



Accessing school age childcare in rural and island areas



AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND MARINE

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Executive Summary

What were we trying to find out?

The Scottish Government commissioned this research to explore the challenges of accessing and providing consistent and affordable school age childcare (for ages 4 to 14) in rural and island areas of Scotland. It builds on recent Scottish Government research and policy focused on childcare, employment, and economic development.

Our research explored the existing models of childcare in rural and island areas, the challenges parents face accessing childcare, and challenges providers face delivering childcare. This research also suggests opportunities to address these challenges.

What did we do?

The research comprised three main elements: desk research, surveys, and in-depth interviews. Surveys and interviews were conducted with parents and carers of school age children, and providers of school age childcare from six rural and island areas of Scotland - Argyll and Bute, Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway, Highland, Shetland Islands, and Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles).

What did we learn from parents?

- Many parents felt there were gaps in available school age childcare offered in rural and island areas. Gaps in wraparound care, school holiday care, and specialist services for children with additional support needs can all negatively impact parents' existing and potential employment.
- Many parents highlighted that opening times and booking requirements of some services did not align with their working hours and conditions. This creates challenges accessing childcare and maintaining employment.
- Cost of childcare was a barrier to many parents, and some are financially worse off working due to the cost of childcare. This has caused some parents to give up work.
- Limited transport options in rural and island areas were another barrier for many parents accessing childcare. This particularly affected those who work, those who have children with additional support needs, those who don't drive, and those who lack informal support networks.
- Informal childcare, particularly from family, was key to many parents' childcare arrangements. Some also supplemented this with a patchwork of other informal care (such as clubs). These arrangements are often precarious, and cause many parents stress.

What did we learn from providers?

- Many rural and island providers experience inconsistent levels of demand. This makes it hard to run financially viable services, and is leading some providers to adapt or limit their services to cope.
- Many providers rely on additional sources of funding to keep services open, as fees alone do not cover their running costs. Accessing this funding is challenging, and what is available can be limited or unsuitable for their needs. Childminders face additional challenges as they are usually unable to access funding.
- Support and community links are important to many providers, but several feel like this support is disappearing, especially from their local authority. This causes some providers to feel undervalued as important community services.
- A lot of providers experience high staff turnover rates, and have operational and financial challenges recruiting and training new staff.
- Several providers have operational and financial challenges around their facilities. Some struggle with the spaces available to them, while others are experiencing increases in rent and running costs.
- Limited public transport in rural and island areas, combined with the high cost of private transport, often poor weather, and the large distances needed to provide for dispersed communities, are all barriers to providers offering transport.
- Many providers feel unprepared and unsupported when providing care for children with additional support needs. Several also mentioned this has become more challenging due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

What do we recommend?

- Assist providers to offer more flexible models of provision, including flexible hours, booking and payment models, as well as exploring pop-up or travelling provision. Support could come in the form of advice and guidance, as well as the following two recommendations of finance and collaboration.
- Provide sustainable financial support for providers through subsidies from the local authority or subsidised arrangements with local businesses, and explore the expansion of funded places to include school age children and children under 3 years old.
- Encourage community collaboration through blended offer models, partnerships with other community services (such as employability services), and by increasing opportunities to share community learnings.

1. Introduction

Key points

This research explores the challenges of accessing and providing consistent and affordable school age childcare in rural and island areas of Scotland. It builds on recent Scottish Government research and policy focused on childcare, employment, and economic development.

The aim of this research project is to provide a holistic view of school age childcare (for ages 4 to 14) in rural and island areas of Scotland. To gain a deeper understanding of the topic, research questions focus on the current landscape of childcare in rural and island areas, challenges of parents in accessing school age childcare, and challenges providers face in delivering such services. Research also explores what opportunities exist to address these challenges, and outlines recommendations the Scottish Government can take forward.

1.1 Assessing school age childcare in rural and island areas

Scottish Government commissioned this research to explore how to address the challenges of providing consistent, affordable, school age childcare (SAC) in rural and island areas. This is in line with 2021 policy objectives from the Scottish Government to provide wraparound school age childcare across Scotland, meaning care before and after school throughout the year, as well as over school holidays.¹

Current and known challenges in accessing school age childcare for parents and carers mainly focus on lack of options and availability,² lack of flexibility in models of childcare,³ challenges around affordability and cost,⁴ inadequate public transport,⁵ lack of suitable facilities, low consistency in demand,⁶ and challenges recruiting, training and retaining staff.⁷

This report builds on recent Scottish Government research into school age childcare,⁸ out of school care,⁹ the provision of childcare within rural farming families,¹⁰ as well as research on statutory provision of childcare for 3 and 4 year

¹ Scottish Government 2021 'A Fairer, Greener Scotland: Programme for Government 2021-22'

² Scottish Government 2019 'Out of school care - draft framework: consultation analysis'

³ Scottish Government 2021 'Rural childcare provision, innovative models and the needs of agricultural families'

⁴ Scottish Government 2019 'Out of school care - draft framework: consultation analysis'

⁵ Scottish Government 2021 'School age childcare: progress report', p8

⁶ Ibid, p38

⁷ Scottish Government 2019 'Out of school care - draft framework: consultation analysis'

⁸ Scottish Government 2021 'School age childcare: progress report'

⁹ Scottish Government 2019 'Out of school care - draft framework: consultation analysis'

¹⁰ Scottish Government 2021 'Rural childcare provision, innovative models and the needs of agricultural families'

olds.¹¹ It also develops insights from annual Care Inspectorate data,¹² and from ongoing pilots for flexible childcare.¹³ Compared to other research, this project takes a more specific qualitative look at provision for school age childcare, and expands on insights around the specific challenges of accessing and providing childcare in rural and island areas.

1.2 Background and policy context

There have been several policy commitments made in recent years by the Scottish Government relating to the provision of school age childcare.

In the 2021 Programme for Government, the Scottish Government stated a commitment to building a system of wraparound school age childcare before and after school, and during the holidays where those on the lowest incomes will pay nothing.¹⁴ In the same year, the Scottish Government expanded its funded early learning and childcare (ELC) support for all 3 and 4 year olds in Scotland, and eligible 2 year olds. This expansion entitles parents to 1,140 hours of funded childcare per year,¹⁵ and has had a high uptake, increasing the number of children accessing funded childcare places, as well as impacting demand on local authority, voluntary, and private providers.¹⁶ This current research addresses some of the wider impacts this has had on childcare providers.

As part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge 2022/2023 to 2025/2026,¹⁷ the Scottish Government committed to providing the same educational opportunities for children and young people living on Scotland's islands as those living in mainland Scotland. As this commitment includes childcare provision, this current research provides insights into the barriers to providing equal childcare provision in island areas.

In acknowledgment that 'a fully-functioning childcare sector is a pivotal part of Scotland's national economic infrastructure',¹⁸ the Scottish Government has included, in the National Strategy for Economic Transformation published in 2022, a commitment to develop wraparound childcare and make it accessible to families on the lowest incomes.

¹¹ Scottish Government 2017 'A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland'

¹² Care Inspectorate statistics webpage: www.careinspectorate.com/index.php/statistics-and-analysis

¹³ Scottish Government 2021 'School age childcare: progress report'

¹⁴ Scottish Government 2021 'A Fairer, Greener Scotland: Programme for Government 2021-22'

¹⁵ Scottish Government website on Early Education and care: <https://www.gov.scot/policies/early-education-and-care/early-learning-and-childcare/>

¹⁶ Scottish Government 2022 'Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Delivery Progress Report',

¹⁷ Scottish Government 2022 'Scottish Attainment Challenge - 2022 to 2023 – 2025 to 2026: fairer Scotland duty assessment'

¹⁸ Scottish Government 2022 'Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation', p43

In addition to these childcare-centred policies and economic strategy, the Scottish Government is committed to reducing the gap between male and female full-time hourly earnings through the National Performance Framework.¹⁹ As ‘availability of high quality, affordable, and flexible childcare is a central factor in enabling women to participate fully in the labour market’,²⁰ investigating challenges to accessing and providing childcare is a key approach to address and achieve this.

Aside from government policy, rural and island areas of Scotland have, like the rest of the country, been heavily impacted by social and economic factors caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.²¹ This continues to affect childcare provision in rural and island areas, which we discuss in our findings chapters.

In this context, this research project explores models of, challenges to, and potential opportunities for childcare in rural and island areas. This is detailed below.

1.3 Research aim and research questions

The aim of this research project is to provide a holistic view of school age childcare (for ages 4 to 14) in rural and island areas in Scotland, addressing the following research questions:

- What models of childcare provision, formal and informal, exist in rural and island areas of Scotland, and how do they differ across regions?
- What are the challenges for providing school age childcare in rural areas?
- What are the challenges for accessing school age childcare in rural and island areas?
- What are the drivers behind families’ choice of school age childcare, including informal care?
- How might challenges faced by rural and island childcare providers be addressed?
- What opportunities exist to help sustain and support these businesses and organisations throughout the year, including their ability to provide wraparound provision?
- What can be learned from existing pilot projects and research into rural childcare providers?
- Where could future pilot projects be established, and what model would these pilots follow?

The research was conducted by Snook. The research was overseen by a Research Advisory Group.

¹⁹ National Performance Framework website: <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/>

²⁰ Scottish Government 2019 ‘A fairer Scotland for women: gender pay gap action plan’, p11

²¹ National Performance Framework Indicator on Scotland’s Wellbeing: <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/scotlands-wellbeing-impact-covid-19>

2. Methodology

Key points

The research findings were primarily sourced from in-depth interviews with parents/carers and providers from six rural and island areas of Scotland - Argyll and Bute, Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway, Highland, Shetland Islands, and Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles). These were complemented with additional surveys and desk research.

Thematic analysis was carried out to analyse data. Research was conducted in line with the Ethics Guidance for Scottish Government Social Researchers.

The main challenges were in recruitment, and the limitation of face-to-face research which was not possible due to ongoing Coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions. The research was also limited in fully answering some of the research questions.

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this research was to develop a deep understanding of:

- the challenges parents face accessing school age childcare in rural and island areas of Scotland, and
- the challenges that school age childcare providers face, and the opportunities that exist, when providing services in rural and island areas of Scotland.

To answer our research questions (see section 1.3) and understand the topic in detail, we used a qualitative research methodology.

