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Scottish
Childminding
Association

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Scottish Childminding Association

Childminding Evidence Paper

In support of *Changing the Narrative: Strengthening Childminding,*
Supporting Families and Increasing Choice: SCMA Strategy 2021-2024

August 2022

SCMA Childminding Evidence Paper

in support of *Changing the Narrative: Strengthening Childminding, Supporting Families and Increasing Choice: SCMA Strategy 2021-2024*

This evidence paper aims to summarise the evidence underpinning SCMA's strategy, our current and planned priorities and activities.

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About Us

SCMA is the only national organisation in Scotland specialising in and dedicated to supporting all aspects of childminding. We are:

- ➔ a membership organisation, with almost 3000 members (79% of the childminding workforce in Scotland) representing and providing a professional voice for our members and the wider childminding workforce and delivering a range of specialised childminding-specific services and support^{1,2};
- ➔ a national Third Sector organisation very closely involved in advocating and informing the development and implementation of evidence-based national and local policy and standards and ensuring these are informed by the views and experiences of childminding; engaging and working collaboratively with a range of national and local stakeholders (across the statutory, childcare, Third and other sectors); developing the evidence base on childminding (undertaking and/or contributing to research and undertaking independent audits); presenting and piloting policy solutions; and developing the childminding workforce;
- ➔ a direct service provider delivering a range of national and local service contracts to support Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) expansion, to provide family support (including for vulnerable children and families and low-income families) and for school-age childcare.

SCMA played a leading role in contributing to the national response to the pandemic, supporting childminders to stay open more than any other form of childcare and to practice safely; in influencing financial support for business sustainability and in promoting recovery - most notably through the launch of our new strategy, '*Changing the Narrative: Strengthening Childminding, Supporting Families and Increasing Choice*' midway through the pandemic (May 2021), at a time when few were looking forward^{3,4}. In recognition of our work, SCMA was shortlisted for the Leadership and COVID-19 awards in the Scottish Public Service Awards 2021 – the only Third Sector, childcare or representative organisation to be shortlisted in both categories⁵.

SCMA Representative/Advisory Experience

SCMA has extensive experience of representing childminding in national discussions with a wide range of stakeholders across the statutory, childcare, Third and other sectors (and in engaging members to ensure that our participation is representative of childminders' views experiences and views):

- ➔ prior to COVID-19 and during the expansion of ELC this included participating in a range of advisory groups established by the Scottish Government including the ELC Strategic Forum, Partnership Forum, Monitoring and Evaluation Group, Recruitment Delivery Group, Skills Development Group, and Census Group, plus national working groups established by the Scottish Government, Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland to develop national standards and policy frameworks including the National Health and Social Care Standards, Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), National Standard for ELC, the Quality Framework, Realising the Ambition, Out to Play and Setting the Table;
- ➔ SCMA played a key role in supporting the national response to the pandemic and in national recovery planning. This included working with the Scottish Government, Care Inspectorate and Public Health Scotland to inform the development of (and over 30 updates to) the COVID-19 Childminder Services Guidance, often involving commenting on lengthy documents at very short notice; regular meeting involvement included the ELC and Childcare Sector Recovery Group, COVID-19 Reference Group and Childcare Sector Working Group; with occasional participation in the COVID-19 Education Recovery Group, cross-sectoral stakeholder meetings with the Deputy First Minister and First Minister, and participation in Scottish Government/Care Inspectorate webinar on guidance changes⁶;
- ➔ as we emerge from COVID-19, SCMA continues to participate in a large and increasing number of national advisory meetings linked to recovery; ELC, Programme for Government commitments (on extending ELC down to one-year-olds and on developing a new system of wraparound school-age childcare), Childcare Strategy, workforce strategy (the Strategic Framework for Scotland's Childcare Profession), quality assurance, the Childcare Sector Working Group, the Action Plan on Childminding Monitoring Group and the Children's Sector Strategic and Policy Forum (and child poverty sub-group). SCMA is also currently acting as an External Adviser to the Irish Government's National Action Plan on Childminding.

- ➔ more recently SCMA was invited to give oral evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee (in May 2022) and to the Finance and Public Administration Committee (in June 2022) on the implementation of ELC and the impact on childminding^{56,57}.

About Childminding

Childminding:

- ➔ is a unique, nurturing and high-quality form of learning, childcare, and family support, delivered in a home setting;
- ➔ consistently achieves higher ratings across all quality criteria, through independent inspection by the Care Inspectorate, than Daycare of Children's Services (local authority nurseries, private nurseries and other ELC settings). 92.6% of registered childminders were rated "Good" or better across all quality ratings in the last recorded year^{7,11};
- ➔ has the lowest adult-to-child ratios by childcare provider, maximising and increasing opportunities for more one-to-one care⁸;
- ➔ provides both pre-school (0-5) and school-age childcare (6-12);
- ➔ enables children of different ages to learn and play together in small groups, enhancing communication skills, learning and development⁹;
- ➔ follows the same learning and quality frameworks as nurseries, including Curriculum for Excellence and Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC);
- ➔ incorporates a higher element of outdoor learning and play than most other forms of childcare;
- ➔ can be blended with other forms of childcare (i.e. nursery), so that children can experience the best of both forms of childcare;
- ➔ can be particularly beneficial for young children who may struggle to adapt or may get lost in a larger setting and also for children with Additional Support Needs (ASNs);
- ➔ is viewed by many families who use childminding as a wider form of family support (enabling siblings to be together; providing care before, during and after school; providing continuity of care from 0-12 years old (or 16 years in the case of children with ASNs) and supporting children and families through the range of transitions within; in addition to providing emotional support to parents)¹⁰.

Prior to COVID-19 there were 31,560 children registered to receive childcare in childminding settings (just under 13% of all childcare places in Scotland) – approx. 50% of children in childminding settings were pre-school age (0-5) and 50% were school-age children (6-12)¹¹.

ELC Expansion and Childminding Workforce Trends

Overview

Funded ELC has been operating in Scotland for a number of years. While it is not a new policy as such, what has changed has been the level of the statutory entitlement of hours offered to parents. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 expanded the previous entitlement to funded ELC from 475 to 600 hours per year; then in 2016 the Scottish Government published its blueprint and commitment to almost doubling the number of hours of funded ELC to 1140 hours per year for all three, four and eligible two-year-olds by August 2020^{12,13}. This has been a significant undertaking and is understood to be the most generous entitlement in the UK.

