



Scottish Childminding Association

## **More Than Numbers | Graeme McAlister, Chief Executive, SCMA**

### **Presentation to SCMA Annual Conference | 16 May 2026**

#### **Summary and Quotes**

##### **Introductory Update**

During his introduction Graeme highlighted a number of positives including:

- SCMA's increasing practice support for members and representative base (now 85% of the childminding workforce and increasing);
- progress with the Programme for Scotland's Childminding Future during which to date almost 600 candidates have commenced Induction, 157 new childminders have completed registration with the Care Inspectorate and established their businesses and a further 138 candidates have submitted their application to the Care Inspectorate (creating a potential 2000+ additional childminding spaces for families between them), with more continuing to come through behind. This has also seen partnering and recruitment undertaken in 31 local authority areas, with childminders in 17 local authorities also participating in retention pilots; and
- a new SCMA research partnership with Three Sisters Consultancy is underway, focusing on neurodiversity and inclusion in the childminding workforce.

##### **SCMA's Evolving Role**

Graeme noted that in recent years SCMA's role had evolved beyond that of a membership organisation, national Third Sector organisation and local service provider to also become a national delivery partner and increasingly operating at the interface between national policy, guidance and frameworks and local authorities to support the implementation of policy into practice. On this he said:

*"We're also dealing with multiple stakeholders who quite often have competing interests with different agendas on different subjects. It won't surprise you that this is quite a sensitive space in which to operate. It's quite politicised and we manage this as sensitively as we can, but there are times when it's necessary for us to act independently and to provide some constructive challenge when things aren't working as well as they should be doing."*

##### **Introduction to the Sector during 1140 Expansion (and first experience of the numbers)**

Graeme referred back to joining SCMA as Chief Executive in April 2019, to himself as a "newbie", "bright-eyed and bushy-tailed ... and possibly a little naive" at a time when ELC expansion and the increase in the statutory entitlement of funded ELC to 1140 hours was well underway and the main policy driver in childcare with stakeholder meetings dominating his diary.

He reflected, however, that:

*"... what I also found quite surprising was that, again this was maybe my naivety, is that it was genuinely about two to three months before children or what was best for them was actually mentioned in these stakeholder meetings. Now that's not an exaggeration and it's not a criticism. What it is an observation and reflection of where we all were at that time. It was such a massive policy ambition to double the statutory entitlement. How do we make it happen? How do we implement this? And it felt like it was about hitting the numbers. To me, it felt like a numbers game when I came in cold."*

### **Putting Children at the Heart of What We Do**

Graeme shared that since the expansion of 1140 hours SCMA had consulted and listened to their members and widened their own policy activities to span 0-12/16 years reflecting childminders' mixed business models. In parallel, SCMA has worked to increase wider awareness of the benefits of childminding for children, to support and "champion" parental choice and taken a lead on developing a sustainable childminding workforce to ensure capacity and childminding spaces for children and families:

*"We were aware that our workforce had been declining. Somebody had to take a lead and stabilise the workforce, so there was actually enough spaces for families around Scotland who wanted to use childminding services."*

He added that this considered approach had brought local authorities to SCMA for support and collaboration as they had also recognised after 1140 expansion (and the policy focus on two to four-year-olds) that they had a wider need for childcare spanning pre- and school-age childcare. Graeme added:

*"... we've been really pushing on school-age childcare, and we still continue to do that. As recently as last month in advance of the parliamentary elections we published our [Top 5 Priorities](#) for the different political parties to consider. Within that we've been really explicit that after school care shouldn't just be an afterthought. For many working parents it is essential."*

### **The Return of the Numbers**

Graeme highlighted a number of well-reported cases in which local authorities had decided to independently depart from following the principles of ELC:

- Edinburgh (2024): stopped cross-boundary placements and taking on new partner providers.
- Falkirk (2025): proposed only using partner providers for overflow once their own settings were full.
- West Lothian (2026): stopped supporting cross-boundary placements in partner provider settings.
- South Lanarkshire (2026): stopped supporting cross-boundary placements with West Lothian in partner provider settings.

He also explained local authorities' rationale behind these changes:

- ELC is only in guidance, not law, so doesn't have to be followed.
- Significant budgetary pressures.
- Spare capacity in local authority nurseries.

- Savings to be achieved by **removing XXX number of children** from **Provider A** (partner provider settings) and placing them in **Provider B** (local authority nurseries) also increasing local authority income.

## What About the Child? (and Parental Choice?)

Graeme explained:

***"What concerned me and others when we looked at this was - What has happened to the child? What has happened to parental choice? When we look at these reports and when we look at these proposals, they are based on numbers of children and almost generic transferable forms of childcare. But within that, what value (if any) is being attached to children's attachments, to children's relationships? It's only a year since we had Suzanne Zeedyk speak about this very subject, we've got Ben later this morning.***

***"Attachments and relationships permeate childminding and all that we do. They are massively important, but we don't see them being considered when people are looking at budgets. What about the basics? It's hugely important that children feel safe, happy and secure. Again, is that being considered? But also, what about parents' preference? Parents make informed choices. They know their children and make an informed choice about what form of childcare they want and believe is best for their child and that can't just automatically be transferred."***

Before adding:

***"Let me make this really, really clear that we absolutely understand the financial pressures local authorities are experiencing and we don't under-estimate that challenge, but if, at this moment in time, a local authority chooses to go down the path of stopping cross-boundary placements, stopping taking on partner providers, what they are doing is undermining ELC and parental choice. It's contrary to the founding principles of ELC. Funding Follows the Child ... it's not in these cases. Provider Neutrality - local authorities have got a responsibility to treat all providers equitably and not to prioritise their own nurseries ahead of other provision. **There's a Partnership Agreement between the Scottish Government and COSLA. It feels like that's been torn up.**"***