2.2 Overview of the research design

The research involved a mix of primary and secondary research techniques, and comprised three main elements:

1. A Rapid Evidence Assessment/desk research to assess existing data in Scotland/the UK, and interviews with subject matter experts.
2. Two online surveys of the targeted participant groups (parents and carers, and school age childcare providers). The surveys aimed to identify emerging themes and trends to shape the direction of our interviews, and allowed us to gather a wider range of experiences to strengthen our findings.
3. Primary qualitative research through in-depth interviews with targeted participant groups. The interviews aimed to gain an understanding of the key issues as perceived by parents/carers and childcare providers in rural and island areas of Scotland.

Sampling of participants for surveys and interviews is explained in section 2.2.3.

Our research method uses techniques from the grounded theory approach. This means that we develop all the conclusions from our research findings. This is an inductive reasoning process that involves using evidence and patterns in data to make broad conclusions.

2.2.1 Desk research and secondary data

The aim of the desk research was to inform the topic guide and to complement and validate our findings from interviews. Evidence collected also helped us answer the following research questions:

- What models of childcare provision, formal and informal, exist in rural and island areas of Scotland, and how do they differ across regions?
- What can be learned from existing pilot projects and research into rural and island childcare providers?

The evidence encompasses studies from academic research, government reports and grey literature. This includes national, as well as international sources. A full reference list is included at the end of the report.

We developed survey and interview questions after reviewing existing research and secondary data. This included consultations and reports. Findings from secondary data were also used throughout our analysis to complement and validate our findings from interviews.

2.2.2 Subject matter interviews

We conducted a total of 15 online interviews with subject matter experts. Interviewees included Education Scotland regional attainment advisors, representatives from networks, and other associations.

This initial step was key to understanding the context of the sector and of rural and island settings, helping frame questions for in-depth interviews.

2.2.3 Recruitment and sampling

To address the research aims above, recruitment for surveys and interviews was targeted at two groups:

- parents or carers of a child or children aged from 4 to 14 years, living in rural and island areas, and
- school age childcare service providers for children aged from 4 to 14 years, providing the service in rural and island areas.

Data collection was confined to parents/carers and school age childcare service providers in rural Scotland. Research took place in six defined local authorities of Scotland: Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway, Highland, Shetland, and Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles).

Locations were chosen to reach participants from a cross-section of demographics and spread of communities across rural and island areas of Scotland. The local

authorities represent a range of rurality based on categories three to six on the Scottish Government's six-fold Urban Rural Classification.²² See Tables 3 and 4 for a breakdown of participant numbers in each local authority.

The aim in qualitative research is not to achieve a sample that is statistically representative of the wider population, but to include a range of participants in different circumstances to identify as much diversity of experience as possible. Participants invited for interviews were recruited primarily through the online surveys, which acted as a recruitment tool.

Table 1 - Key characteristics of parents recruited

Criteria	Sub-category	Number of interviews
Age of children	0-3	2
	4-8	8
	9-13	9
	14+	3
Work status (5 not known)	Full time	2
	Part time	3
	Education / training	1
	Not working (unpaid carer)	1
Rurality (3 not known)	Remote small town	1
	Accessible rural	2
	Remote rural	6
Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) (8 not known)	SIMD 1 (most deprived)	1
	SIMD 3	3
	SIMD 5 (least deprived)	1
From an ethnic minority group	Yes	1
Has a disability	Yes	1
Single Parent	Yes	3
Child with additional support needs	Yes	5

²² The Scottish Government's six-fold Urban Rural Classification is described on the Scottish website at: www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-urban-rural-classification-2016/pages/2/

Table 2 - Key characteristics of providers recruited

Criteria	Sub-category	Number of interviews
Age range of children they care for (3 not known)	Only school age	1
	School age and pre-school	8
Number of children they care for across a week (1 not known)	Up to 15	5
	30-40	4
	40+	2
Rurality (2 not known)	Remote small town	1
	Accessible rural	2
	Remote rural	10
Providing services for children with additional support needs	Yes	8
Provide services in Gaelic	Yes	3
Focus on outdoor learning	Yes	5

2.2.4 Surveys

The aim of the surveys was to:

- recruit and screen potential interview participants, and ensure wider participation from a diverse pool of community respondents, and
- identify emerging themes and trends that would then inform the framing of interview questions.

In addition the survey results supported evidence from findings, addressing the following research questions:

- What models of childcare provision, formal and informal, exist in rural and island areas of Scotland, and how do they differ across regions?
- What are the challenges for providing school age childcare in rural areas?
- What are the challenges for accessing school age childcare in rural and island areas, including what are the drivers behind families' choice of school age childcare as well as informal care?

Two online surveys were conducted, one for parents or carers of school age children and one for school age childcare providers. Survey and research invites were distributed via email and social media using Scottish childcare networks, local authorities, local authority schools and third sector organisations.

Questions covered demographics of families living in rural and island areas, drivers behind childcare choices, and core challenges, opportunities and good practice

from childcare providers. The full questionnaires can be found in section 4 of our technical report.

Both surveys were open for four weeks between March and April 2022. The survey for parents or carers resulted in 878 completed surveys. The survey for childcare providers resulted in 72 completed surveys. The breakdown of the geographic spread of the survey responses can be found in Tables 3 and 4.

The findings from this survey are designed to support our qualitative research findings only, and do not provide a representative sample. Therefore, data from the surveys do not represent the state of school age childcare in rural and island areas of Scotland.

Surveys were hosted on Smartsurvey and were available in English and Gaelic. To ensure accessibility, we asked survey participants if they would rather answer the survey over a phone or online call.

2.2.5 Interviews

In-depth qualitative interviews provide the deep insight and level of detail needed to understand the reality and day-to-day experience of the user groups.

A total of 27 interviews were conducted between mid-April and mid-May 2022. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach to ensure we engaged with parents or carers, as well as school age childcare providers, from a variety of contexts and geographies. This meant that participants were purposefully chosen to represent the following characteristics:

Parents/carers

- Location - across the six defined research locations.
- Priority family types - lone parent families, larger families (3+ children), families with a younger mother (under 25), adults or children with additional support needs, minority ethnic families.
- Age of child(ren) - 4 to 14 years old.
- Parental employment status - full time employment, part time employment, student, full time carer, searching for employment.

Childcare providers

- Location - across the six defined research locations.
- Type of provision - childminders, local authority-run childcare, private childcare, charitable organisations.
- Additional provisions - those that provide childcare for children with additional support needs, outdoor learning and Gaelic medium education.
- Role of person interviewed - manager, practitioner and chair member.

Interviewees were recruited primarily via the surveys. To meet some of the criteria set out above, researchers actively recruited three participants from outside of the survey.

Table 3. Distribution of parents by local authority

Area	Interviews	Survey
Aberdeenshire	1	29
Argyll & Bute	2	178
Dumfries & Galloway	2	176
Highland	1	208
Shetland	3	142
Na h-Eileanan Siar	3	120
Other/did not answer	0	25
Total	12	878

Table 4. Distribution of providers by local authority

Area	Interviews	Survey
Aberdeenshire	2	19
Argyll & Bute	2	8
Dumfries & Galloway	2	13
Highland	4	25
Shetland	1	2
Na h-Eileanan Siar	3	1
Other/did not answer	1	4
Total	15	72

In parents/carers interviews, we asked questions to explore the needs and interests of families, digging deeper into the overall challenges of accessing childcare in rural and island areas. Service providers were asked questions to explore the practicalities of school age childcare provision, including digging deeper into the operational challenges of managing fluctuating demand in rural and island areas. See section 3 of the technical report for discussion guides.

Interviews were done by video conferencing or phone call, depending on the preferences and conditions of interviewees. To ensure accessibility, participants were asked if they had any particular needs or requirements. In addition, parents and carers received shopping vouchers as incentives. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour.

2.3 Data analysis

We used thematic analysis techniques to identify patterns and themes in the data collected across surveys and interviews. Research findings from the interviews were complemented with data from the surveys and secondary data sources. This helped to strengthen and validate the conclusions from interview findings and insights. Initial findings and insights were presented to the Research Advisory Group to agree key findings and priority areas to develop recommendations.

2.4 Ethics

This research was conducted in line with the Ethics Guidance for Scottish Government Social Researchers. Participation in surveys and interviews was based on voluntary participation, confidentiality and informed consent. Privacy notices, which offered reassurances about anonymity, were provided to each participant prior to their engagement (see section 8 of the technical report). Written consent was obtained from all participants. In addition, verbal consent was obtained from interviewees prior to recording. All data was handled in line with UK data protection. Data collected was securely stored and anonymised for a specified period of time.

2.5 Challenges and limitations of the research

The ongoing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic precluded the possibility of face-to-face research at the time this study was conducted. This limited the research methods that could be implemented (for example workshops to include a wider group of parents in the area), and thereby the richness of data gathered.

Recruiting providers for interviews, in particular childminders, proved to be a challenge. However, childminders provided the majority of responses in the online survey.

Direct access to those who have run pilots in Scotland was not possible in some cases. As such, we were partially limited in the extent to which we could answer the research question ‘What can be learned from existing pilot projects and research into rural and island childcare providers?’ Nonetheless, this question is partially answered by the collected online evidence and an interview with one provider.

In addition, scoping of future pilots exceeded the capacity of this research, limiting the answer to the research question ‘Where could future pilot projects be established, and what models could these pilots follow?’. Although providers and parents from a range of communities across the six local authorities participated, none came from the same community, thereby limiting our ability to single out communities with significant characteristics beneficial to the running of a pilot.

In the conclusion and recommendations chapter we cover different models and initiatives that can be explored to address the challenges of accessing and providing childcare. However, further work is needed with communities to identify tailored solutions that would work best for them.

3. Overview of childcare models in rural and island areas

Key points

Eight models of childcare were identified within the six rural and island areas where research took place. In rural and island areas there is crossover between these types of services provided, as providers adapt to changing community needs. However, there are key differences around their capacities, available hours, and facilities.

Formal models include day care centres, after school care, breakfast clubs, school holiday care, childminders, and specialist additional support needs services. These are more likely to have longer opening hours, larger capacities, and be run on school sites. Informal models, clubs and activities, and arrangements with family and friends such as act may have shorter hours, or run on fewer days. Some families did not use childcare at all.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is a brief overview of childcare in rural and island areas. We outline the different models of childcare and their characteristics based on findings from desk research, interviews and surveys.

3.2 Models of childcare within rural and island areas

School age childcare refers to care provided outside school hours, including before and after school during term time, and care provided during the school holidays. All school age childcare used by families in Scotland falls into two categories: formal and informal.