While the impact of increasing the statutory entitlement to 1140 hours on children's and family outcomes is under ongoing evaluation, **the phased expansion of ELC over a period of years has meant there is now an increasing body of evidence about what has been working or not working with the implementation of ELC expansion.**

It should be clearly stated that SCMA is very supportive of ELC policy, its intent to close the attainment gap and to provide free childcare to families, particularly on low incomes.

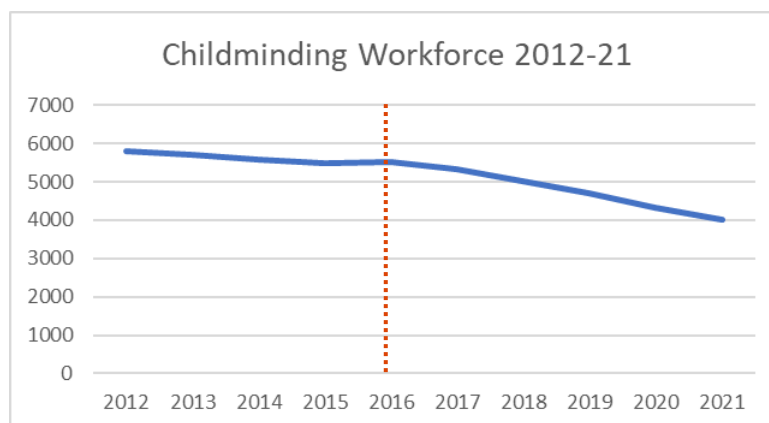
Our concerns relate to the manner in which the expansion of ELC policy has been implemented nationally and locally and the significant adverse effect which this has had on the childminding workforce which has declined by 26% (1457 childminders) in the last five years during the implementation of '1140 by 2020'.

In parallel, the number of new entrants to the childminding workforce has declined by 75% in the same five-year period (from 592 in 2016 to 148 in 2021)¹⁴. This cannot be sustained.

The data above is based on the five-year period of July 2016 - July 2021, as reported in our SCMA ELC Audit 2021. Moving forward, full five-year data for the period of July 2017 - July 2022 is not yet available, but two months short of this (May 2022) the decline in the childminding workforce has increased to 30% and we anticipate it to reach 32% by the time July 2022 data becomes available.

Particular problem areas include:

- ➔ the national drive to recruit additional staff into nurseries to support ELC expansion and the destabilising effect this had on the sector;
- ➔ inequitable and inconsistent local implementation of national ELC policy (including continuing local prioritisation of local authority nursery provision, continuing low-level inclusion of childminders in funded ELC delivery at levels which support business sustainability and continuing inequitable promotion of all childcare options);
- ➔ duplicative quality assurance at a national and local level and a significant increase in bureaucracy under ELC expansion; and
- ➔ the requirement for practitioner qualifications set against a backdrop of a long-standing, high-quality and older workforce.



As a policy, it was hoped that the expansion of ELC would increase choice for parents; instead, its implementation has largely failed childminding and is decreasing choice with shortages of childminders being experienced around the country. This not only has implications for parental choice and the delivery of funded ELC, but also the delivery of the Scottish Government's Programme for Government commitments to extend ELC to one year-olds and all two year-olds, and to develop a new system of wraparound school-aged childcare (areas of childcare in which childminders play a vital role)¹⁵.

These commitments and the Scottish Government's wider, but inter-connected, policy agendas on Education Reform and the National Care Service also present additional potential risks to the sustainability of childminding in Scotland if these were to add further to the levels of bureaucracy created by ELC expansion. Urgent step change is required.

ELC Expansion and Childminding (SCMA Audit Findings 2017-21)

Linked to the delivery of '1140 by 2020' the Scottish Government commissioned SCMA to undertake annual, independent, audits of local authorities' progress in involving childminders in delivering funded ELC. Our first three audits were undertaken and published in 2017-19^{16,17,18}. These audits, and our work in this area, highlighted a number of recurring issues including:

- ➔ some local authorities who understood the unique benefits of childminding had been supportive and were including childminders, but were in the minority;
- ➔ very slow progress in including childminders in ELC delivery - only approx. 4-5% (200 childminders out of a workforce of 4000) had been included in actually delivering funded hours by 2019;
- ➔ significant disparities in the levels of childminders approved for and actually delivering funded ELC (see later);
- ➔ local authorities have a conflict of interests – responsible for overseeing local ELC expansion plans and are also a direct service provider themselves. Many local authorities had been prioritising their own nursery provision and not promoting childminding as an option for receiving their funded ELC entitlement to parents;
- ➔ few local authorities had undertaken impact assessments of their expansion plans on childminders;
- ➔ a number of local authorities had proceeded with capital build projects without first using existing provision in other providers (including childminders);
- ➔ the childminding workforce was decreasing annually in parallel to ELC expansion and recruitment into local authority nurseries to support expansion (14.5% reduction in 2014-19).

SCMA made a series of recommendations to the Scottish Government in our 2019 audit including the urgent need for both independent research into the declining workforce trends to be conducted (this was accepted) and a national childminder recruitment campaign (which was not accepted).

SCMA did not conduct an audit in 2020 due to the pandemic, but re-introduced it in July/August 2021. The implementation of '1140 by 2020' had itself been put back to August 2021 due to the impact the pandemic had on local authority recruitment of additional staff and construction progress of capital build projects. We recognise the unprecedented and highly disruptive nature of the pandemic, and the need to prioritise the national response and the co-ordination of critical childcare for key workers and vulnerable children at that time ahead of ELC implementation (to which SCMA contributed with 700-1000 childminding settings remaining open during the national lockdown in 2020). However, it should be noted that some local authorities were already delivering 1140 to families by the time the pandemic struck in March 2020, a number of others were close to doing so and that the problems with ELC implementation which have been experienced in childminding were deeply embedded before the pandemic.

Our most recent ELC Audit (2021) provided a snapshot of both where we were in August 2021 and also after five years of national and local implementation activity to support ELC expansion.



