

COVID-19, RESTRICTIONS ON BLENDED PLACEMENTS AND THE IMPACT ON THE CHILDMINDING WORKFORCE, CHILDREN, FAMILIES & PARENTAL CHOICE

Briefing Paper, July 2020

Introduction/context

Restrictions on blended childcare placements, due to current public health-informed Scottish Government COVID-19 operating guidance, have already started to have a significant adverse effect on childminding businesses in Scotland. Evidence obtained by SCMA would indicate that as a result of these restrictions childminders in Scotland have already lost over 1190 families from their settings and that if these restrictions were to continue and not be removed by the time schools return full-time from 11 August 2020 **only 19% of childminding businesses believe they will still be financially viable in 12 months' time**¹. As such this could have a devastating effect on childminding businesses and parental choice for childcare in Scotland.

What is Blended Care and Why is it so Important to Families?

Blended care involves a split placement either of childcare between more than one provider (i.e. between a nursery and a childminder) or between education and childcare involving a school and an out of school childcare setting (creche, after school club or childminder - before, after or before and after school). In both cases demand for blended placements is largely driven by working parents/carers' needs for flexible childcare. In the case of blended childcare (split between a nursery and childminder) this demand is also driven by informed choice from parents/carers who want their child/ren to experience both nursery (as preparation for attending primary school) and childminding (which provides a very nurturing and high-quality form of childcare in a home setting, with lower adult to child ratios - providing more one-to-one support, in which children of different ages can play and learn together and experience unparalleled continuity of care – from birth to 12 years old).

Currently, there are approximately 4500 childminders in Scotland (of whom 83% are members of SCMA) who provided childcare for over 32,000 children in Scotland within the last reported year². A recent large-scale survey undertaken by SCMA found that 46% of childminders in Scotland are involved in delivering some form of blended care with this number expected to increase to around 60% within the next 12 months³. There is also significant demand for blended placements in other Out of School Care settings (including breakfast clubs, after school clubs and creches – many operating within the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector), where the vast majority of care is provided on the basis of split placement between a school and a childcare setting. Over 53,000 children and their parents / carers rely heavily on this model of care and will also be adversely affected by restrictions on blended placements if these were to continue².

Understanding the Problem

When COVID-19 struck and it was announced that most schools and nurseries would require to close, initially all childminding settings in Scotland were allowed to remain open due to the smaller size of these settings and the reduced risk of transmitting infection. Then when we went into lockdown specific public health guidance was developed to enable local authority hubs, PVI settings and childminding settings to remain open to provide critical childcare for key workers and vulnerable children. This reduced capacity in all of these settings to reduce the risk of transmitting infection. In the case of childminding this restricted capacity to supporting no more than two families (excluding the childminder's own) at any one time. It is understood that between 700 and 1000 childminding settings remained open during lockdown to support the national response to COVID-19⁴.

To support our moving out of lockdown the Scottish Government developed a Route Map for Recovery with an accompanying framework for education and early learning and childcare^{5,6}. This framework has largely been based on public health principles of maintaining small group size (of no more than 6-8 children, depending on setting) and on minimising contact between these groups. As the small group model required was quite close to the existing childminding model, in which the majority of childminders have a maximum capacity of 6 children in their setting at any one time, all childminding settings were allowed to re-open in Phase 1 from 3 June 2020. During phases 1-3 of recovery, and in support of the public health principle of minimising contact between groups, blended placements have been significantly restricted and only allowed where absolutely necessary to support the policy priority of delivering critical childcare. This has been applied across COVID-19 operating guidance for childminding, larger early learning and childcare settings (including nurseries) and Out of School Care Settings^{7,8,9}.

These public health principles have also influenced much of the planning which went into how blended learning would have worked in schools after the summer when school pupils were initially expected to perhaps only have been able to attend school 1-2 days a week, due to the significantly reduced capacity arising from such a small group model, and learning at home on other days. However, this situation changed significantly when it was announced last month that it would now be possible to plan for the full-time return of schools from 11 August if we continue to make progress in suppressing the virus. This clarity of intent was welcomed by many to support parents/carers, schools and employers to plan ahead over the summer period. However, it was also clear that if schools were going to return fully, with many hundreds of pupils returning to school with classes operating at normal capacity, and at a time when it is expected many sectors will have re-opened and there will be much wider social mixing within the wider community outwith school, this would look quite different to the public health small group model on which current guidance for childcare settings and restrictions on blended placements are based.