Formal school age childcare includes settings which are registered and regulated by the Care Inspectorate. Types of formal school age childcare include:

- Childminders
- After school care
- Breakfast clubs
- Holiday club/playscheme

While childminding services are privately run, school age childcare services and holiday playschemes are operated by a mixture of private, local authority, and voluntary/not for profit providers.²³

²³ Care Inspectorate 2020 'Early Learning and Childcare Statistics Supporting Data Tables', Table 13

Additionally, some childcare providers mainly aimed at younger children may also offer school age childcare in addition to their main area of care.²⁴ These can include:

- Children and family centres
- Crèches
- Nurseries
- Playgroups

Informal school age childcare refers to unregulated settings. These types are not registered with the Care Inspectorate, and include:

- Childcare agreements with family, friends, and neighbours.
- Extra-curricular groups and clubs whose main purpose is not childcare (examples include sports clubs, music lessons, or youth clubs)

Through this research, we identified eight models of childcare provision in rural and island areas of Scotland. Six fall under formal models of childcare (day care, after school care, breakfast clubs, school holiday care, childminders, and specialist services for children with additional support needs), and two are informal (club activities, and friends and family members).

3.2.1 Formal Childcare

Day care/ All-day care/ Childcare centres

Day care services run all day wraparound care based on local need and demand. Many services open before school starts (between 7:30 and 8:00am) and close after school finishes (between 5:00 and 6:00pm). Many offer flexible or 'ad hoc' booking, but also cater for families with regular patterns.

These services are registered for both early learning and childcare (ELC) and school age childcare (SAC), and cater for children from birth up to age 16. Demand is highest among those aged between 3 and 5, and drops off considerably at age 12. These services generally have higher capacities than other models.

Many rent facilities from their local authority, but some have arrangements to use facilities for free. Some also offer pick-up from local schools and nurseries (by bus, walking, or taxi). For example, providers in Argyll and Bute and Aberdeenshire were based near to, or share sites with, local primary schools.

Day care providers offer a range of activities which include arts and crafts, music, cooking, engagement with the wider community, use of community facilities (for example, local swimming pools), and outdoor activities.

²⁴ Care Inspectorate 2020 'Early Learning and Childcare Statistics Supporting Data Tables', Tables 9/9b

After school care

After school care runs on weekdays during term time, and typically begins as school finishes (around 3:15 to 3:30pm), until around 5:00 to 6:00pm. Providers see a mixture of regular and 'ad hoc' users and, to make this feasible, some have introduced contracts with a minimum number of hours per week.

Services generally offer care to primary school aged children between 5 and 12 years old, however some cater for those aged 3 to 16 (though demand usually drops off around age 10).

After school care providers in rural and island areas may be based within school sites or community facilities (such as village halls, or community centres), and their location is often dependent on who they are run by. Services provided by the local authority are often based in schools, while those run by charities or the community are more generally based in community venues. Providers based off school premises offer pick-up from school (majority by walking).

Many services provide food and a snack. After school care has a big emphasis on child-led activities, offering free play, arts and crafts, outdoor play (including gardening and outdoor toys), and sensory play. Additionally, providers in Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles) offer activities in Gaelic.

Capacity varies by area; for example, services in Argyll and Bute had 16 to 20 children per day, while in Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles) one service we spoke to only had four children per day.

Additionally, in rural and island areas of Scotland, some after school care services offer totally outdoor provision. These providers are typically based in local woodland, usually with access to local facilities in case of bad weather. Alongside more usual services, like providing pick-up from school, they also offer outdoor-based activities such as litter picking, foraging, climbing, bush craft and fire pit activities. Many also have purpose built outdoor shelters and workshops.

Breakfast clubs

Breakfast clubs are often run by after school care providers, and usually provide food from 8:00am until school begins. Most are based on school sites.

The breakfast clubs we found tended not to operate on a daily basis (some running only one morning a week). Some parents mention that breakfast clubs would be beneficial if they operated daily and started earlier, to align with their working schedule and enable them to drop off their children before work.

School holiday care

Much holiday childcare in rural and island areas is run by after school care providers and varies greatly in the consistency of what is on offer. Many only offer services during the summer holidays (when there is more demand), although some also run during half term holidays (Easter and October). Some run full day

provision, while others run much more limited hours (for example, three hours per day).

Holiday care providers offer many of the same options - such as arts & crafts and cooking - as other term time providers. However, they are also more likely to offer different activities such as trips to local facilities (for example, museums), sports days, and external organisations running activities.

Holiday clubs in Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles) and other areas may also offer Gaelic provision, including Fèisean nan Gàidheal and Spòrs Gàidhlig which operate across Scotland.

Childminders

Childminders in rural and island areas offer all day care to children from birth to age 16 (with less demand from age 12). Starting times tend to be between 7:30 and 8:00am, with finishing times more varied (between 4:00 and 6:00pm) depending on flexibility needs and individual childminders and areas.

Many childminders have space in their house or garden dedicated to providing childcare, and activities are very varied. Many offer pick-up from school and nursery, take children on trips to local outdoor spaces (including local woodland, parks, and beaches), do cooking and gardening, provide food, and offer arts & crafts as well as outdoor activities (e.g. climbing, paddling, and den building).

Some have also established good relationships with other local childminders to offer different experiences by grouping resources.

Specialist services for children with additional support needs

For children with additional support needs (ASN), some rural and island areas have specialist services run by the local authority or the third sector. These are held in school halls and playing fields, specialist ASN schools, and community facilities including community halls. Services offer a range of activities, including video games, sports, outdoor activities, and soft play.

Service provision varies according to the operator. You can find specialist school provision opening times normally offered from 9:30am to 2:30pm Monday to Friday. Childcare for school age children with ASN will be provided by third sector services that may only run sessions for a couple of hours once or twice a week. Local authorities cover the cost of after school care for those with ASN where identified in a couple of the areas.

Food provision in formal school age childcare

Providers (in particular childminders, daycare centers, after school care and breakfast clubs) provide snacks for children. Preparation of meals vary: some prepare food themselves whilst others purchase from local suppliers. A few after school care providers collect lunches from their local primary school.

3.2.2 Informal Childcare

Many parents in rural and island areas use other, informal, options to manage their childcare needs, such as clubs or family and friends.

Club activities for children

Clubs are a common informal childcare option that run throughout the year. These usually involve short activities of about an hour, but sometimes up to an hour and a half.

Activities are generally provided by local authority sports and leisure centres or local schools, with sports being the most common type of club offered by both providers. Football, athletics and dance are among the most common sports, but parents also mentioned gymnastics, swimming, climbing, and cheerleading. Schools may also offer more creative or academically focused activities, such as homework clubs or music activities.

Some communities also have youth clubs, including those with an outdoor focus where children do bug/scavenger hunts, den building, and other woodland activities. Government bodies, such as the Ranger Service, may also offer activities.

The availability of clubs varies greatly both by area and by the age groups served.



Family and friends

Many parents in rural and island areas use family and friends for childcare - either exclusively or in addition to other available options. This is most often a

grandparent, but may be another family member such as an older sibling, or a parent who lives outside the household. Others rely on friends to help with childcare to different degrees. This might be full time or just with school pick-ups, for example.

No childcare

In many instances, parents living in rural and island areas do not use childcare at all. For some parents we interviewed, this is so they could spend more time with their children. However, for others, no options are available in their area or are of interest to their child. Some do not need childcare as they are able to work flexibly to accommodate their childcare needs, currently work in childcare themselves or do not work. A small number are happy to leave older children alone for short periods of time.

3.3 Crossover between models of childcare

As providers adapt to their community needs there can be a degree of crossover between different models of childcare provision. For example, after school care providers may extend to provide breakfast clubs or holiday care, or childminders experiencing high demand may evolve into a daycare centre to better meet the needs of their community. Care Inspectorate data from 2020 also shows this pattern, where all types of childcare providers offered some additional type of services to their main offering. This was especially common among school age childcare providers who offer the most additional services, with the majority of these being breakfast clubs and holiday playschemes.²⁵

There are two main similarities across all models of childcare. The majority of providers interviewed focus on offering child-led activities and, particularly given the natural resources available in rural and island areas, many focus on being outdoors.

3.4 Differences between models of childcare

The key differences between the models is around their opening times, capacities and locations. For example, formal models are more likely to have longer opening hours, larger capacities, and be based on school sites. In comparison, while childminders may also have long opening hours, they have smaller capacities and are mostly based out of their own homes. Informal activity clubs may have much shorter hours, and run on fewer days of the week.

Another difference is how providers see themselves. Informal providers are less likely to view or describe themselves as childcare. This can influence what kind of services they provide (frequency of provision, how many hours, and what kind of activities they offer), and how they see their role in the community.

²⁵ Care Inspectorate 2020 'Early Learning and Childcare Statistics Supporting Data Tables', Table 17

4. Research findings: Insights from parents

Key points

Parents/carers in rural and island areas face several key challenges – availability, cost, transport, and lack of specialist services – in accessing affordable and consistent school age childcare.

This negatively impacts their employment opportunities, causes them to rely on precarious informal arrangements, and creates feelings of guilt and frustration.

To tackle these challenges, it is necessary to address parents' key needs of: flexible childcare, school holiday provision, childcare for children with additional support needs, and childcare for children under 3 years old.

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter we outline the key challenges and needs of parents/carers accessing school age childcare in rural and island areas. Though many of these findings are unique to rural and island areas, some do mirror challenges faced in urban areas.

4.2 Challenges accessing school age childcare

This section explores the primary challenges of accessing school age childcare highlighted by parents in interviews and through the parents' survey.

4.2.1 Gaps in availability

Many parents we spoke to feel there are gaps in available school age childcare offered in rural and island areas. Though this was raised about all types of providers and models, the most common gaps parents highlighted were after school clubs, breakfast clubs, and holiday care.

The most common concerns parents raised around availability were:

1. Opening times and booking models can be inflexible, and often do not fit around parents' work or education.
2. There are no formal wraparound or holiday services in their area, and informal options are too inconsistent to rely on.
3. Childcare options for their younger children are limited, and this impacts access to care for their school age children.

Opening times and flexibility

Parents and carers in rural and island areas are often employed on a seasonal basis, do shift work, and have unreliable or inconsistent schedules. Many parents we spoke to highlighted that the opening times and booking requirements of many

services do not align with such working hours and conditions. This was particularly true for parents in Shetland and Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles).

As parents in these situations cannot provide advance notice, or guarantee consistent booking, they often have to pay for childcare they do not use, or find alternative arrangements.