## Impact on Parents: Academic Research

To add some objectivity to the subject, Graeme then shared a high-level summary of some academic research on the subject which had just been published in April by the Centre for Public Policy, University of Glasgow, after being commissioned by Pregnant Then Screwed.<sup>1</sup> This provides an evaluation and case study of the impact of the policy change on cross-boundary placements in Edinburgh. Graeme noted that:

***"174 cross-boundary placements had been in place from nine other local authorities and that was at a cost of £1.2m a year. Clearly that's not sustainable for Edinburgh to absorb that within their budget. And 150 of these placements were in partner provider settings, so you could see where the impact was going to be if there was a change in policy."***

---

<sup>1</sup> Evaluating Cross-Boundary Childcare Provision in Scotland: insights from an Edinburgh case study, Claire MacRae, Hannah Salamon, Dan Fisher, Centre for Public Policy, University of Glasgow, April 2026 (commissioned by Pregnant Then Screwed).

Focusing on the main findings, Graeme said:

***"The results are really depressing. They should be of great concern to any of us or with an interest in childcare. What this found, and it won't surprise you, is that almost all of the respondents (88%) were female. Two thirds reported an increase in childcare costs. Half (46%) reported an increase in time taking their child to another childcare setting and picking them up, as this wasn't their setting of choice. And I find this absolutely horrific – 66% (two thirds) reported they had to change their working patterns or hours because of this. We're working nationally with the Scottish Government and others to support parents by reducing child poverty. If they're having to change their hours and give up work because of this we're pushing them into child poverty. We need to think seriously about what we're doing just now. And 61% had to rely on families and friends for help. This data is really alarming and should be of concern to us all."***

Looking forward, Graeme made it absolutely clear that this isn't just about Edinburgh, with whom SCMA has a good working relationship, and that we've already seen within the last couple of months two other local authorities follow suit and ***"there is a risk this is starting to spread like a contagion"***. He also spoke about the evidence coming through from this research of the disproportionate equalities impact upon women and partner providers.

In parallel, SCMA was aware of a secondary risk and impact in areas where SCMA is recruiting childminders:

***"We're currently recruiting in 31 local authority areas. So, what we're finding is in some areas the local authority is asking us to go out, recruit new childminders and help them to establish their business. But then the new childminders are saying that the local authority is curbing their business and ability to earn an income by placing restrictions on ELC. It's not joined up. It doesn't make sense. You've got policies and teams pushing and pulling against each other and it's getting really messy out there and again providers and children are getting caught in the middle. We really need to refocus on what we're doing. SCMA has previously warned that if this isn't addressed there is a real risk the wheels could come off funded ELC and that is something we continue to be deeply concerned about."***

### **Learning from Other Sectors**

Nearing the end of his presentation, Graeme spoke briefly about the need and opportunity to learn from other sectors. He noted the pressures which have been experienced in childcare including low value, low morale, workforce pressures and recruitment and retention issues and highlighted previous research which he had contributed to while working in health which had looked at how the NHS could learn from serious failings in care.

Common themes found in such failings had included poor leadership, defective culture, low morale, workforce pressures and shortages. While not suggesting these were directly comparable, this work had also found failings in basic care caused by 'compassion fatigue' attributed to these pressures reminding us that such pressures can lead to a reduction in the levels of care and of the need to remain caring and not just think of children as numbers.

### **All Forms of Childcare are Not the Same**

Graeme returned to his earlier comments on the mistake of viewing childcare as generic and provided two examples to illustrate this:

- a local authority nursery term-time place (9am – 3pm) cannot be seen as meeting the needs of a working parent using a private nursery all year round (9am – 6pm).
- childminding is a unique form of childcare delivered in a home in small groups, with low adult-to-child ratios (enabling a higher element of one-to-one care), with children of different ages (0-12/16 years) playing and learning together which can have additional benefits for development. Childminding also caters for children who may not be able to cope in a larger setting and childminding cannot be replicated by a nursery place. The unique nature of childminding as a form of childcare has also recently been recognised in the Quality Improvement Framework (September 2025) developed by the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland which includes, for the first time, childminding-specific quality assurance.

In closing, Graeme made a personal and professional plea to remember that children are more than numbers.

### **What Can Be Done to Ensure Local Authority Adherence to Funding Follows the Child?**

Responding to a question linked to his presentation, Graeme said:

*"It's difficult, because on the one hand some of the work we're doing with local authorities on recruitment is hugely positive. We have colleagues in local authorities who absolutely recognise the value of childminding, the difference it can make for families and want to support childminding. **The problem we've got at a national level is that Funding Follows the Child is in guidance, it's not in legislation and because there are so many financial pressures out there some people think it's an opportunity not to follow it. But this is one of the founding principles of ELC. It's parental choice, the funding has to follow the child.***

*"To my understanding the Scottish Government is absolutely committed to Funding Follows the Child. We've had meetings with the Minister and officials. They continue to meet with COSLA, but these discussions have been going on for two years. What we're not seeing is any progress. When we speak to childminders and other providers they're starting to lose confidence. They feel this needs to be taken more urgently and see more accountability, even a bit more leadership between these national and local bodies.*

*"We really need to get together and try to find a way through this. At the moment it is taking too long, and it really needs to be a priority of the new incoming Scottish Government and COSLA to find a constructive way through this."*



Scottish Childminding Association

[childminding.org](http://childminding.org)