The audit provided triangulated data based on the audit (returns from all 32 local authorities) and accompanying snapshot surveys of childminders (n=474 childminders) and parents (n=276 parents)^{19,20,21}. The main findings may make stark and uncomfortable reading:

- ➔ **The childminding workforce had declined by 26% (1457 childminders) in the last five years (2016-21)**

→ Continuing slow progress in including childminders in delivering funded ELC:

- only 4% of childminders were delivering funded ELC to eligible two year-olds (no change since 2019). This was of particular concern, as eligible two year-olds are a priority group of the Scottish Government due to the desire to increase support to low-income families;
- only 17% of childminders were delivering funded ELC to three and four year-olds (this represented progress against only 4% in 2019), with an additional 510 childminders involved in delivery and SCMA has worked with local authorities around Scotland to bring more childminders into ELC delivery.

However, this improvement does not present the full picture. The accompanying snapshot survey of childminders found that 75% of childminders involved in delivering funded ELC to three and four year-olds are largely doing so on the basis of blended placements split between nurseries and childminders, with a number of childminders and parents reporting that local authorities were continuing to require the bulk of the entitlement of funded hours to be taken with their own local authority nurseries and with childminders just receiving the remainder of the hours (either before or after nursery).

This is not sufficient to support childminders' business sustainability; 67% of childminders believe delivering funded ELC is very important to their business sustainability, but only 30% believe there is a strong match between the offers made by local authorities and their business sustainability;

- continuing differentials in the number of childminders **approved** for providing funded ELC by local authorities and **actually involved in delivering** funded ELC: eligible two year-olds – 29% approved / 4% involved in delivery; three and four year-olds – 29% approved / 17% involved in delivery. **As to the reason for this continuing differential, parents and childminders who responded to our snapshot surveys both reported that in many cases local authorities are still not promoting childminding equitably to parents, alongside their own nursery provision, as an option for receiving their funded ELC entitlement (see below);**

→ Lack of Provider Neutrality - problems continue to be experienced with many local authorities' favouring the promotion of their own nursery provision over other childcare providers, including childminding. Provider neutrality is a founding principle of ELC **yet only 4 out of 32 local authorities had conducted an impact assessment of their own ELC expansion plans on childminding businesses in their area**, and parents and childminders who responded to our snapshot surveys both reported continuing problems with childminding not being promoted equitably by local authorities:

- 49% of parents who are accessing funded hours through a childminder were not offered childminding as an option and had to request it;
- in a number of local authority audit returns, 20.5% of parents accessing funded hours through a childminder and 33.3% of parents accessing funded hours through another provider reported a requirement to take some or all hours with a local authority nursery.

→ lack of flexibility in funded ELC offers to parents – many parents and childminders reported a requirement for parents to take their funded ELC hours on fixed days and times of the week, including examples of parents receiving single offers of fixed 10 hour days which did not match their families' needs and resulted in reduced numbers of hours received by parents when they did not use all the allocated hours in the offer. This is at odds with the founding ELC principle of flexibility and there was strong demand from parents and childminders for much more flexibility in ELC offers made to parents by local authorities;

[We recognise the small sample size of the snapshot surveys of childminders (474) and parents (276) and recommended that the Scottish Government should repeat the questions we asked of parents in their larger-scale national survey of parents launched earlier this month. It is disappointing that these questions have not been replicated in this exercise. However, even without larger-scale testing and replication we do believe the survey findings provide valuable tri-angulated data alongside the local authority audit and in line with our experience of supporting childminders and parents around Scotland].

- ➔ **a number of procurement and tendering exercises to recruit funded providers were disproportionate to childminding:** recurring evidence during expansion that some procurement and tendering exercises have been very bureaucratic, have put some childminders off from applying and have also been disproportionate to childminding i.e. applying high levels of nursery insurance cover required to small childminding businesses. Some progress has been made in simplifying tendering processes, but more work is still required.

In parallel, the ELC Delivery Progress Report (Improvement Service, September 2021) reported that only 2% of children accessing funded ELC receive this from a childminder²². We do not believe that either this or the results obtained in our latest audit could be considered a success after five years of national and local implementation activity.

ELC Policy Implementation and Administration: Main Areas of Weakness

1

Recruitment to Support ELC Local Authority Nursery Expansion

A large-scale national advertising campaign was undertaken to recruit an additional 12,000 staff into local authority nurseries to support ELC expansion and the delivery of '1140 by 2020'. Evidence from multiple sources has shown that this rapid recruitment drive had a de-stabilising effect on the childcare and wider social care workforce by taking staff from Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) settings, childminding and the wider social care workforce into higher-paid local authority positions instead of attracting new recruits into the workforce as had been hoped^{23,24,7,18}.

This has adversely effected recruitment and retention and has been acknowledged by the Scottish Government as an “*unintended consequence*” of ELC expansion – a phrase also used by another Scottish Government Directorate in relation to the planned development of the National Care Service and the intent this will address the “*unintended consequences*” of the earlier integration of health and social care. While sympathetic to, and understanding of the challenges faced when developing and delivering large-scale policies at pace, it is also of concern if “*unintended consequences*” with adverse impact on existing services which predicted this effect were to become a recurring feature of policy implementation.

2

National Policy with Inequitable and Inconsistent Local Implementation

We recognise the democratic strength and value of parallel systems of government at a national and local level, but also that this can present challenge when trying to achieve consistent implementation of national policy at a local level in 32 local authority areas. This dynamic has been complicated further during the delivery of '1140 by 2020' in which local authorities have had a dual responsibility for overseeing local expansion while being a direct service provider of childcare in their own right through their own nurseries. Some local authorities have managed this conflict of interest well, others less so.

As noted earlier, while some local authorities who have recognised the value of childminding have approached this fairly and been very supportive, there has been recurring evidence of local authorities prioritising their own provision ahead of other providers and not promoting childminding equitably to parents as an option for receiving their entitlement of funded ELC hours and in a manner which supports childminders' business sustainability. These are not new issues, have featured throughout ELC expansion and have not been addressed.

While recognising that neither the Scottish Government nor the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities want to interfere with local autonomy by telling local authorities what to do, this can create a vacuum, standing off enables the negative behaviours to continue, and the preferred approach of encouraging the sharing of good practice has not been sufficient to deliver substantive improvement and has enabled these problems to continue. Greater ownership is required.