“I’ve used the nursery, and it was a bit stricter about what you could and couldn’t book, a minimum of three sessions a week - and I only worked two days a week. I didn’t need the third session, which meant that I had to work to pay for my childcare. I was worse off working, using a private nursery.” Provider, PRO10

Wraparound care

In areas where they have some provision, but lack wraparound care (such as breakfast and after school clubs), parents still face challenges.

Gaps between the end of school and the start of other activities leave gaps in provision. This can prevent parents fully participating in employment.

To cope with these gaps, some parents we spoke to leave work early to transport their children between school and activities, while others look after their children at their place of work. This is more common in areas where parents rely on informal out of school care provided by clubs and leisure centres.

School holiday care

The majority of parents we spoke to said there are little to no options for school age childcare during the school holidays in their area, and over half of parents who responded to the survey said school holiday provision would increase the accessibility of childcare.

In many areas, the only options are informal sport and outdoor activities, often provided by charities, leisure centres, or day care centres. Parents told us that these activities can have limited spaces, and they found themselves under stress every year trying to secure bookings.

In areas where holiday provision does exist, parents told us that services usually do not cover the entire holiday, and often only run for part of the work day. This is a regular source of stress for parents in these areas, particularly felt by working parents who were unable to take enough time to cover the entire school holiday.

“Holidays are just...I’m already anxious about the summer, you just have this ball of anxiety a lot of the time.” Parent, PA03

Many families expressed that they cope with this by taking turns using their annual leave in order to provide childcare themselves. Interviewees stated this can create emotional burdens for parents, as it reduces their time together as a family.

Care for children under 3 years old

Childcare provision for children in early learning settings or that are under 3 years old are outwith the scope of this research. However, a gap many identified, particularly in the survey, was the lack of funded provision for children under 3 years old. This was pointed out as a factor that can indirectly impact access to school age childcare.

For parents of school age children with younger siblings, even where school age childcare is available and accessible, parents may have to limit or stop work, or rely on informal arrangements to meet their childcare needs for both children.

“Currently we struggle to find any childcare for between the ages of 1-2. My daughter has just turned one and I have just started back at work, following my maternity leave. There is no provision for her to be cared for by anyone else but a family member or friend.” Parent, survey

Other parents suggested that lack of access to childcare for children under 3 has longer term economic impacts. By the time their children become old enough to access funded childcare, some parents, particularly mothers, will have been out of work for several years. This can limit what employment they can find, or limit their long term career and economic prospects regardless of their access to school age childcare later in their child’s life.

These gaps in availability create a great deal of frustration, stress, and worry for parents. Though some expressed that childcare tailored to their family needs would be great, the majority said any childcare options would have a positive impact on their lives.

4.2.2 Cost

Cost was mentioned as a barrier to accessing childcare (both formal and informal activities) by several parents. This particularly affects lower income families, families with multiple children, and those with children who have additional support needs.

“The costs are huge for our local breakfast and after school club and the service isn’t even very good. It is the only local option for working parents so we have no other choice.” Parent, survey

Cost of childcare combined with low wages in rural areas means some parents are financially worse off working. This was evident in a 2019 report, which found that some families in Scotland were spending the majority of their salaries on childcare.²⁶ Though many parents we spoke to saw this as a necessary expense in order to stay in work, some had chosen to stop work altogether in order to provide their own childcare.

²⁶ Scottish Government 2019 ‘Out of school care - draft framework: consultation analysis’ p10

4.2.3 Limited transport

Many parents we interviewed see public transport in their area as infrequent, unreliable, or poorly connected, which creates barriers to accessing consistent and affordable childcare. This affects working families, those who have children with additional support needs, those who don't drive, and those who lack informal support networks the most.

“I've considered the bus, but the buses are a bit hit and miss, the timings don't always align with the timings of the classes, you're either too early or too late.”
Parent, PA06

This is a key issue in many rural areas, where transport needs are ‘particularly acute’.²⁷ This is primarily due to the greater geographical population spread in rural and island regions, and the associated greater distances many parents have to travel in order to access childcare.

Many parents we spoke to feel as though they have to travel far in order to access childcare, and that distances become greater as more local services shut down or limit their services. Parents who choose to send their children to schools outside their catchment area, which some do in order to access school-offered childcare, may face additional challenges as they are not guaranteed places on school-provided transport.

This lack of consistent public transport means the majority of parents drive to access services. For some, especially those without family and friends to offer support with transport, this creates additional financial barriers to accessing childcare. Some parents cite fuel costs as a barrier, while others would have reduced pay from being forced to leave work early.

Among parents who don't drive, some feel guilty about the impact missing out on activities has on their children.

“My children are socially isolated because we can't afford to drive them to and from evening clubs.” Parent, survey

For these reasons, location is a key consideration for parents when choosing childcare. This is reflected in our survey, where **parents picked location as the most important factor** when selecting childcare.

4.2.4 Lack of options for children with additional support needs

Many parents we spoke to see accessing childcare for children with additional support needs as a ‘postcode lottery’ (PA12), in relation to whether there will be any local provision, and whether that provision will have staff who are trained and confident looking after children with additional support needs.

²⁷ Scottish Government 2019 ‘Out of school care - draft framework: consultation analysis’ pV

“Children with additional support needs, often they are forgotten, and you have to fight all the time, and keep motivated, and keep pushing for those children [to get provision] as well.” Parent, PA03

Staff training and good facilities for caring for children with additional needs was a key area many parents feel is lacking in rural and island regions. For example, one parent noted that lack of investment in accessible outdoor spaces is a particular barrier for children with additional support needs to take part in activities outside, which was particularly frustrating given the current focus by the Scottish Government and many local authorities on outdoor play.

Several parents also noted that access to provision for children with additional support needs has become worse since the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which led to many specialist services closing or limiting their offerings.

This gap was also identified in Scotland in 2019: ‘Some parents noted that there was very little out of school care locally which provided appropriate support for their child and in some areas parents noted that waiting lists were very long for specialist provision’.²⁸ This suggests that this is an ongoing problem, and more support is needed for families who have children with additional support needs to be able to access childcare.

Access to childcare for children with additional support needs is also of key importance to parents. Some parents we spoke to are full time carers for their children, and specialist care gives them the opportunity to spend time with their other children, or have time for themselves.

4.3 The impact of limited availability

4.3.1 Limited employment opportunities

As the availability of a lot of school age childcare provision does not always align with rural and island working patterns, many parents limit their working hours, turn down work, choose employment which offers more flexibility (which is often lower paid), or choose employment which does align with available childcare (such as school work, nursery work, childcare provider work).

Many parents feel the employment choices they have made to cope with a lack of childcare options have limited their career prospects. This causes frustration amongst some parents.

“I feel like my career prospects have really declined since I’ve had to prioritise the kids.” Parent, PA07

Several parents also raised how this impact on employment is felt more by mothers. This finding was previously discussed in 2017, where lack of access to

²⁸ Scottish Government 2019 ‘Out of School Care in Scotland: A Draft Framework 2019’, p41

childcare in rural areas was described as part of the 'sticky floor' of daily life which acts as a barrier to women's employment and careers.²⁹

"There [are] very little options as a full time working mum." Parent, survey

Though this was referring to families working in farming and agriculture where family life can be heavily gendered,³⁰ a few parents' situations highlighted how this may also be common in remote rural and accessible rural areas, where 3% of those employed work offshore or overseas.³¹ This situation is likely for families in Aberdeenshire, Shetland, and Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles), where it is common to work in the oil and gas industry.

4.3.2 Reliance on informal care

The most common option for parents who cannot access school age childcare is informal arrangements with family and friends. The majority of families rely on grandparents for childcare, though many also rely on older siblings to look after younger children, or leave their children home alone when they are old enough.

Those without family for support rely on an ad-hoc patchwork of other arrangements. These are often informal childcare services such as out of school clubs and activities, favours from friends, or flexible arrangements with employers.

Reliance on informal care, or a patchwork of options, can create stress for many parents who feel as though their childcare arrangements are precarious.

"There's not a lot of slack in our childcare system, the balance of it, everything needs to be working well in order for it all to work. Living where we live and knowing there's not a lot of other options for childcare, always makes me think 'what would I do if something was to go wrong?'" Parent, PA08

Some parents linked this to the fact that several after school care providers in rural areas are charity run and their board members alongside being volunteers might not always have knowledge needed regarding the nature of the business. They are also less likely to have robust contingency plans if service providers are unavailable, which means cancellations can be frequent. Meanwhile, other parents feel that flexible arrangements they have made with their employers (such as leaving early, compressed hours, or working from home on some days) could break down if a manager were to leave or retire and be replaced by someone less accommodating.

Limitations of informal care

Some families living in rural and island areas face additional challenges which create barriers to using informal childcare or social networks for support.

²⁹ Scottish Government 2017 'Women in farming and the agricultural sector: a research report', p39

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Scottish Government 2021 Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021

Several parents we spoke to who have children with additional needs feel as though they can't ask friends to look after their children or support them with transport, due to their child's additional support needs.

“My five year old boy is autistic which adds another dimension to everything, including childcare and what's available to him for his needs.” Parent, PA09

This can create additional barriers for parents in areas where there is no specialist respite or formal provision, which is often only available in larger urban areas, and even then may be difficult to access due to demand.

As another example, parents or families who work in farming or crofting may not be able to look after their children at home due to the often unsafe conditions of farm life.

4.3.3 Feelings of guilt and frustration

Many parents have an overall sense of frustration about the lack of childcare available to them in rural areas, and frustration towards the accommodations they have to make in order to cope with this. Where parents rely on informal childcare arrangements with family, or take time off work to meet their childcare needs, there is a feeling of guilt or worry of 'taking too much' from friends and family providing childcare, or placing additional pressure on colleagues.

“I feel bad, I'm always apologising for giving them stuff to do on top of their own caseload, and people do understand but you don't always want to feel...or them to think that you're taking advantage.” Parent, PA03

4.4 Parents' key needs

The following needs have been identified and should be addressed in order to improve parents' access to school age childcare. They centre on four priority areas: flexible childcare, school holiday provision, childcare for children with additional support needs, and childcare for children under 3 years old.

Flexible childcare

- “As a parent, I need flexible school age childcare so that I can fully participate in employment.”
- “As a parent, I need flexible school age childcare so that I can reduce my childcare costs.”
- “As a parent, I need flexible school age childcare so that I can ensure my childcare arrangements are stable and reliable.”

School holiday provision

- “As a parent, I need childcare over the school holidays so that I can work as normal.”

- “As a parent, I need childcare over the school holidays so that I can use my annual leave for time with my family.
- “As a parent, I need childcare over the school holidays so that I can rely on my family less.”

