the small size of the snapshot survey of parents, but some of the findings are of concern, these are supported by the separate audit, childminders' survey, and our organisational experience in practice and we would recommend that the Scottish Government conducts a larger-scale survey of parents on their experiences of funded ELC to strengthen the evidence in this area, repeating questions asked in our snapshot survey of parents

Bureaucracy linked to ELC expansion:

6

Urgent, and immediate, action is required by the Scottish Government to reduce the level of bureaucracy associated with ELC expansion which has played a significant role in the reduction of the childminding workforce. Many childminders' workloads have become unsustainable and a range of ongoing policy proposals present a risk of compounding this further.

The Scottish Government should undertake an urgent review of the wider scrutiny landscape **BEFORE** creating any additional scrutiny through Education Reform, the National Care Service and the development of the Programme for Government's commitments to extend ELC to one year-olds and to develop a new system of wraparound school aged childcare.

7

The Scottish Government should work with SCMA, the Care Inspectorate, Association of Directors of Education and COSLA in reducing the duplicative quality assurance systems, nationally and locally, which have arisen as a result of ELC expansion with a view to streamlining, increasing consistency, standardising data capture and reporting which reflect childminder settings.

8

ELC standards and frameworks should be adapted, with childminding-specific versions developed with input from SCMA

9

The Scottish Government should commission SCMA to work with statutory stakeholders to develop standardised documentation and templates to help reduce bureaucracy and support the participation of professional childminders in delivering funded ELC (by, for example making quality assurance and self-evaluation more childminding-specific and helping childminders to evidence their practice).

Childminding workforce: recruitment and retention:

10

SCMA is currently planning to partner with local authorities to deliver joint demographically-targeted recruitment campaigns in remote and rural areas facing acute recruitment and retention challenges in childminding. This will just be the first step of a wider programme of work required to safeguard and develop a more sustainable childminding workforce to support national policy ambitions and parental choice – including further targeted extension into urban areas.

Recognising it's national interests in ELC, increasing parental choice and the Programme for Government commitments to extend funded ELC to one-year-olds and to develop of new system of wraparound SAC, where childminding will play a vital role, the Scottish Government should also contribute financially to support the extension of planned SCMA workforce and recruitment activity aiming to bring more new entrants into the childminding workforce in the short, medium and long term.

11

SCMA is also actively exploring the potential development of a mentoring network, tapping into the experience within our membership, and matching experienced childminders with those coming into the workforce to provide support, to strengthen skills and knowledge acquisition and transfer, to reduce isolation and to support recruitment and retention within the childminding workforce.

The Scottish Government and Skills Development Scotland should consider providing financial support to enable SCMA to pilot and evaluate this initiative. The Scottish Government has previously funded and is currently funding recruitment activities within the wider ELC sector which are not childminding-specific. By providing funding to support targeted childminding-specific recruitment and retention activity (as detailed in recommendations 10 and 11) this would help to provide more parity of support between nurseries and childminding.

Eligible Two's uptake

12

The Scottish Government should review the uptake of funded hours in Eligible Two-Year-Olds, as a matter of urgency, and implement measures to increase the use of childminders for this priority group, particularly as a pre-cursor to the expansion of ELC downwards to include one-year-olds.



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