As a professional membership body involved in ongoing quality improvement we are supportive of quality assurance, inspection and scrutiny. However, we also strongly believe that this should be proportionate and the statutory sector has a responsibility to minimise the level of bureaucracy for practitioners where this is harmful.

There is now compelling evidence that duplicative quality assurance and an increase in bureaucracy during ELC expansion are the main reasons that childminders have been leaving or are planning to leave the childminding workforce.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in requirements placed on childcare providers by a range of statutory stakeholders to demonstrate their adherence to various frameworks and standards. This has included wider policy frameworks such as Getting it Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) and Building the Ambition which are firmly embedded in childminding practice, Curriculum for Excellence and the National Health and Care Standards, but it has also seen a range of updates and refreshes including Realising the Ambition (following on from Building the Ambition). In parallel, the Scottish Government was developing a new National Standard with ongoing criteria that providers must meet to deliver funded hours and a range of specific frameworks have been layered on to support the development and expansion of ELC policy and improving outcomes for children, while local authorities continued in the interim with their existing local systems^{25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32,33,34}.

The Care Inspectorate has the responsibility to regulate, inspect and scrutinise all forms of childcare in Scotland. As such, childminding is a regulated profession which prior to ELC expansion was already subject to inspection and scrutiny covering a wide range of detailed quality indicators. During this time childminding has consistently achieved higher ratings across all quality criteria, through independent inspection by the Care Inspectorate, than Daycare of Children's Services (local authority nurseries, private nurseries and other early learning and childcare settings)⁷. Education Scotland was charged with developing a learning framework to support the delivery of ELC and published How Good Is Our Early Learning and Childcare (HGIOELC) in 2016³³. This provides a self-evaluation framework of quality indicators to measure learning improvement against in ELC settings. In parallel, to support its role in ELC expansion, the Care Inspectorate started developing a new Quality Framework³⁴. Local authorities have also been making varying demands of childminders for the use of HGIOELC alongside the existing Care Inspectorate requirements for self-evaluation using the Quality Framework.

SCMA recognised at an early stage that ELC expansion was creating additional bureaucracy, leading to duplication and engaged with the Scottish Government and others about this, as while larger childcare providers such as nurseries may have been able to sustain this (although some may struggle as well), we recognised this would put much more pressure on childminding where the effect would be more pronounced. *For additional context, the majority of childminders are sole workers and while they are expected to follow the same standards and curricula as nurseries, they do not have teams of staff (practitioners, managers, finance/admin and quality improvement officers) to support them. During the day their sole focus is on practice delivery and everything else has to be done by them individually, unpaid, in their own time in the evenings or at weekends (cleaning their settings, undertaking professional learning, documenting quality assurance, keeping up-to-date with the latest guidance, administration, finance, liaising with parents, marketing etc).*

Recognising these issues, and the risks posed by separate, dual inspections, **an independent review of ELC had recommended in 2015 that**

“in future, either a joint education and care inspection or one inspection conducted by one single inspectorate body for ELC should be standard”³⁵.

In response to this the Scottish Government charged the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland with developing a single/shared inspection. This work was very slow and the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland failed to reach agreement on a single/shared inspection and continued to develop their own separate frameworks³⁶. While we do not under-estimate the challenges involved, this was very disappointing as we were aware from supporting childminders around Scotland of the adverse impact this was having on them.

It is now almost seven years since a single/shared inspection was recommended and has still not been delivered. During this period childminders have had to absorb the consequences of this – an evolving, detailed quality framework (with self-evaluation and inspection) by the Care Inspectorate and a separate detailed learning framework by Education Scotland (with self-evaluation and possible local authority inspection based on this). In parallel both the Care Inspectorate and local authorities consider themselves the guarantors of quality under ELC and we are already aware of some local authorities who do not recognise the role of the Care Inspectorate and are planning to undertake their own twice-yearly inspections and self-evaluations (using a mix of indicators) in addition to what the Care Inspectorate is doing at a national level.

However, it is not just a matter of the model of inspection – this is only part of the problem; the other is the ever-increasing number of standards and frameworks (noted earlier) produced by different organisations - each with their own detailed methods of outcomes reporting which require to be embedded into practice, documented and have layered on additional requirements which are not sustainable for sole workers/practitioners. During this time SCMA's role in bridging the gap between policy and implementation in practice has become of increasing importance as without this support many childminders would struggle to keep up with the volume of official output with which they must comply.

SCMA Membership Survey findings suggest pending workforce crisis

SCMA undertook a large-scale membership survey in spring 2020 (1470 responses, 38% response level). This survey found that the level of paperwork and bureaucracy associated with current childminding practice was the main reason that childminders had left the workforce (70%) and were considering doing so within the next five years (59%), closely followed by not being able to compete with local authority nursery expansion³⁷. The survey also found that on top of the significant decline in our workforce, 25% of childminders did not believe they will still be childminding in five years and a further 26% didn't know if they would.

We believe this data to be deeply worrying and compelling, as when running this data together we have the makings of a workforce crisis. Although we need to account and adjust for the age profile of the childminding workforce, the results also indicated a strong opportunity to positively influence this if we could reduce the pressure on the childminding workforce - only 25% said that nothing could be done to change their minds.

SCMA used this powerful data constructively. This was instrumental in our advocating the need for and securing a new Action Plan on Childminding from the Scottish Government^{38,39}. However, despite an encouraging start in providing business sustainability grants to offset the financial impact of the pandemic, the Action Plan has faltered since. Our survey findings were also fed into independent research into the childminding workforce trends undertaken by Ipsos/MORI and overseen jointly by the Scottish Government, Care Inspectorate and SCMA.

This research was published in April 2022 and largely reaffirmed our findings with concerns about bureaucracy and paperwork dominating the findings running through interviewees (from those considering becoming a childminder, through to recent entrants to the childminding workforce, as well as those mid-career and considering leaving and those who had left the workforce)⁴⁰. A separate SCMA survey also found that 86% of childminders involved in delivering funded ELC had reported a very significant or significant increase in paperwork and the level of paperwork associated with ELC is now becoming the main reason that more childminders do not wish to become involved²⁰.