Childcare for children with additional support needs

- “As a parent of a child with additional support needs, I need access to well-trained or specialist childcare providers so I know my child is getting a good quality of care.”
- “As a parent of a child with additional support needs, I need access to well-trained or specialist childcare providers so I know my child is having the same opportunities as other children.”
- “As a parent of a child with additional support needs, I need access to well-trained or specialist childcare providers to give me time to rest.”
- “As a parent of a child with additional support needs, I need to be consulted on what my and my child’s needs are so that we are properly catered for.”

Childcare for children under 3 years old

- “As a parent of more than one child, I need childcare for my children under 3 years old so that I can access childcare for my older children more easily.”
- “As a parent of more than one child, I need childcare for my children under 3 years old so that I can stay in work.”

4.5 Conclusions

The main challenges parents have accessing affordable and consistent school age childcare are around availability, cost, transport, and lack of specialist services. For some, this negatively impacts their employment opportunities, causes them to rely on precarious informal arrangements, and creates feelings of guilt and frustration.

In order to minimise these challenges and improve access, parents’ key needs of flexible childcare, school holiday provision, childcare for children with additional support needs must be addressed. In addition, childcare which meets the needs of parents that also have children under 3 years old would help address the challenges in a more holistic and integrated manner.

5. Research findings: Insights from providers

Key points

Providers in rural and island areas face several key challenges - demand, funding, support, staffing and training, facilities, transport, and providing for children with additional support needs - in providing affordable and consistent school age childcare. Many of these challenges are linked to those faced by parents.

These challenges cause providers to limit or adapt their services, and create feelings of frustration and guilt at not meeting community needs.

To tackle these challenges, it is necessary to address providers' key needs of: reliable financial support, good communication and relationships, assistance with training, and recruitment issues.

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we outline the key challenges and needs of providers operating in rural and island areas. As with the results of the parents' survey and interviews, many of these findings are unique to rural and island areas, although some do mirror challenges faced in urban areas. Also explored later in this chapter are the key links between the experiences of parents and providers, and how they maintain one another's challenges.

5.2 Challenges of providing school age childcare

The following section details the main challenges faced by providers in rural and island areas. The exploration focuses on the main challenges of demand, funding, decline in support, staffing and training, limited facilities, limited transport, and accommodating additional support needs. Despite different lines of enquiry, no specific differences were identified from one area over another. However, some challenges differed between types of providers.

5.2.1 Inconsistent demand

Across the different types of providers we spoke to, the majority experienced inconsistent levels of demand on their services. This makes it difficult to plan services (including opening hours, staff numbers, and activities).

The main inconsistencies rural and island providers experience are variations in demand that exist:

- throughout the week,
- throughout the year,
- by age,
- since the expansion of Early Learning and Childcare, or

- since the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Variation throughout the week and year

Several providers highlighted that demand is not consistent throughout the week or year, and many have to balance over/under-subscription at different times.

“The job is a famine or a feast for inquiries, and lately it has been a famine.”
Provider, PRO13

This is a particular challenge for providers who are the only local option in their area, as well as those who are attempting to provide more flexibility in their services.

This can also be a challenge for many during the school holidays, where families go away at different times. Additionally, during the summer holidays, other services (including leisure centres, schools, charities, churches, and the local authority) may run ad-hoc activities which clash with provision. This problem is exacerbated where community communication and collaboration is low.

Variation by age

Most providers we spoke to found that demand for older children is generally lower, and demand for children under 3 years old is increasing. This is a challenge for some providers who cater towards older children, as demand is not high enough to run an economically viable service.

Variation since expansion of Early Learning and Childcare

Some providers highlighted that the expansion of Early Learning and Childcare to 1,140 funded hours³² has led to a decrease in demand for their services. Several put this down to growth in the numbers of children attending local authority-run childcare services, while one provider said confusion among parents around which providers offer funded places may be part of the reason.

“I think a lot of people have the view that they need to be at nursery to get the 1,140 hours.” Provider, PRO12

There is a perception that this has had a particular impact on childminders, as some have stopped work altogether due to low demand.

“...we had a couple of childminders on the island, who were very good. Unfortunately when they [the council] opened the nursery, the baby room, they put all day care in the baby room and it put them out of business.” Parent, PA02

³² Scottish Government 2017 ‘A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland’

Variation since Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has had a mixed impact on the different providers we spoke to. For some, it has led to a drop in demand for services. According to providers, this is partly due to changes in working patterns (such as different hours, more parents working from home), which has reduced their need for childcare.

For others, Coronavirus (COVID-19) led to a rise in the number of parents sending their children to childcare for the social benefits of playing with other children again.

5.2.2 Availability of funding

Many providers, especially those with low or inconsistent demand, struggle to cover their running costs through fees alone. Many providers highlighted that they feel a responsibility to parents to keep fees low, even when this negatively impacts their own income. This makes them dependent on additional sources to keep services running.

“As we stay in a rural town our numbers aren’t large, so trying to get enough children whilst paying costs is a factor as to why we lose money every financial year.” Provider, survey

Sourcing funding is challenging and time consuming for a lot of providers, and may take time away from their responsibilities supporting other areas of the service. Part of the reason for this, as a few providers highlighted, is the fragmented nature of the funding available, which requires piecing together funds from many different sources (such as their local authority, National Lottery, Community Trust).

One provider in Argyll and Bute mentioned that they felt a lot of support from their local authority for accessing different pots of funding. However, even when providers can secure funding, many said that it can be unreliable, making it hard to plan long term. Some providers also noted that what is available often doesn’t align with business needs. For example, many day care centres and outdoor learning providers say there is often a lot of funding for equipment but not for staff, which is where they need the most support.

There is also a perception among some providers that funders (including the local authority) support certain types of providers more than others.

Many of the childminders we spoke to expressed frustration at their lack of access to funding, and their limitations in deducting some of the costs of running the service, for taxable profit when self employed. Several said this places an additional financial burden on them in comparison to other types of providers who can access support.

In order to cope with these limitations, some providers fundraise in the community, though others are reluctant to do this. Fundraising activities mentioned were mainly bake sales. Others use informal arrangements with other community organisations to keep costs around rent and food down. Nevertheless the different types of

providers shared concern on their ability to meet the rising costs on facilities, and healthy food products.

Disparity in funding is also mentioned by some providers that provide both early learning and school age childcare. They stated that they were only able to provide meals to funded children, for example.

“In line with 1140 delivery a hot lunch is provided to all funded ELC children attending for 4 or more hours per day. In line with SG guidance, milk and fruit is provided for all children daily.” Provider Survey

In addition, providers that only cater to school age children stated that they are not eligible to apply for certain funds, such as the Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme.

5.2.3 Decline in support

Many providers we spoke to highlighted the importance of links with the wider community and support from their local authority as key elements to running a successful service. However, several noted that links with their local authority are disappearing. The decline in support from their local authority is seen as a big challenge for many providers interviewed.

For some, the decline of these connections with local authorities is part of a bigger shift - over the last ten years - in the amount of support on offer across Scotland.

“If you go back 10 years, the council was really quite forward thinking, and it was about play experiences. 10 years ago we had all these lovely bodies, play commission, Highland play forum, lots of lovely child-focused groups, all about removing the cotton wool, adventurous play.” Provider, PRO10

Other providers suggested that their relationship with their local authority has become worse over recent years, and they often find themselves in conflict over funding, facilities, and resources. This is a big source of stress for them.

Another source of stress for some rural providers is the disconnect they feel from formal childcare bodies. Several find it harder to communicate with formal or regulatory bodies (such as the Care Inspectorate), largely due to the wide geographical distance between them. For some, this distance results in practical difficulties and delays completing key tasks (such as becoming registered).

Other interviewees are worried that this disconnect could result in local decisions being made by organisations that have no experience of living in the community. Some voiced that they are uncomfortable about this prospect.

5.2.4 Staffing and training

Lots of providers in rural and island areas experience high turnover rates, which makes recruiting and retaining staff a key challenge.

“The most critical problem we have is staffing.” Provider, PRO10

Many providers we spoke to listed the industry's low pay, low and unsociable hours, and sometimes demanding nature of the work, as reasons many providers are losing staff and struggling to replace them. In Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles), providers also highlighted the additional challenge of recruiting staff who are Gaelic speakers, and could provide Gaelic Medium Education.

For many providers, the expansion of early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours has exacerbated these existing staffing problems around recruitment, retention, and training. The increased demand for staff from local authority services, combined with the better pay, hours, and benefits offered by the local authority, contributes to many staff leaving.

“...[since] 1,140 hours came in, we've lost so many of our qualified staff to the schools, because of the increase in the hours, and of course we can't compete with wages or holidays they offer at the school, so we have had to recruit massively.” Provider, PRO14

Several providers also described how new qualification requirements from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) are having the same impact. Difficulties finding staff with the necessary qualifications means several providers choose to train staff on the job, however the time this takes means it can be challenging financially. Some providers highlighted how they had recently lost experienced staff who were unwilling to get or meet the new qualifications.

“The Scottish Government has said that's what they want [these qualifications], and that's fine, but they have to know it does make it more difficult to run this provision.” Provider, PRO5

Several providers also noted that staff moving on after training is a common pattern, either to other providers (usually local authority-run) or to other industries (such as teaching).

Additionally, several providers - particularly childminders - noted the decline over the last decade in the types and frequency of training offered. Several expressed that the training available does not match their current needs, is run at inaccessible times, or involves high costs (such as travel).

5.2.5 Limited facilities

Challenges around facilities vary between different types of providers.

For the providers based in community facilities, many feel limited by their available space. This influences what kind of activities they can run, and how many children they have capacity for.

Many providers who rent or borrow facilities (either from private landlords or the local authority) feel limited by changes and improvements they want to make to their space. Several voiced that they would like to have their own facilities, although cost is a key barrier to achieving this.

Some providers who rent facilities from the local authority are also struggling financially due to recent introductions of, or increases in, rent. For several providers in the different areas we spoke to, this had followed years of low or no rent. The financial impact of this has been huge for some providers already experiencing low demand, and as a result they are limiting their offering in order to cut costs.

For several childminders we spoke to who use their own homes as facilities, the costs of heating, refurbishments, and transport are key challenges. This has become a greater challenge for a lot of them recently, due to the impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) guidelines and the cost of living crisis. Some childminders said the burden of these costs, without financial support, is causing them to alter the services they provide (such as staying in the local area, and doing different activities).

