



Island Childcare Networking & Learning Meeting

Thursday 4 December 2025, 10:30 to 12:00

1. Highlands & Islands Enterprise – update from Jacqueline McGuigan

Jacqueline provided an update on activity through the Highlands & Islands Regional Economic Partnership (HIREP), including its Childcare Sub-Group, which meets quarterly and includes representatives from all Local Authorities, SOSCN, SCMA, CALA, HIE, Scottish Government and, more recently, Bòrd na Gàidhlig. The group focuses on sharing challenges and good practice across the region. A number of **new childcare models** are currently being explored or piloted:

- **Barra:** HIE-funded research exploring childminding outwith a domestic setting, within a shared community space. While this model is not yet provided for in legislation, its potential is referenced in the Childcare Evidence Report.
- **North West Highlands:** Similar research undertaken last year, funded through the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP).
- **Tiree:** Exploration of 0–2 childcare provision, with a proposed model where the community trust provides a unit within school grounds and the Council operates the service and employs staff.
- **Moray:** A pilot shared with the Uist & Barra Childcare Forum, working with the local bus service to add stops enabling children to travel from primary school to an outdoor activity setting. This has enabled 16 additional children to access out-of-school care and supported parents to increase working hours.
- **North West Highlands:** Highland Council is piloting a supported childcare model in two communities with no existing ELC provision.
- **Skye:** Skye is experiencing a significant childcare crisis. CALA and HIE are working with the local HIE office to explore potential models and funding sources, including the SSE Highland Sustainability Fund.

Childcare Evidence Report

A formal response has been received from Natalie Don-Innes MSP, Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise. While not detailed, the response provides a welcome opportunity to work with civil servants to develop a package of proposals, post-election, addressing the resources and decisions required. Jacqueline will provide a fuller update following internal discussions and engagement with CALA and HIREP.

2. Care & Learning Alliance (CALA): update from Jaci Douglas

- **Single Care Model:** CALA is developing an integrated adult and childcare model in partnership with Highland Council's Reducing Poverty Working Group. An application has been submitted to the Child Poverty Accelerator Fund to pilot this approach in Ullapool and Strontian. The projects will be community-led and aim to demonstrate how access to flexible childcare supports reductions in child poverty.
- **Work Club Pilot:** CALA is working with the Strontian community to explore a "work club" model providing up to four hours per day where parents can work online or meet others. While not childcare, children will be supported in play sessions within the building, with parents remaining responsible for personal care needs. The pilot is expected to be tested early in the New Year.
- **Engagement with Scottish Government:** Jaci recently met with the Minister for Children and Young People, who was supportive of exploring different childcare models for rural and island areas and recognised the need for flexibility. Jaci also raised rural childcare at two whole-family support events with the First Minister, who similarly acknowledged the need to take a different approach.
- **School-Age Childcare Definition:** A Scottish Government consultation is expected next year on a new definition for school-age childcare. The current regulatory framework applies the same standards as daycare for babies, which can be inappropriate for older children. Jaci and Audrey Anderson (SOSCN) sit on the steering group and will notify the group when the consultation launches, encouraging strong rural and island participation.
- **Sustainable Rate Review:** CALA has provided feedback to the Scottish Government review of the sustainable rate for the 1140 funded hours, highlighting the importance of ensuring viability for providers operating with very small numbers of children.
- **Depository of Learning:** CALA and HIE are exploring how best to capture learning from emerging pilots and models, including what has worked and what has not, and make this accessible to communities.

Questions & Discussion

- **Shared Learning & Data:** discussed how best to gather examples and learning to create a depository and develop a toolkit and the value in revisiting and updating the data collected for the Child Care Evidence Report. **Agreed that a follow up discussion on this would be welcome – Jacqueline, Jaci and Kirsty to action.**
- **Tiree:** Dunvegan Community Trust is exploring childcare options and was interested to learn more about the model being developed in Tiree. Phyl, Tiree Community Trust, has been exploring options for 0-2 childcare provision for some time and the idea, which Argyll & Bute Council is considering will involve

the Trust providing a facility within the school grounds and the Council running the service. With help on costings and a local childcare survey from CALA, it became clear that if the Trust was to run it, it would be very difficult to make it affordable, it would duplicate management time and could create staffing difficulties across the two different services. There is still a lot of detail to be worked through such as utilities, building maintenance etc, and the Council is currently working out what it would cost to run the service alongside and under the same management umbrella as the existing school nursery. The Trust will also explore options to subsidise the service, if needed, potentially by running afterschool/summer activities. At the moment there is no 0-2 childcare options in Tiree and a number of families are really struggling to make a living. When combined with the ferry issues, higher cost of living, difficulty visiting family and friends on the mainland for support etc, it pushes people to leave.

- Jaci noted that **CALA can support communities** by running childcare costings and modelling options, including ratios, insurance, Care Inspectorate registration, consumables, fee income and hours of operation.

Contact: j.douglas@calachildcare.co.uk

3. North Ayrshire Council Childcare Project **Grace Hutchison, Policy Officer NAC**

Grace outlined North Ayrshire Council's work on depopulation, identifying childcare as a key lever for retaining and attracting residents. A successful application to the **Addressing Depopulation Action Plan** is enabling exploration of childcare solutions in rural and island communities, aligned with **community wealth building principles**.