SCMA has worked very closely and constructively with a range of stakeholders including the Scottish Government, Care Inspectorate and other organisations from across the childcare sector to contribute to recovery planning. We have very much supported the cautious and considered approach adopted by the Scottish Government which has enabled us to suppress the virus. In doing so we have all been led by the public health advice and none of us wish to risk the progress which has been made in suppressing the virus.

Wider Social & Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Childminding

However, in addition to considering the public health advice, as the risks reduce there is also an increasing need to take into account the economic and social impact of the virus on families and childcare providers. We are reaching a point where this must be given more recognition.

As the only national professional membership organisation in Scotland dedicated to supporting childminding we have remained open throughout COVID-19 with all of our staff working remotely and on full hours to support childminders during this challenging time. As a result of this we are acutely aware of the economic impact of COVID-19 on childminding businesses and the families they support and, in particular, of the risks to the future viability of childminding businesses in Scotland. Alongside others across the childcare sector we have been working to quantify and understand this. At the end of June we conducted two membership surveys – one based on those childminding settings which are currently open (it is understood that over 1800 / almost 40% settings are now open) and one based on those which are still closed. These surveys covered a number of areas including the impact of current guidance on operating costs and capacity, the impact of restrictions on blended care and the future viability of their businesses.

The survey results are stark, compelling and deeply worrying for anyone who cares about children, families, childcare and parental choice. They also provide a high response rate and powerful sample. The main findings included –

- **58% of childminders (open and closed) reported that current restrictions on blended care have already had a “significant negative effect” or “negative effect” on their businesses;** of those who are already open 1 in 3 do not know if they will be able to stay open and 64% report current restrictions in blended care as a major factor;
- **43% of childminders (open and closed) reported that families who they normally provide childcare for have either already left or indicated they will leave the childminding setting if restrictions on blended care were to continue;**
- **over 1190 families have already been lost from childminding settings (open or closed) due to current restrictions on blended care;**
- **68% of childminders (open and closed) believe their business will still be financially viable in 12 months if current restrictions on blended care are LIFTED BEFORE THE SCHOOLS GO BACK; however, if restrictions on blended care CONTINUE AFTER THE SCHOOLS GO BACK, only 19% of childminders (open and closed) believe their businesses will still be viable in 12 months’ time**
- **18% of childminders (open and closed) reported that this has already or could affect 75-100% of their monthly income and overall 37% of childminders (open and closed) reported that this has already or could effect over 50% of their monthly income.**

A summary of the full results in relation to blended care is provided in the table on the next page. Please note that in the table the results are presented separately by open and closed settings. Within the high-level summary above, these results have been combined.

SCMA COVID-19 Survey:

Your Childminding Business, Future Intentions and Financial Viability, July 2020

Separate surveys of open and closed childminding settings conducted 30 June – 3 July 2020. Combined response level: 1300 responses (approx. 34% of SCMA members; approx. 29% of childminding workforce in Scotland).