5.2.6 Limited transport

Lack of available and reliable public transport is also a challenge to providing accessible childcare in rural and island areas.³³ This is further exacerbated by several other characteristics unique to rural and island areas. First is the high cost of private transport options, particularly for transport which is accessible to children with disabilities or additional support needs.³⁴ Second are the long distances that providers must cover to provide transport in rural and island areas. Even for providers who walk, the frequency of poor weather conditions and lack of pavements in some areas of their route makes taking children between sites difficult, even when distances are short.

“Transport links, we are isolated, there is very little transport for parents, we need to provide as much as we can to help parents.” Provider, PRO14

Additional costs of providing transport means some providers have to make compromises on what elements of their service to prioritise. For example, one provider from Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles) chose to offer transport instead of adding an additional staff member.

“...we used to run a transport service...and it worked well for a number of years until [the] council raised the mileage rate and we couldn't afford it anymore.”
Provider, PRO10

One provider indicated that they made efforts in the past to coordinate private transport. However, they were later told by the transport company that this would be in competition with the local public bus.

³³ Scottish Government 2021 'School age childcare: progress report', p8

³⁴ Shared Care Scotland 2020 'Holidays or Isolation? Research into holiday activity provision for disabled children and young people in Scotland', p41

“I looked into getting a community transport provider to do it as a run, and they said they couldn’t do it because it’s in competition with a public bus route.”
Provider, PRO9

When it comes to transport, providers - particularly day care centres - are left without many options. As such, many providers suggested that being located a walking distance from school was the most practical solution, as this would reduce the need for transport between the school and provider sites.



5.2.7 Accommodating additional support needs

Many providers across the different areas we spoke to highlighted that they are seeing more children needing additional support since Coronavirus (COVID-19). Providers suggested this may be due to the negative impact the pandemic has had on a lot of young people’s mental health.

Some providers said they are struggling to cope with this increase, and are in need of greater support. This was particularly with regard to training, which some said they struggle to access due to cost, timings, or lack of availability.

“...[the rise in numbers of children with additional support needs] puts a tremendous pressure not just on me, I know the school is struggling as well.”
Provider, PRO11

Providing for children with additional support needs can also create additional costs for some providers. Additional expenses include costs for more staff, specialist equipment, specialist training, and adaptations to facilities to ensure accessibility.³⁵ Many providers we interviewed felt that there was a lack of financial support available to cope with these costs, and some feel that they aren't able to sufficiently meet these children's needs as a result.

"...if you've not got one-to-one [support for a child with additional support needs], and you've got 8 other kids to look after you can't possibly be on her case all the time. It's a huge challenge." Provider, PRO14

5.3 The impact on providers

5.3.1 Limiting or adapting provision

Several providers we spoke to are choosing to limit or adapt their services in order to cope with these challenges.

Adapting services

Where providers faced inconsistent demand, some stated they are moving away from flexibility by introducing advanced booking. This is to ensure they can plan services more reliably.

For providers experiencing low demand from school age children, some have begun adapting their services to offer provision for children under 3 years old. They find that getting children into the provision young (such as through baby groups), means the children are more likely to stay long term.

Adapting to include under 3's is one example of how providers use 'loss leading models' to create greater financial stability. In other words, by taking on more under 3's, who require a higher staff-to-child ratio but who will stay in the service long term, providers balance losing money on these younger children with making more on older children (who cost less to care for, but have the same fees).

Limiting services

For providers who lack financial support, and who cannot make other adaptations, many are limiting their services in order to cope. This looks different for different providers, but could involve cutting school holiday care, reducing hours, reducing how many days the service runs, limiting staff, or changing activities offered. A 2021 report from the Scottish Out of School Care Network (SOSCN) suggests this is a widespread problem for providers as 'without additional financial support and current levels of income/costs, a third of services said they would have to make staff redundancies or close down completely.'³⁶

³⁵ Scottish Government 2019 'Out of school care - draft framework: consultation analysis', pV

³⁶ SOSCN 2021 Snapshot financial sustainability survey SAC Sector 2021, p5

Making these changes to their provision leaves some providers with a sense of guilt at 'letting parents down' (PRO15).

"A lot of these things it's not people not wanting to do it, it comes down to the financial implications of running it. We would be more than happy to open at 8:00am...but you might get 2 or 3 children through the door. Financially it's not viable." Provider, PRO2

5.3.2 Feeling undervalued and unsupported

Many providers we spoke to experience stress and worry around these key challenges. This is particularly common for providers experiencing inconsistent demand or struggling to access necessary funding and support.

"There have been times where it's been quiet, and it's been a bit of a worry. Thinking 'how am I going to live?'" Provider, PRO12

Several also feel that these conditions reflect an overall undervaluing of the childcare industry and their role in maintaining rural communities.

Childminders in particular mention how they feel 'overlooked' in the industry. Lack of access to funding and decline in their numbers after the expansion of early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours are key reasons childminders feel undervalued and supported, as well as their view on how they are treated versus other care services.

"...last couple of years we've all felt really down and really alone and unsupported, I think we're all feeling like that." Provider, PRO6

5.4 Providers' key needs

The following needs have been identified as a priority for providers of school age childcare in rural and island areas. These needs should be addressed to help providers overcome the challenges identified above. The needs centre on three key areas: access to reliable financial support, good communication and relationships with other community services (including the local authority), and assistance with training and recruitment.

Reliable financial support

- "As a provider, I need reliable financial support so that I can offer flexible options."
- "As a provider, I need reliable financial support so that I can maintain my current provision."
- "As a provider, I need reliable financial support so that I can keep my fees low for parents."
- "As a provider, I need reliable financial support so that I can develop and grow my service (e.g. through refurbishments, new equipment)."

Good communication and relationships

- “As a provider, I need good communication and relationships with other community services so that I can feel valued in the community.”
- “As a provider, I need good communication and relationships with other community services so that I can avoid clashing with other providers.”
- “As a provider, I need good communication and relationships with other community services so that I can ensure I’m meeting community needs.”

Assistance with training and recruitment

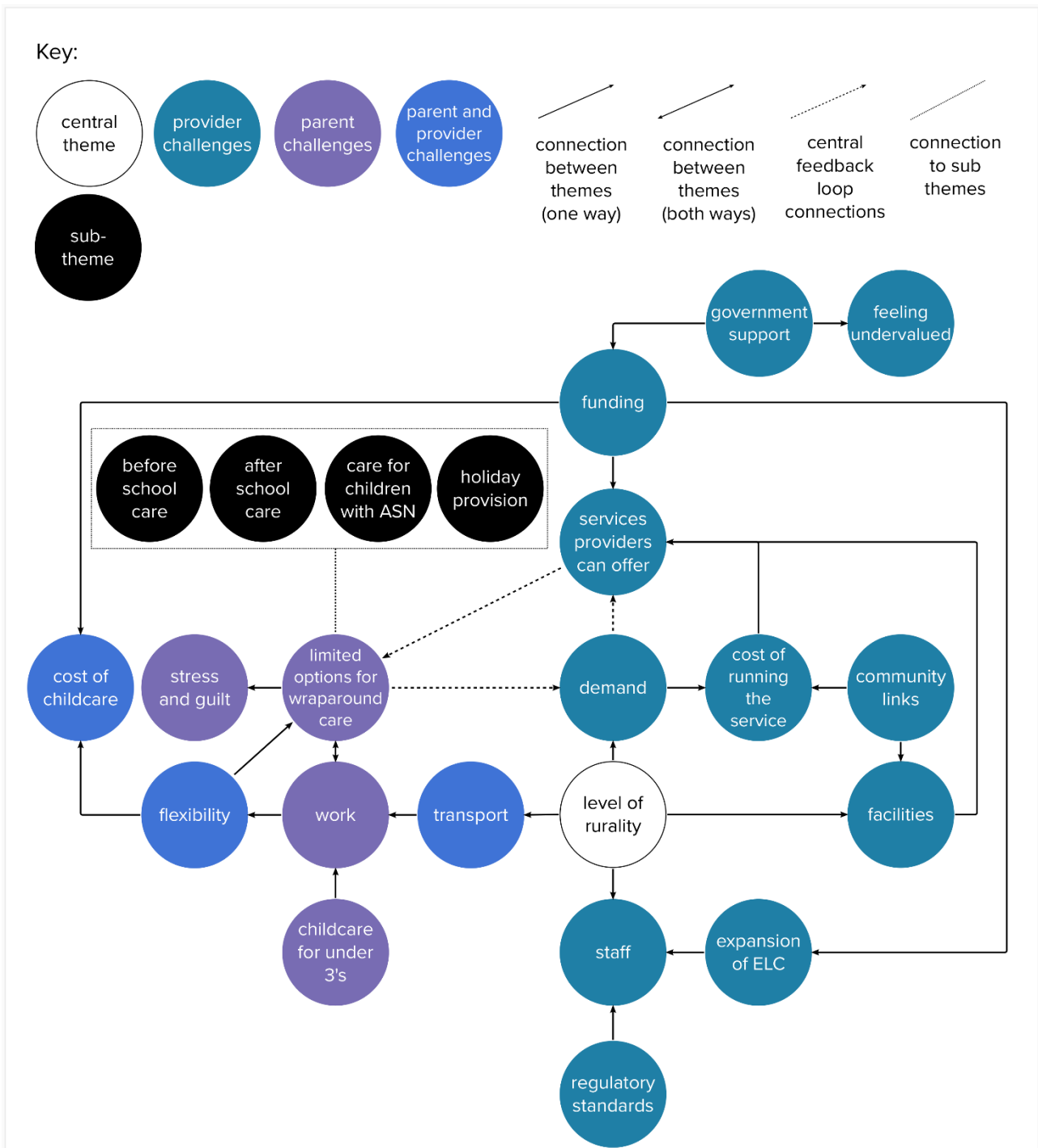
- “As a provider, I need assistance with training and recruitment so that I can provide a high quality of care for children with additional support needs.”
- “As a provider, I need assistance with training and recruitment so that I can keep my experienced staff while also fulfilling SSSC requirements.”
- “As a provider, I need assistance with training and recruitment so that I can find quality staff for my service.”

5.5 Overlap with parent challenges

A key finding of this research is the existence of a central feedback loop in rural and island areas where lack of demand leads to a lack of provision, which creates a lack of demand.

Figure 1 shows a map of how parents’ challenges connect to providers’ challenges. As well as how both sets of problems are impacted by the level of rurality.

Figure 1. Overlap between parent and provider challenges



In this central feedback loop, inconsistency in demand impacts the services providers are able to offer. When this is negative (as is currently the case for many providers), this in turn limits the options parents have for wraparound school age childcare (which may include before and after school care, holiday provision, and provision for children with additional support needs).