Key points:

- The project is exploring **inclusive and democratic business models**, including cooperatives, to strengthen childcare provision and empower communities.
- A consultant is being appointed to undertake a feasibility study in **Garnock Valley** and the **Isle of Arran**.
- The project has benefited from a significant level of data captured by NAC and a childcare survey by Arran CVS.
- The study will capture case studies from Scotland and the wider UK and identify **legislative barriers** to rural and island childcare.
- The project runs until April and will produce a comprehensive report, with potential to develop a framework that other local authorities could replicate.
- Opportunities include promoting childcare as a positive career path and working with schools and youth forums on inclusive business models.
- **Arran CVS Childcare Survey:** Sheridan reported a strong response rate (25%) from a recent survey distributed via schools and social media. Findings confirmed that lack of childcare is driving out-migration, limiting employment and career progression, and placing significant strain on family life. The survey also identified strong demand for out-of-school care in some villages, though recruitment remains challenging due to qualification requirements for limited hours.

Questions & discussion

- **Childcare workforce:** Jaci highlighted that a recent SG map of qualification provision showed very limited access North of Perth, and she has met with Sandra McAllister at SG to discuss the access barriers to qualifications, training, mentoring, peer support etc. **Jaci will link Grace, Laura and Sheridan into that discussion to feed in their experience.**

4. Scottish Out of School Care Network (SOSCN)

Audrey Anderson, CEO

Audrey provided an overview of SOSCN's role supporting and advocating for over 1,000 school-age childcare services across Scotland.

Key updates included:

- **Legislative Change:** Development of a new framework and definition for school-age childcare represents a significant opportunity for recognition and investment in the sector.
- **Support for Services:** SOSCN provides toolkits, templates, policies, training workshops and support towards qualifications such as AQS.
- **Data Collection:** SOSCN gathers extensive data through member engagement. Recent surveys have highlighted workforce issues and significant variation in Local Authority letting charges, which can determine service viability.
- **Networking and Engagement:** Recent local networking events have been well attended. Two engagement events with Scottish Government are planned in the New Year. Members of the Island Childcare Working Group are welcome to attend.
- **Conference:** SOSCN Annual Conference – **19 March**, focusing on additional support needs.
- **New Framework & Nutrition Guidance:** SOSCN has raised concerns about inconsistencies in nutrition guidance where services operate in different premises, for example, where out of school activities are delivered within a school building. Assurance has been given that HMIE and Care Inspectorate inspections will not impact each other.

Questions & Discussion

- Jacqueline asked whether SOSCN could share data on the geographical distribution of members across the Highlands and Islands to help identify gaps in provision.
- Jacqueline also highlighted recent SSC workforce data which demonstrates a clear decline in the number of childcare businesses but an increased number of staff. **Jacqueline will share to the group.**

5. Islands Entrepreneurial Network

Naomi MacDonald, Islands Entrepreneurial Network Project Manager

Naomi outlined her new role, part of the TalEntEd programme supported by Robert Gordon University and funded through the Islands Growth Deal.

- Current coverage includes Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles, with aspirations to expand to all islands.
- A Mums in Business online course has been delivered, supporting 15 participants, two of whom have moved into full-time self-employment.
- While some participants were expected to consider childcare businesses, feedback indicated a preference for self-employment as a way to reduce reliance on external childcare.
- Upcoming programmes include a creative entrepreneurship programme and an over-60s programme in the New Year.

6. Scottish Government School Age Children Division Cameron Anson, Policy Team Leader School Age Childcare Division

Cameron outlined forthcoming **legislative changes** to create a distinct definition for school-age childcare within the Public Services Reform Act. Drivers include:

- Recognition of the fundamental differences between school-age childcare, and early learning and childcare. School age childcare has more focus on play and playwork rather than education.
- It is also distinct from a government policy perspective where its primary driver is around parental opportunities, employability, access to education etc which differs from ELC which is focused on the right of the child to education and care and provides a statutory offer through the 1140 funded hours.
- The need to create a route to enable a further review workforce qualifications and requirements, which is particularly challenging for sparsely populated communities.

A public consultation will begin early next year, preceded by two early engagement webinars with SOSCN on **10 and 17 December at 11am**. In-person engagement sessions, including rural and island communities, are also planned.

Cameron emphasised that childcare is increasingly viewed as an **enabler of community sustainability**.

7. General Updates & Discussion

- **Registration Delays:** Sheridan noted long Care Inspectorate registration times in Arran. Emily shared similar experiences in Uist, with a year-long process to establish out-of-school and holiday care.
- **Dunvegan:** Mali reported that Dunvegan Community Trust has purchased a building that could support childcare provision in future – **HIE and CALA could help develop a comprehensive childcare survey**.

8. Next steps & actions

- Kirsty to circulate minutes and arrange the next date

- Jaci and Jacqueline to keep the group updated on the Childcare Evidence Report and related developments.
- Follow up discussion to be arranged on depository and toolkit.
- Kirsty to follow up with Audrey regarding a further SOSCN meeting/workshop.
- Cameron and/or Audrey to share joining details for upcoming engagement events.