We recognised that the reasons for the decline in the childminding workforce were multi-factorial, including the fact that the childminding workforce was ageing (21% aged 55+) and that there is a requirement within the National Standard for all providers delivering funded ELC to have either obtained or be working towards the benchmark qualification. More experienced childminders who may have been practising for over 20 years and had been consistently achieving high quality ratings through independent inspection by the Care Inspectorate without the benchmark qualification may not believe it was worth obtaining a qualification at this point in their career. As such, we had anticipated that there may be some premature skills loss in older age groups.

UK Childminding Workforce Trends

It is also appropriate to consider if the trends within the childminding workforce in Scotland are unique or are being experienced in other parts of the UK. The following presents a comparison of the decline in the childminding workforce over the last five years in Scotland with England and Wales –

England:	24% reduction (11,321 childminders) in last five years
Scotland:	26% reduction (1,457 childminders) in last five years
Wales:	24% (522 childminders) in last five years

As can be seen, the trends are very similar which is not surprising given that there has also been an increase in the statutory entitlements of ELC in England and Wales. When exploring the common underlying contributory factors, with our equivalent organisations in England and Wales (the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) and PACEY Cymru, there is also much commonality with our experience in Scotland.

Key themes:

- ➔ reductions have occurred during expansion of statutory provision of ELC in which nursery provision has been prioritised;
- ➔ generic nursery-focused systems, frameworks and inspection have been developed which do not recognise, understand or reflect the unique nature of childminding;
- ➔ expansion of ELC has led to a significant increase in bureaucracy and paperwork which is disproportionate to childminders (as predominantly sole workers) and is adversely affecting recruitment and retention;
- ➔ before and during COVID-19 childminding has received much less financial support, proportionately, than nursery provision;
- ➔ need for greater childminding-specific focus and support; and
- ➔ need for national childminding-specific recruitment campaigns to maintain this unique form of childcare⁴¹

We believe the evidence in relation to the declining childminding workforce is increasing, compelling and requires a long-term strategic response and commitment. By taking action now there is also an opportunity for the Scottish Government to lead the rest of the UK in positively addressing this decline.

Financial Sustainability

SCMA has historically captured data from members on the rates which they charge parents for the delivery of childminding services and the factors which influence this. This continued during ELC expansion alongside much wider data capture on ELC implementation, both through our published ELC Audits and a range of surveys.

During the pandemic, and given the need to prioritise supporting members to continue to practice safely and to contribute to national recovery, we did not repeat this routine data capture on childminding rates, but we did undertake a wide range of activity and surveys linked to childminders' business sustainability including building the case for much-needed financial support for childminders during COVID-19 and contributing to the Scottish Government's Financial Health Check of the childcare sector (summer 2021).



Impact of COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19 childminders' concerns about their financial sustainability had increased during ELC expansion, with many childminders finding it difficult to compete with the rapid large scale of local authority nursery expansion. Our surveys conducted during COVID-19 found that childminders' financial sustainability was weakened further in a number of ways including:

- ➔ during the national lockdown in spring 2020, childminding settings were only allowed to stay open to provide critical childcare to key workers and vulnerable children and to provide childcare for children from no more than two families other than their own at any one time. 700-1000 childminding settings stayed open at this time and the remainder of the childminding workforce (around 75%) had to close their settings resulting in loss of income. While payment was continued for funded provider childminders who would have been delivering funded ELC, no such payment was made to non-funded childminders (the majority of the childminding workforce);
- ➔ when childminding and other settings were allowed to re-open in June 2020, the operating guidance largely did not allow blended placements which are common to many childminders for parents who wish their children to split their childcare between a nursery and childminding setting and to benefit from these two distinct forms of childcare. Our survey on this subject found that 1190 children had already been lost from childminding settings due to these restrictions and that only 19% of childminders believed their businesses would still be viable in 12 months' time if the restrictions on blended placements were not lifted by the time the schools went back in August. SCMA worked constructively to influence the easing of restrictions on blended placements, but a number of local authorities were slow to allow blended placements to return despite the operating guidance allowing them⁴²;
- ➔ a number of childminders were falling through the cracks between Scottish and UK Government financial support for COVID-19 or were ineligible for this support. Initially SCMA established the Childminding Workforce Support Fund (CWSF) to make small grants to childminders experiencing financial hardship and released £30,000 from our reserves (with £30,000 match funding from the Scottish Government). This fund was heavily over-subscribed and we used this evidence of demand to secure an additional £390,000 from the Scottish Government. To facilitate quick payment SCMA was asked to take on the grants administration of this fund and almost 1200 childminders experiencing hardship received small grants of £350.
- ➔ the CWSF also provided evidence, over and above the anecdotal reports which we had been receiving from around Scotland, that the UK Government's Self Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) was paying out much less to childminders than anticipated and in comparison to the Job Retention Scheme (JRS) for employers and employees. The JRS was based on providing 80% of salary costs and employers had the option to top this up to 100%; in comparison the SEISS was promoted by the UK Government as providing 70% of income to the self-employed. This was not the case, as it just covered 70% of **profits** – a fundamentally different level particularly for childminding which is not a high-income profession and with many childminders understood to be sitting just above the low-income threshold for benefits. In practice, many childminders received closer to just one month's income out of three and these awards were much lower still if a childminder had experienced an interruption to their hours and tax history due to pregnancy or reducing their hours due to ill-health or caring responsibilities⁴³;
- ➔ the differentials and inequalities in financial support experienced at a UK level were also exacerbated in Scotland, because all childcare providers (with the exception of childminders) were able to claim for grants from the Transitional Support Fund. In parallel, as the pandemic extended the financial impact of the official requirement for parents/carers to work from home and from parents/carers being on furlough also caused more pressure. SCMA captured further data from members in September 2020 regarding this and childminders' financial sustainability. This found that 79% of respondents had experienced a significant reduction or reduction in the number of children in their settings (74% reported a reduction of 30% or more); 81% reported this reduction in demand was due to the official requirement for parents/carers to work from home; 74% of respondents had questioned if they would be able to continue childminding; and 46% did not believe their business would remain viable in 6 months' time without either financial support or an increase in business⁴⁴.

Given the above there was a need for SCMA to work to secure further financial support for childminders. Over a period of months, SCMA built the evidence base (including the surveys noted earlier) to support the provision of Business Sustainability Grants to childminders by the Scottish Government, linked to the new Action Plan on Childminding. Initially £1m was announced to support childminders. However, after further detailed discussion took place with SCMA regarding how targeted this support would have to be, this increased to £3.2m (£750 grants for all childminders) and paid in March 2021^{45,46}. In addition to playing a major role in influencing this support SCMA played a key role in driving uptake of the Business Sustainability Grants (85% - the highest by provider type).