This is known as an ‘amplifying’ feedback loop, which is associated with unsustainable cycles of behaviour.³⁷ This kind of feedback loop reinforces the problems parents and providers are experiencing, as well as the surrounding problems the map shows.

For parents, this reinforces **barriers to work and employment**, and **feelings of stress and guilt** associated with informal childcare arrangements.

For providers, this reinforces **financial challenges** running their services.

This negative feedback loop maintains a lot of the challenges discussed in this and the previous chapter. Although the challenges and needs of parents and providers have been explored separately above, the feedback loop demonstrates these issues must be addressed together in order to find holistic solutions to rural and island school age childcare.

5.6 Conclusions

The main challenges providers have in offering affordable and consistent school age childcare are around demand, funding, support, staffing and training, facilities, transport, and providing for children with additional support needs. These challenges negatively impact providers’ offerings by causing them to limit or adapt their services, as well as creating feelings of guilt and frustration

To tackle these challenges, providers’ key needs of reliable financial support, good communication and relationships, and assistance with training and recruitment should be addressed.

In order to do this holistically, the interdependencies between parents’ and providers’ needs should also be considered.

³⁷ Stroh 2015 ‘Systems Thinking for Social Change’, p46

6. Opportunities and best practice examples

Key points

Many opportunities exist, both in Scotland and internationally, to address the challenges parents and providers experience in rural and island areas. These opportunities centre on increasing the flexibility of childcare models, greater financial support, and increased community collaboration.

Greater flexibility, as in increasing flexible childcare options, could include the use of flexible hours, flexible booking/payment models, or pop-up provisions. Such options have been successfully trialled in rural and island areas.

Greater financial support could involve extending funded places in childcare to school age children, and fostering partnerships with private businesses. One provider interviewed is already piloting subsidised spaces in partnership with a local company.

Our findings suggest that community collaboration is key to provision in small rural and island communities. Increasing community collaboration could link providers with other funded services in rural and island such as leisure centres, environmental services, and wellbeing services.

6.1 Introduction

Although there are many challenges to accessing and providing accessible and consistent school age childcare in rural and island areas, our research also found a number of key opportunities that exist already within Scotland. This chapter explores these opportunities and benefits for both parents and providers. The chapter also sets out a number of examples that represent 'best practice' for these opportunities.

6.2 Greater flexibility

6.2.1 Flexible hours, booking and payment models

Flexible hours, the ability to make and cancel bookings at short notice, and options of ad hoc agreements, could all better meet the needs of rural and island families with irregular seasonal and shift-based working patterns.³⁸ This is especially true where informal childcare from friends and family is not an option.³⁹

Flexible options could make school age childcare more accessible for those with non-standard working patterns, increasing demand for providers. It could also make

³⁸ Scottish Government 2021 'Rural childcare provision, innovative models and the needs of agricultural families: Research', p20

³⁹ Scottish Government 2022 'Improving our understanding of child poverty in rural and island Scotland', p31

childcare more affordable by only charging parents for time used, and reduce parents' barriers to employment and/or education.⁴⁰

However, it is important to note that, as flagged by several providers in our interviews and in other research,⁴¹ flexibility can mean additional costs for providers. For this reason, flexibility may need to be paired with other initiatives that would offer financial support.

Many parents from Na h-Eileanan Siar and Shetland require even more flexibility due to the nature of their working schedules (mainly those working in the oil and gas industry). We suggest that pilots for trialing flexible hours, booking and payment models be conducted in these two areas. Pilots to explore this option must be worked with and tailored to the requirements of the local community.

Best practice examples

Hame fae Hame⁴² and Flexible Childcare Services Scotland (FCSS)⁴³ are two examples of providers that have successfully introduced various flexible elements to their services. The Scottish Government's Access to Childcare Fund supported Hame fae Hame to develop and test a more flexible model of school age childcare in Shetland. The service has been able to offer flexible childcare services for children aged 12 months to 12 years. The service has flexible hourly rates, as well as no charges for holidays or sick days. Flexible Childcare Services Scotland (FCSS) also offers flexible hours, pay per hour rates, no upfront costs, drop-off and pick-up services, home-based and mobile crèche options.

Internationally, the Australian Government introduced The Child Care Flexibility Trials⁴⁴ to address the challenges faced by Australian families with non-standard or variable work hours. It tested flexible models of childcare, including extended hours, short notice bookings, and flexible cancellations. Though only a trial, the project demonstrated how flexible childcare can benefit families with non-standard childcare requirements. There was particularly high uptake for some providers of initiatives around flexible cancellations and extended hours, some of which were adopted by providers on a longer term basis.

The experiences of these providers suggests that potential elements to consider for future pilots include:

- flexible and extended hours (including during holidays),
- pay by the hour,
- no charges for holidays or sick days,

⁴⁰ Scottish Government 2022 'Improving our understanding of child poverty in rural and island Scotland', p8

⁴¹ Scottish Government 2022 'Improving our understanding of child poverty in rural and island Scotland', p43

⁴² Hame Fae Hame website: <https://hamefaehame.co.uk/>

⁴³ Flexible Childcare Services Scotland website: <https://www.fcss.org.uk/>

⁴⁴ Baxter and Hand 2016 'Flexible child care: Key finding from the AIFS Evaluation of the Child Care Flexibility Trials', Australian Institute of Family Studies

- flexibility in cancellation, or
- ad hoc booking.

6.2.2 Pop-up or travelling provision

Another opportunity that could help some families and providers is flexibility of location. In areas with highly dispersed communities and low numbers of providers, pop-up or travelling providers, which move location, could address gaps in childcare by region, and by season. This type of model is already working in some rural areas, as one informal provider we spoke to found.

While offering travelling childcare would not be suitable for parents who need consistent daily childcare, it could be beneficial for parents in need of holiday care, those who need temporary ad hoc care, or parents who want to use childcare on an occasional basis for the social benefits.

Explorations of this opportunity should also consider that although this model benefits parents, it still does not ensure consistent demand for providers.

Best practice example

In London, the Westway Trust runs a pop-up community crèche for organisations in need of temporary childcare for children aged 3 months to 8 years old.⁴⁵ The Trust is a partnership between several organisations whose missions focus on enabling parents to work or carry out their normal routine while their childcare needs are met. The scheme is not for profit, has flexible fees based on the type of organisation worked with (with cheaper rates for voluntary organisations), and creates flexible employment for local people who need work that fits around their own childcare needs.

6.2.3 Flexible employment

Another consideration is that providing flexible childcare options is only a partial solution to the barriers parents face accessing childcare.⁴⁶ Flexible or 'child-friendly'⁴⁷ working arrangements with employers are also necessary to remove barriers to accessing childcare, and barriers that parents (though especially mothers) face when trying to access employment. Formalising flexible working could also remove some of the stress and anxiety associated with the casual/informal flexible working arrangements some parents have in place.

6.3 Greater financial support

6.3.1 Extending funded places

⁴⁵ Westway Trust website: <https://www.westway.org/our-work/learning/creche/>

⁴⁶ Scottish Government 2019 'Out of school care - draft framework: consultation analysis', p19

⁴⁷ More information on child friendly hours can be found here: <https://maternityaction.org.uk/advice/child-friendly-working-hours/>

Extending funded places to include school age children, could reduce financial barriers to accessing and providing childcare.

This could reduce short term and long term barriers to employment and education created by lack of access to childcare. It could also make services more economically sustainable, enabling providers to offer greater provision to their communities.

Extensions of funded places could be piloted in remote small towns with childminders. Several parents pointed out that childminders are the most suitable option for areas that are remote, as they have a smaller, and more dispersed population. In these areas, other providers such as day care centres or after school care providers are less likely to economically succeed. Pilots to explore this option must be worked with and tailored to the requirements of the local community.

Best practice examples

This type of model has been successful in Norway, where there is no gap between the end of parental leave and the start of entitlement to childcare.⁴⁸ In 2011, the benefits of this were reflected by 83% of mothers with children aged one to two being in employment.⁴⁹

Explorations of this opportunity should consider how to avoid exacerbating the fears of certain providers, as discussed in Chapter 5. Improved communication, further consultation, or co-designing future strategies with providers are areas to consider.

6.3.2 Partnerships with private business

There is an opportunity for large local employers/corporations to support parents and providers through subsidised childcare arrangements, either directly, through providers, or by providing funded spaces for employees.

The assumption is that this could make childcare more affordable and accessible for parents by reducing the cost. It may also create greater financial security for providers and their staff, due to more consistent demand, better stability, and the ability to plan services ahead of time.

Businesses may also create staff security for employers of parents and carers. By reducing barriers to accessing childcare, parents and carers would be less likely to limit their hours or stop working in order to meet their childcare needs.

Best practice example

Only one provider interviewed has started to pilot subsidised spaces in partnership with a local company, so further research is required to explore this option in more depth.

⁴⁸ Scottish Government 2013 Early Childhood Education and Care Provision: International Review of Policy, Delivery and Funding', p74

⁴⁹ Ibid.

6.3.3 Subsidies

There is an opportunity for the Scottish Government to provide subsidies to childcare providers during periods of low demand.

We anticipate this could help keep providers economically viable when numbers are low, and able to maintain their usual staff levels and opening hours. It may also stem the feedback loop between inconsistent demand and a decline in provision discussed in Chapter 5, and enable providers to offer greater flexibility in their services, reducing barriers to parents' employment.

According to the 'Improving our understanding of child poverty in rural and island Scotland' report, other benefits would include the "harder to measure but vitally important outcomes" of addressing population decline in rural and island areas, and supporting the attainment of young children.⁵⁰

Other subsidies around transport, rent, and facilities could also benefit providers.