CHILD MindERS CURRENTLY OPEN	CHILD MindERS CURRENTLY CLOSED
Response rate: 906 responses (approx. 50% of childminding settings currently open in Scotland)	Response rate: 394 responses (approx. 11 % of childminding settings currently closed in Scotland)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 32% (n=292), or almost 1 in 3, of childminders do not know if they will be able to remain open; of these 64% (n=196) believe that current restrictions on blended care are contributing to this thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 27% (n=105) are planning to re-open during July 56% (n=220) are planning to re-open in August in time for schools and term-time nurseries re-opening on 11 August 2020 The main reason influence thinking about re-opening was reduced demand for childcare due to pre-existing families being on furlough, working from home or having lost their jobs - 61% (n=241); 23% (n=89) stated that current restrictions on blended care are also influencing their thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 59% (n=530) of childminders believe restrictions on blended care have already had a 'significant negative' or 'negative' effect on their business; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 61% (n=235) of childminders believe current restrictions on blended care have had a "significant negative" or "negative" effect on their business
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 44% (n=397) of childminders reported that families who they normally provide childcare for have either already left or indicated they will leave the childminding setting if restrictions on blended care were to continue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 42% (n=161) of childminders reported that families who they normally provide childcare for have either already left or indicated they will leave the childminding setting if restrictions on blended care were to continue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 27% (n=110) have already lost 1 family from their setting due to restrictions on blended care 57% (n=230) have already lost 2-3 families from their setting due to restrictions on blended care 10% (n=40) have already lost 4-5 families from their setting due to restrictions on blended care 6% (n=23) have already lost more than 5 families from their setting due to restrictions on blended care taking the lower value within each category above, this already equates to at least 845 families already having been lost from childminding settings which are currently open due to current restrictions on blended care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 29% (n=47) have already lost 1 family from their setting due to restrictions on blended care 54% (n=87) have already lost 2-3 families from their setting due to restrictions on blended care 10% (n=16) have already lost 4-5 families from their setting due to restrictions on blended care 7% (n=12) have already lost more than 5 families from their setting due to restrictions on blended care taking the lower value within each category above, this already equates to at least 345 families already having been lost from childminding settings which are currently closed due to current restrictions on blended care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> blended care as a percentage of monthly income: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> up to 25% of monthly income – 29% (n=213) 25-50% of monthly income - 27% (n=203) 50-75% of monthly income - 24% (n=179) 75-100% of monthly income – 20% (n=150) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> blended care as percentage of monthly income: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> up to 25% of monthly income - 22% (n=67) 25-50% of monthly income - 26% (n=81) 50-75% of monthly income - 22% (n=68) 75-100% of monthly income - 29% (n=90)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 74% (n=664) of childminders believe their business will still be financially viable in 12 months' time if current restrictions on blended care are LIFTED BEFORE THE SCHOOLS GO BACK Whereas only 20% (183) of childminders believe their business will still be financially viable in 12 months' time if current restrictions on blended care CONTINUE AFTER THE SCHOOLS GO BACK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 58% (n=226) of childminders believe their business will still be financially viable in 12 months' time if current restrictions on blended care are LIFTED BEFORE THE SCHOOLS GO BACK Whereas only 17% (n=66) of childminders believe their business will still be financially viable in 12 months' time if current restrictions on blended care CONTINUE AFTER THE SCHOOLS GO BACK

Impact on Childminding Workforce and Families

The childminding workforce was already under strain before the outbreak of COVID-19. The childminding workforce has decreased by 14% in the last 5 years². This trend had accelerated in parallel to local authority expansion in advance of the Scottish Government's commitment to deliver 1140 funded hours of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) for all three- and four-year olds and eligible two-year olds in Scotland by August 2020. Successive annual ELC Audits, undertaken by SCMA and commissioned by the Scottish Government, over the last 4-5 years had found very slow progress in many local authority areas including childminders in ELC. The most recent SCMA ELC Audit published in October 2019 found that only 12% of childminders in Scotland had been approved by local authorities to deliver funded hours for all three and four-year olds, and even less, (4%), were actually included in delivering funded hours during phased expansion; numbers were broadly comparable for eligible two-year olds.¹⁰ SCMA made a series of recommendations and the Scottish Government agreed to fund research into the trends within the childminding workforce, to be overseen collaboratively on a tripartite basis by the Scottish Government, Care Inspectorate and SCMA. Initial scoping work was due to commence when COVID-19 struck and this work has been delayed. Childminding numbers have continued to decline this year.

Childcare will play a very significant role in helping parents/carers get back to work and in supporting wider economic recovery from COVID-19. Our survey has found that if restrictions on blended placements continue after the schools go back **only 19% of childminding businesses (open or closed) believe they will still be financially viable in 12 months' time**. This would have a devastating effect on childminding businesses, childcare availability and parental choice. In human and numerical terms, if only 19% of childminding businesses were to remain viable, this would equate to over 3600 childminders going out of business and the loss of over 22,300 childcare places for families at a time when childcare will be vital in supporting economic recovery¹¹. Also, our survey found that those childminders who responded have already lost over 1190 families from their settings due to restrictions on blended care. The 1300 childminders who responded to our survey equates to approx. 50% of childminding settings which are currently open, 34% of SCMA members and 29% of all childminders in Scotland. This represents a large response and sample. If these losses were extrapolated to the full childminding workforce this could mean that over 4,100 families have already been lost from childminding settings due to current restrictions on blended care. This also does not include further losses which may be incurred over the summer. Such a significant reduction in the workforce would also have serious implications for the Scottish Government's expansion of ELC and the delivery of 1140 hours of funded childcare for parents in Scotland.