During the pandemic many childminders had also been disproportionately affected, as sole workers, by the requirements of self-isolation which resulted in recurring periods of loss of income when either they had to self-isolate and close their setting or when families had to self-isolate and did not attend the setting. This was compounded by UK-wide guidance from the Competition and Markets Authority. SCMA captured further data from members regarding this⁴⁷.

COVID-19: Financial Health Check

In summer 2021 the Scottish Government conducted a Financial Sustainability Health Check of the childcare sector in Scotland⁴⁸. This involved undertaking surveys of, and some interviews with, providers to obtain a snapshot of their financial business health after over 15 months of COVID-19.

It found that childcare providers' concerns about their financial sustainability had increased significantly during COVID-19, as a result of operating restrictions and the sustained reduction in demand for childcare caused mainly by the continuing requirement for parents/carers to work from home or being on furlough, and that the two most financially vulnerable provider types were childminders and school-aged childcare settings.

During the Financial Health Check the Scottish Government also undertook in-depth interviews with representative childcare provider organisations (including SCMA) to understand the impact that COVID-19, operating restrictions and the need to prioritise our time and resources to contributing very heavily to the national response had had on their income and financial sustainability. Within the Financial Health Check the Scottish Government recognised the valuable and very significant role that representative organisations had played during COVID-19, that they had all been adversely affected financially by the pandemic, that their continued involvement in supporting providers and national recovery would be essential and committed to exploring some additional financial support for this purpose. More recently, the Childcare Sector Representation and Sustainability Fund has been established to complement core funding.

A few months after the Financial Health Check exercise was undertaken the Omicron variant of COVID-19 struck. Due to its increased transmissibility and ability to re-infect quickly, this had a further significant adverse effect on childcare providers in Scotland leading to widespread closures and self-isolation. SCMA and other representative organisations involved in national recovery (the National Day Nurseries' Association, Early Years Scotland, the Scottish Out of School Care Network and the Care and Learning Alliance) continued to capture data on the impact on members and the Scottish Government's ELC Directorate acted swiftly to secure additional £9.2m of financial support for the childcare sector in Scotland and establish the Omicron Impacts Fund. This provided all childminders in Scotland with the opportunity to apply for one-off grants of £950.

While much work has been done to provide financial support for childminders during COVID-19, business sustainability remains a key issue.

ELC and Sustainable Rates

While the main focus of financial sustainability in recent years has been on the adverse impact of the pandemic, greater attention is now returning to 'normal business'. This includes the setting of sustainable rates for all partner providers delivering funded ELC.

SCMA recognises that this is very important to providers' business sustainability and we have received feedback from a number of members to indicate that for some childminders the level of rates offered by local authorities in some parts of the country are too low to make their participation in ELC delivery financially viable – particularly if only receiving a small number of hours. This matter has taken on greater prominence as a result of the cost of living increases experienced over this last year.

As with other providers, the cost of delivering childminding services has increased and even before the current cost of living pressures, the Financial Health Check exercise found that many childminders were planning to hold their prices and not to pass costs on to parents as they felt this could adversely affect their already financially vulnerable childminding businesses. SCMA had been in discussion with COSLA and the Improvement Service regarding a Cost Collection survey of childminders, as was recently conducted of other ELC providers (in April 2022), to obtain a more up-to-date cost of the delivery of childminding services.

However, we believe that to be meaningful it is essential that this should capture data on the hidden costs of delivering childminding services (including increasing unpaid time in the evenings and at weekends in support of their businesses), so that a truer sustainable rate for childminding services is established. To date there has been a reluctance to explore this and to understand how childminding businesses operate.

Sustainable rates are just one part of the equation and should not be considered in isolation.

As noted earlier, despite the headline finding in the SCMA ELC Audit 2021 that the number of childminders involved in delivering funded ELC for three and four year-olds has increased from 4 to 17% of the childminding workforce since 2019, the linked Childminder Survey found that **75% of childminders involved in delivering funded ELC are mostly just involved on the basis of blended placements split between nurseries and childminders with a number of childminders and parents reporting that local authorities were continuing to require the bulk of the entitlement of funded hours to be taken with their own local authority nurseries and with childminders just receiving the remainder of the hours (either before or after nursery).**

This is not sufficient to support childminders' business sustainability; 67% of childminders believe delivering funded ELC is very important to their business sustainability, but only 30% believe there is a strong match between the offers made by local authorities and their business sustainability. As such, five years into ELC implementation we believe the time is long overdue for all local authorities to be required to involve childminders equitably in ELC delivery and with a level of hours which will support their business sustainability.

Against this background and to build on the evidence captured via our Childminder Survey we requested that childminders should also be asked if they believe the level of hours of funded ELC provided to them by their local authority are of a high enough level to support their business sustainability.

Unfortunately, agreement was not reached on including this important question in the COSLA/Improvement Service Cost Survey and SCMA withdrew its support for that exercise⁴⁹.

SCMA will consider the results of the childminder Cost Collection exercise which proceeded and is also planning further data capture shortly to enhance understanding of this area.



Family Support

In addition to providing a unique and highly-nurturing form of childcare, childminding also provides family support, both in terms of general and intensive.

Family Support (*general*)

As noted earlier, childminding provides very strong continuity of care with support from 0-12years (or 16 years in the case of children with ASNs) and also supports children and families through a range of transitions within i.e. going to nursery, primary and secondary school. It is common for childminders to develop a close bond with the families they care for, to be viewed as an extended part of the family and also for adults to keep in touch with childminders who cared for them as children.

Many parents also rely on the close, but professional relationship which they have with their childminder to seek non-judgmental professional advice. Childminding also provides more flexibility for parents/carers, with increasingly flexible working patterns, than traditional nursery hours with childminders also caring for children before and/or after school and responding at short notice to parents' changing needs.

Much of this is well-established and known within childminding, but the evidence has largely been anecdotal and including parental feedback, testimonials and case studies.

