



Island Childcare Community-led Initiatives

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Participants

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Alison Young	Isle of Luing
Ceiteag MacDonald	Cothrom, South Uist
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Purpose

To connect island groups to share learning and experience, to better understand the challenges around childcare and to look for solutions that are already in place or could be put in place. The session will also feed into the design of the childcare session at the Scottish Rural & Island Parliament in November.

What's happening in the islands?

1. Ceiteag MacDonald, Cothrom Òg, South Uist

Cothrom Òg provide wrap-around Gaelic medium childcare. It has been running for 30 years and was originally set up by a group of Mums to provide a playgroup, It now caters

for children from the age of 3 months up to pre-school from 8am to 5pm as well as running breakfast and after school clubs. Flexible hours are offered to make sure it suits the needs of parents: <https://www.cothrom.net/cothromog.html>

Cothrom Òg is independently operated but works very closely with the council, delivering funded hours and getting good support from the Early Years team, relief staff and training.

Being independent enables it to offer over and above the funded hours and allows it to access funding to run additional activities and services such as after school and holiday clubs.

At the moment the core service is financially viable through the funded places with additional funding sought only to make improvements to the premises and equipment or to add new activities.

However, it is dependent on the number of children and this can fluctuate a lot and should it drop for any length of time it would leave the service at risk.

Other challenges include, staff recruitment and transport. With council budgets very stretched, transport has become less of a priority and although there could be space on the school bus, the contracts don't allow the flexibility to offer space for transport to after school activities.

2. Alyson MacGillivray, South Islay Development & Sonas Childcare

A few years ago in Islay, a group of Mums got together as there was no childcare. Initially they worked with the council to look for suitable premises but with no real progress approached SID. A sub-group of SID was set up with committee members of the Sonas Childcare group: <https://southislay.co.uk/the-sonas-childcare-charity-continues/>

SID's premises, Ramsay Hall, was felt to be a good option for a childcare facility, and development funding was secured for a feasibility study and business plan. There is currently only one child minder in the island and a community survey identified a huge need for childcare, highlighting the difficulties for parents returning to work as well as for businesses in recruiting staff.

If funding is secured the new facility would see the community hall renovated with improved services, potentially office space, as well as the childcare facility for children under 3 (aiming for up to 9 babies and 15 toddlers) with access to outdoor space on the new Port Ellen playing fields.

SID has worked with the Council and Care Inspectorate in the early design and feasibility work and has submitted a stage 1 application to the Regeneration Capital Grant Fund. Private funding through the distilleries in Islay will also be sought. It is hoped that building work will start in 2024.

As well as finding premises, challenges include staffing – there is no shortage of work in Islay due to the distilleries and the rate of pay is good which makes it difficult to attract people into jobs such as childcare where the pay can be fairly low. Transport is also an issue and needs to be factored in to childcare provision.

3. Mairi Gregg, Mull & Iona Community Trust

Recognising the need for childcare in Mull, MICT had explored childcare provision and raised the issues around it with the council and Scottish Government. Plans were developed for a nursery and funding sought from the Scottish Government, but this was allocated directly to the council and therefore used for council-run facilities already in place across the region.

MICT has since taken part in a pilot project as part of the Scottish Government “rural childcare provision, innovative models and the needs of agricultural families” research: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/challenges-rural-childcare-provision-innovative-models-needs-agricultural-families/>

The pilot aimed to find sustainable models for out of school childcare provision in rural areas. Initially planned as a 12-month project, delays to the funding meant, in practice, it was just 9 months.

Activity based breakfast, after school and holiday clubs were delivered successfully but some of the challenges included the difficulty in recruiting due to the short timescale, transport (even with space on the school bus, children could not be transported to the after school club as this was outwith the council transport contract); the cost of delivering the service versus the price that parents are able to pay.

MICT concluded that the best way forward in Mull would be for childcare provision within the school setting rather than a new dedicated building.

Questions & Discussion

Bressay: in Bressay the school which included the nursery was mothballed, then closed and sold. Transport to Lerwick is a big cost for parents and isn't currently co-ordinated for all age groups. For example, while high school pupils are collected from home, primary school pupils are picked up from a specified point and there is no provision at all for nursery and therefore although the government's free childcare is available, accessing it is pretty expensive. Bressay also struggles to make its case as a small island, with its challenges sometimes invisible due to data being lumped together with Lerwick.

Luing: the situation is similar in Luing with the school which included the nursery being mothballed and parents now having to travel to neighbouring Seil.

Tiree: Tiree Trust has conducted a childcare feasibility study to explore demand and look at different models and options. Similar issues to those discussed were found such as financial viability due to low and fluctuating numbers and the cost that parents can

afford to pay <https://www.tireetrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Tiree-Childcare-Feasibility-Study-Mar-2023-FINAL.pdf>

Financial viability: operating a service that is financially viable is far more challenging in a small island setting due to the small number of children. The cost of living is also higher than on the mainland and wages tend to be lower and finding a balance between affordability for parents and making childcare a well-paid attractive career is very difficult.

Government plans for the £12 per hour minimum wage while very welcome will require additional support. Passing the additional cost onto parents could create a further barrier to accessing the service as well as undermining viability.

Impact & Value: lack of childcare is a major barrier for parents returning to work in many island communities. It creates inequality of opportunity as well as in access to the governments free childcare and its impact is felt much wider than the child and parents alone.

For example, in Tiree the council has had to recruit agency staff for the care home due to being unable to recruit locally due to lack of childcare. While on the surface childcare may appear costly, if viewed holistically, it can lead to savings elsewhere. Wider still, there is an impact on volunteering with many grandparents out of the loop due to helping with childcare.

If success and support is based on numbers alone, islands will never do well. The measure needs to be on the broader real life impact and benefit that it delivers.

Staffing: childcare needs to be promoted and supported as a good career choice. While it is a very rewarding job, it is also hard work physically and emotionally and a huge responsibility and the current low wages are a major barrier to recruitment.

Topping up salaries, perhaps an uplift to reflect the unique circumstances in island/rural settings would be welcome.

Increased funding and promotion of modern apprenticeships and support for people to access the required training and qualifications. It was felt this should be targeted at older people as well as school leavers.

Transport: lack of transport provision is another barrier for parents in accessing childcare and there is a need for collaboration and co-ordination across council departments and with childcare providers and schools to find solutions.

Forward planning & joined-up thinking: would like to see more collaboration across councils and government departments as well as better forward planning. Mapping out the childcare situation and strategy for different island council areas and identifying and sharing good practice was suggested.

Next steps

- Kirsty to circulate the notes (all happy to share emails)
- Scottish Rural & Island Parliament – identify speakers and any other key points to raise
- Childcare group – volunteers identified, follow up to consider this a bit further
- Consider whether we could source funding to do an island childcare economic impact report.