The latest COVID-19 operational guidance to be published, for out of school care settings (3 July 2020), has confirmed that restrictions on blended placements will continue during Phase 3 and that "the guidance on blended placements will be reviewed and updated by 30 July to ensure alignment with the guidance that will underpin the return to school"⁹. It is expected this will apply across Phase 3 guidance for all settings – childminding, nurseries and out of school care settings. For childminders, who have lost business and will continue to lose business during the summer, this does not provide confidence as it fails to clarify if the intent beyond 30 July 2020 is to remove these restrictions before the schools go back. Similarly, for parents / carers who are needing to make decisions now about what childcare they need to put in place to enable their return to work when the schools go back this does not provide confidence, as it fails to clarify if the intent is to remove these restrictions before the schools go back. As a result, parents / carers may have to source alternative childcare provision before then. SCMA continues to receive a high and increasing level of contact from childminders around Scotland who are extremely concerned about this and we are aware that the loss of families will only continue to increase throughout the summer in the absence of advance clarity about if restrictions on blended care will be lifted before the schools go back. As noted earlier, childminding provides very strong continuity of care in a nurturing environment. If families are forced to make new childcare arrangements this could be very unsettling for children and parents/carers, and create further change and transition.

Conclusion and Recommendation: Urgent Action Required

The findings of our surveys on the financial viability of childminding settings make stark reading. But they also present, at a national level, an opportunity to make an informed policy decision to prevent the rapid decline of the childminding workforce, and to maintain parental choice for childcare by removing all restrictions on blended placements before the schools go back. In considering the public health advice, the Scottish Government has already made an exception to support the policy priority of providing critical childcare for key workers and vulnerable children. The public health situation continues to evolve, schools will be returning full-time without restrictions on capacity in August and many sectors will be opening more widely over the summer and resulting in wider social mixing. As such, it would be difficult to see how restrictions on blended placements could be justified or maintained at that time. In parallel, the need for action on the wider social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on childminding is becoming more critical by the day.

The Scottish Government has shown strong leadership and advance clarity of intent by announcing last month that it is now possible to plan for the full-time return of schools from 11 August if we continue to make progress in suppressing the virus. This also provided all involved with 6-7 weeks' notice to plan for this.

We believe that similar leadership and advance clarity of intent is urgently required now for childcare with an advance, unequivocal commitment and statement of intent to remove all restrictions on blended placements (both those involving more than one childcare provider and involving schools and childminding) before the schools go back on 11 August 2020, if we continue to make progress in suppressing the virus. No less is required to maintain the childminding workforce and enable parents, childminders and other childcare providers to start planning now for when the schools go back.

Graeme McAlister
Chief Executive

July 2020

References

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2. Early Learning & Childcare Statistics 2018, Care Inspectorate, Sept 2019
3. #Tell SCMA, Childminding & You membership survey spring 2020 (unpublished), 1470 responses (38% response level)
4. During COVID-19 a range of surveys (daily, fortnightly, snapshot) have been undertaken by the Scottish Government, Care Inspectorate and SCMA. These have had variable response rates. The figure of 700-1000 is an approximation based on these returns.
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7. Coronavirus (COVID-19): childminder services guidance, Scottish Government, June 2020
8. Coronavirus (COVID-19): Phase 3 guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services, Scottish Government, June 2020
9. Coronavirus (COVID-19): Phase 3 guidance on reopening school age childcare services, Scottish Government, July 2020
10. Early Learning and Childcare Audit 2019, SCMA, October 2019
11. Based on an average of 6.2 children per childminding setting (see Ref 2 above).

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