SCMA sits as an adviser on the Scottish Government's ELC Monitoring and Evaluation Group, which oversees the Scottish Study of ELC (SSELC), a major long-term study evaluating the outcomes of increasing the statutory entitlement of funded ELC in Scotland.

It had been intended to undertake some research into the specific impact of funded ELC delivered by childminders. Prior to the pandemic, it was recognised that the number of childminders involved in delivering funded ELC at that time was too low (approximately 200) to support larger-scale quantitative research. It was therefore agreed to commission some independent qualitative research on 'Perceptions of the impact of childminding services on child, parent and family outcomes'¹⁰. This research was undertaken by Ipsos/MORI on behalf of the Scottish Government and based on in-depth interviews with 26 parents and 26 childminders in March and April 2021.

Published in September 2021, the main findings included that parents view childminding as:

- ➔ a professional and nurturing service
- ➔ an "extension of home"
- ➔ more flexible than nurseries (with parents reporting childminders often going "above and beyond")
- ➔ more child-led than nurseries
- ➔ providing a mix of ages in small groups – beneficial to close relationships and social skills development
- ➔ providing greater continuity than nurseries: childminders know children "inside out"
- ➔ providing more outdoors play and trips than nurseries
- ➔ more than a form of childcare – provides family support (emotional support and close, but professional advice to parents not available elsewhere)

While of a small-scale nature, this in-depth qualitative research repeats recurring anecdotal evidence and parental feedback obtained by SCMA.

SCMA Family Support Services (*intensive*)

Recognising the potential to extend childminders' routine family support into a more intensive form to support families in need, SCMA developed its **Community Childminding** services model. This is an early intervention for vulnerable children and families who may be one step away from crisis and where whatever is happening at a parental level (i.e. mental health, addiction, terminal illness) is impacting on young children (such as through the development of attachment disorders).

Health visitors and social workers are the main source of referrals and support is generally provided for 12 weeks, although this can vary. Childminders who have undergone specialised Community Childminding training deliver this

support and SCMA is currently contracted to deliver this service by local authorities in Aberdeen, Scottish Borders, Fife and Glasgow (with our services in Aberdeen and Glasgow taking the form of integrated models linking into eligible two's provision of funded ELC for low-income families).

Within this last three years we have supported more than 900 vulnerable families through our Community Childminding Services. COVID-19 has increased the level of need, and demand for our Community Childminding Services exceeds capacity. These services aim to provide a range of outcomes for both children and parents. Evaluation findings include:

70%

of children have improved physical and cognitive development

75%

of children have improved social skills and increased confidence

65%

of parents report improvements in their wellbeing⁵⁰

Expanding our Community Childminding Services and widening access to them is a key objective within our strategy.

During COVID-19 and the national lockdown a number of organisations were unable to deliver physical family support to vulnerable children and families due to operating restrictions. This was at a time when 700-1000 childminding settings had remained open to support the national response by providing critical childcare to key workers and vulnerable children.

SCMA built on this position by securing a £70,000 grant from the Scottish Government's Wellbeing Fund and we created a **Wellbeing Service** to provide childminding places for vulnerable children and families and we invited direct referrals from other Third Sector organisations (including Women's Aid and Home Start) who were temporarily unable to provide physical support. This helped 70 vulnerable children and also provided respite for parents affected by poor mental health, domestic abuse, or with additional support needs.



We are currently awaiting the outcome of our application to the Scottish Government's Whole Family Wellbeing Fund which, if successful, will enable us to pilot a hybrid of our Community Childminding and Wellbeing services to provide nurturing interventional support for one year-olds, kinship care and to also help inform the Scottish Government's development of its ELC offering for one year-olds.

In parallel we continue to deliver and evaluate our **Access 2 Childminding** pilot service, also funded by the Scottish Government, to deliver school-age childcare support to low-income families. This will also feed into the Scottish Government's Programme for Government commitment to develop a new system of wraparound school-age childcare.

Developing a Strategic Response

SCMA Strategy

Against the background reported within this evidence paper, and in our regular CYPFEIF core funding reports over the last few years, we recognised that leadership was required and we developed our new strategy in response to the challenges which childminding was facing. Initially developed during 2019 and 2020 and signed-off just before COVID-19 struck in March 2020, we deferred implementation of our new strategy given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and prioritised our support for members, and the wider childminding workforce, and to contributing to the national response to COVID-19.

Recognising the challenges which our strategy had been developed to address were becoming more acute as a result of the pandemic, we reviewed our strategy for currency in the context of COVID-19 and launched it as soon we felt able to do so in order to promote recovery - in May 2019, just over midway through the pandemic and at a time when few were looking forward and none of us knew how long the pandemic would last.

Our three-year strategy, '**Changing the Narrative: Strengthening Childminding, Supporting Families and Increasing Choice – SCMA Strategy 2021-24**' represents the first stage of a longer ten-year journey and has five key workstreams (and 15 objectives)⁴:

- ➔ **Representation, Policy and Influencing:** continuing to provide a strong professional voice and using evidence and childminders' experiences to influence and support national and local policy;
- ➔ **Workforce, Learning and Quality:** developing a sustainable childminding workforce (increasing recruitment and retention, and tackling the barriers which are adversely affecting this) and supporting ongoing skills development and learning at all career stages;
- ➔ **Membership:** helping members to recover and sustain their businesses as we emerge from COVID-19 and ensuring our membership support adapts to changing needs - providing them with what they need, when they need it and in the most appropriate form;
- ➔ **Families and Communities:** further development of our family support services to meet the increasing demand from families in need, increasing support for out of school care and developing childminding as a community asset in areas where provision is low (including addressing inequalities – economic and geographic);
- ➔ **Value of Childminding:** changing outdated perceptions of childminding, increasing the value attached to it by parents, policymakers, other providers and the wider public to create more demand for childminding.

Our strategy pre-dated the Programme for Government, but clearly articulated our aim to adjust the balance in our policy influencing activities so as to continue to support ELC implementation, but also to provide as much support for school-age childcare.

Our strategy is also more closely aligned to a number of national priorities than ever including ELC, school-age childcare; workforce, learning and quality; family support/support for vulnerable families; children's mental health and wellbeing; tackling inequalities (economic and geographic, including remote and rural); and community development.

Workforce: Targeted Developments

Central to our new strategy has been the need to develop a more sustainable childminding workforce and we have been leading nationally on a campaign to recruit more childminders, as well as tackling the issues which affect retention.

Scottish Rural Childminding Partnership: recognising that childminding shortages were having a greater adverse impact in remote and rural areas we convened a national and local stakeholder strategic discussion on childminder recruitment and retention in remote and rural areas in November 2021. This was attended by 17 organisations including the Scottish Government, COSLA, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland, Care Inspectorate and a number of the most remote and rural local authorities in Scotland. This led to the establishment of the Scottish Rural Childminding Partnership (SRCP), launched in late March 2022.

This partnership is led by SCMA with financial support from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, South of Scotland Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Government and delivered in partnership with ten remote and rural local authorities. The aim is to recruit 100 childminders in remote and rural communities where they are urgently needed. The pilot involves:

- ➔ a demographically-targeted recruitment campaign (digital and radio) aimed primarily, but not exclusively, at the main entry point to childminding (women aged 30-40 who have started a family and wish to combine a career with caring for their own child/ren);
- ➔ provision of the SCMA childminding-specific Induction Support Programme (including one-to-one support for new childminders through the Care Inspectorate registration process);
- ➔ a package of training (three childminding-specific SCMA Continuing Professional Learning (CPL) courses on child protection, the business side of childminding and parental involvement); and
- ➔ £750 start-up grants.

The pilot is based on in-depth SCMA membership research and aims to provide a test of change pilot aimed at capturing evidence to inform wider childminder recruitment activity. SCMA believes this needs to be extended and rolled out nationally across Scotland.

Reducing Bureaucracy: SCMA is continuing to work to reduce bureaucracy and paperwork for childminders. We engaged early with the independent expert group on Education Reform to share evidence of the adverse effects of duplicative quality assurance on the childminding workforce, given that the Scottish Government had decided to remove the inspection function from Education Scotland and the group was asked to consider what should replace this. This activity also includes ongoing advocacy and representation at a national level, participation in the Childminding Action Plan Monitoring Group and we have developed three new CPL courses on Quality in Practice to reduce the pressure on childminders to assist them with their quality assurance and evidencing requirements and reflective practice (with the support of a Scottish Government grant). This is currently being piloted and evaluated with the intent of further extension.

SCMA Investment: SCMA is committed to developing a sustainable childminding workforce and supporting our members. Over the next two years we are investing from our reserves in developing a new CPL platform with improved functionality and a wider range and format of content. We are also investing reserves in further childminder recruitment activity and in a separate campaign to promote the benefits of childminding to parents as a stimulus for wider partnership funding. This will support marketing, but cannot be used for staff costs.



Programme for Government

Implications for Delivery

The decline in the childminding workforce not only has implications for existing ELC delivery and parental choice, but also for the delivery of Scottish Government commitments within the Programme for Government to extend ELC to one year-olds and all two year-olds, and to develop a new system of wraparound school-age childcare.

These are both areas of childcare in which childminders play a vital role.

Childminders provide unparalleled continuity of care for children from 0-12 (or 16 years in the case of children with Additional Support Needs). Approximately 50% of the 32,000 children in childminding settings annually are in the pre-school age range (0-4) and 50% in the school-aged childcare age range (5-12/16). Parents using childminding services do so for many reasons and make an informed choice. This includes a home-based form of childcare, delivered in small groups and in which children of different ages learn and play together (which can benefit a number of aspects of development).

Childminders have extensive experience of providing nurturing care to babies and one year-olds which could play a key role in informing the development of the Scottish Government's offering for one year-olds which it has been recognised will be fundamentally different in nature to and not simply a roll down of existing ELC provision. Childminders also have extensive experience of providing school-aged childcare.

In simple terms, if our workforce continues to decrease this will have direct implications for the delivery of these new commitments.

Potential for Programme for Government, Education Reform and the National Care Service to Compound Problems for Childminding

We welcome the recommendation from Prof Ken Muir's report on Education Reform that a single/shared inspection for ELC should be delivered, the Scottish Government's acceptance of this recommendation and the Scottish Government's ongoing consultation on this^{51,52,53}. However, we also note that it was recommended to replace Education Scotland with not one, but two new bodies which feels contrary to reducing bureaucracy. We believe there is still potential for duplicative quality assurance to continue, as the need for a single/shared inspection was previously recommended and accepted seven years ago, but not delivered and a number of local authorities are continuing to develop their own local systems of quality assurance.

Childminding businesses cannot withstand duplicative inspection and quality assurance. This must be addressed as a matter of urgency and will require a commitment from all stakeholders (including the Scottish Government, Care Inspectorate, the bodies which replace Education Scotland, local authorities, local government representative bodies and provider organisations) to deliver change. In parallel, there is a pressing need to reduce the layering and paperwork which has built up during ELC expansion and is not sustainable nor proportionate to childminding.

To compound matters further, childminding businesses could face the prospect of duplicative quality assurance increasing further if it was to be decided that either or both of the Programme for Government commitments on one year-olds or school-aged childcare also require additional quality assurance, self-evaluation, inspection or qualifications.

Many childminders have mixed business models in which they may provide childcare to babies and one year-olds, pre-school childcare to 2-4 year-olds and school aged-childcare to 5-12/16 years. **It would not be credible or sustainable if they were expected to comply with different quality assurance, inspection and qualification requirements for each of these policy areas.**

The situation could be even worse for childminders who also currently deliver Community Childminding. This is a specialised early intervention and form of family support which has supported over 900 vulnerable families in Scotland in the last three years and for which demand is increasing.

Currently the proposals for the development of the National Care Service (NCS) do not include ELC, but they do include children's social care under which community childminding falls. The consultation on the NCS made clear that it is intended to develop standards, quality assurance and consider qualification requirements for all NCS providers. As such, this could layer on further requirements of community childminders making their roles unsustainable and lead to the loss of vital family support when demand is increasing.

SCMA has engaged constructively with the consultations on Education Reform and the NCS submitted detailed written evidence to these exercises warning of the further serious risks which these policy agendas present to the sustainability of childminding in Scotland^{54,55}. We have also advised the Scottish Government of the urgent need to review 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.

Graeme

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Scottish Childminding Association

August 2022



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We acknowledge the support of the Scottish Government through a CYPFEIF and ALEC Fund Grant.