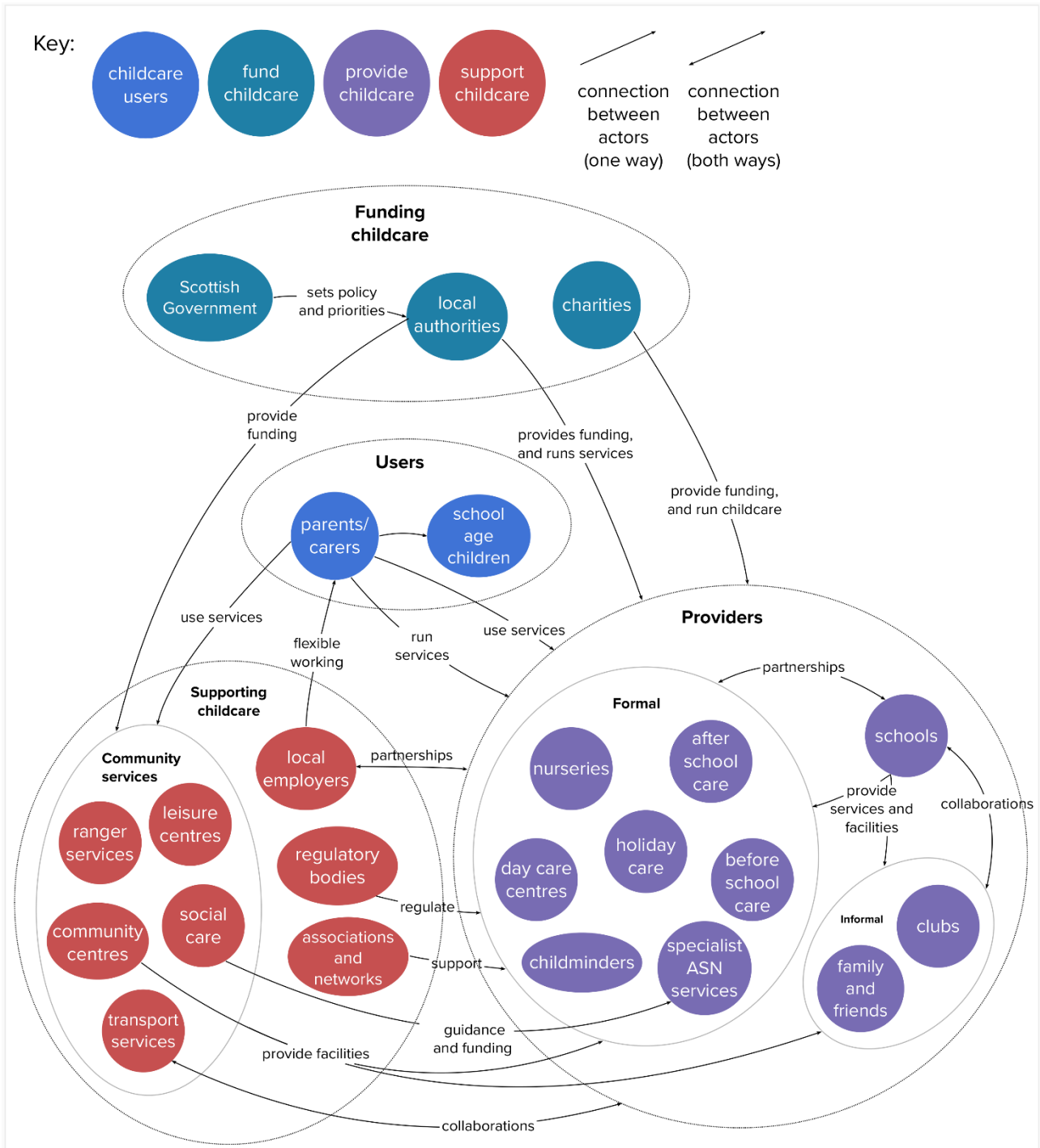
6.4 Increased collaboration

Many providers highlighted that having local support and good relationships with the wider community was important for them to successfully provide childcare.

Figure 2 shows the range of actors involved in childcare in rural and island areas that came out of our survey and interviews, and how they connect. It is divided into four sections: actors which provide childcare, actors which use childcare, actors which support childcare, and actors which fund childcare. It shows the many connections between actors, and illustrates the kinds of collaborations providers have regarding staff, facilities, scheduling, transport, and training, among other things.

⁵⁰ Scottish Government 2022 'Improving our understanding of child poverty in rural and island Scotland', p43

Figure 2. Map of System Actors



There are opportunities for supporting greater collaboration with other funded services in rural and island areas - some of which already provide informal childcare - such as leisure centres, swimming pools, environmental services, and wellbeing services. This in turn could help provide a 'blended' or mixed model, where a group or partnership of providers shares the delivery of childcare. A toolkit

for mixed models has already been developed in England.⁵¹ Blended models might also include sharing facilities or staff to operate childcare provision.

We anticipate that blended models of childcare could offer a wider range of opportunities for school age children, and the reliability, stability, and qualifications that formal childcare providers offer. Blended models may also ensure a more even distribution of provision throughout the year, and help with retention of staff through employment partnerships. They could also provide additional support needs services at previously non-specialised providers. They may also help with resourcing of Gaelic speakers in informal childcare provision.

Many providers have arrangements with other community services (around rent, food, fundraising, training, facilities, and scheduling) to support their operations. Others are members of wider local and regional groups which collaborate around community needs. This means that networks could already exist in other areas, and be used in future pilots.

Best practice examples

The Mull and Iona Community Trust (MICT)⁵² successfully works with other community groups, as well as local and national government, to provide a range of collaborative community services - one of these includes school age wraparound childcare.

In Morayshire, the Action for Children employability scheme⁵³ is trialling partnerships between childcare providers and local employability or careers schemes. These partnerships may be beneficial to providers for recruiting and retaining staff, as well as parents looking for work.

6.5 Outdoor learning

Rural and island areas have the particular advantage of having open spaces, access to forest, rivers, hills and the sea as the ideal landscape for outdoor learning. Building on the existing advice in the Scottish Government's 'Out to Play' practical guidance,⁵⁴ there is an opportunity for increased provision of childcare in outdoor settings.

Childcare in outdoor settings fulfills many parents' preferences for childcare, as it provides more varied activities and experiences than traditional sports-based options which are common in rural areas. It can also cater to children's interests, as current outdoor provision is often child-led. Outdoor learning is also educational and offers opportunities for learning, although is not an extension of school.

⁵¹ DfE's 30 hour mixed model partnership toolkit: www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/dfes-30-hour-mixed-model-partnership-toolkit

⁵² Mull & Iona Community Trust website: www.mict.co.uk/

⁵³ Action for Children Employability scheme website: <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/acf-action-for-children/>

⁵⁴ Scottish Government 2020 'Out to Play - creating outdoor play experiences for children: practical guidance'

For providers, fully outdoor provision can be cheaper to run and a more viable option in rural and island areas. Lack of, or reduction in, costs from rent and utilities, makes it more economically sustainable to run a service with a smaller number of children. We suggest that future pilots in areas which suffer from a lack of available and affordable spaces, focus on outdoor learning.

6.6 Conclusions

Many opportunities exist in Scotland and internationally to address the challenges parents and providers experience in rural and island areas. These centre on increasing flexibility of childcare models, greater financial support, and increased community collaboration.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Key points

In rural and island areas, flexible wraparound school age childcare is essential for parents, while financial and operational support and good community relationships are essential for providers. Many challenges faced by rural parents and providers mirror those in urban areas, but are exacerbated by rural and island characteristics. Solutions to parents' and providers' challenges need to be tailored to specific community needs in order to be effective. School age childcare in rural and island areas is a community service.

We recommend that the Scottish Government consider the following three opportunity areas when exploring future school age childcare initiatives: greater flexibility, sustainable financial support, and increased community collaboration. Many of these recommendations have been successfully implemented elsewhere, as discussed in the best practice examples in the previous chapter.

7.1 Conclusions

We have explored the challenges that both parents and providers face in rural and island areas of Scotland. Drawing on the research, we can conclude:

1. Flexible wraparound childcare is essential for parents

Flexible wraparound school age childcare is essential for parents (including those who have children with additional support needs), to be able to:

- fully participate in employment,
- keep their childcare costs low,
- avoid precarious 'patchwork' arrangements and ensure their childcare is stable and reliable, and
- meet their family's other needs.

2. Financial and operational support, as well as good community links, are essential for providers

Reliable and consistent support (both financial and operational), as well as good community relationships, are essential for providers to be able to:

- offer flexible childcare options,
- grow and develop their services while keeping costs affordable for parents,
- offer quality care for all children, including those with additional support needs, and
- meet their regulatory requirements.

3. Many challenges faced by rural parents and providers mirror those in urban areas, but are exacerbated by rural and island characteristics

Many of the challenges parents and providers experience accessing or providing school age childcare in rural and island areas are similar to those parents and providers experience in urban areas. However, specific rural and island characteristics, such as smaller and dispersed populations, limited public transport, poor weather, and fewer options for facilities or specialist services, all exacerbate these challenges for rural and island parents and providers.

4. Challenges were similar for providers in the different regions we looked at, but solutions need to be tailored in order to be effective

Though many of the challenges for providers outlined in this report were similar across the different types of providers and different regions we looked at, for our recommendations to be effective they should be tailored to meet the individual needs of their communities, and the individual needs of those running them.

5. School age childcare in rural and island areas is a community service

School age childcare in rural and island areas is a service provided by the community for the community. Providers acknowledge that their role is to provide a service that caters to their community's needs, and may not be profit-making. Further research should be done to better understand and evidence the socio-economic benefits associated with provision of school age childcare in rural and island areas, such as maintaining local populations, language and cultural education, and reducing child poverty.⁵⁵

7.2 Recommendations

When working towards future school age childcare provision in rural and island areas, we recommend that the Scottish Government consider:

- greater flexibility,
- sustainable financial support, and
- increased community collaboration.

Many of these recommendations have been successfully implemented elsewhere, as discussed in the previous chapter. For provision to be effective for both parents and providers, we suggest that no single opportunity area we discuss is enough on its own to ensure consistent and affordable childcare in rural and island areas.

Although these three opportunity areas should be at the core of any future initiatives, further consultation is also needed to tailor these ideas to specific community needs.

⁵⁵ Scottish Government 2022 'Improving our understanding of child poverty in rural and island Scotland', p43

Provide greater flexibility

Flexibility is of key importance to rural and island families, and providers should consider this in their school age childcare offerings.

We recommend that more flexible hours, booking, and payment models are provided in order to reduce barriers to participating in employment and education, make childcare more affordable, and better support families who lack informal support networks.

We recommend that flexibility of location should be explored through pop-up or travelling provision models. This would spread access to childcare more widely in areas with fewer services, and reduce barriers to access created by limited transport in rural and island areas.

We recommend that the Scottish Government provide tailored support in accordance with the communities need, through sustainable financial support, guidance and advice, or opportunities to collaborate.

Provide sustainable financial support

Financial sustainability is one of the biggest challenges faced by providers we spoke to.

We recommend introducing subsidies from local authorities to support childcare providers during periods of low demand. Financial support, particularly for operational costs, such as staffing, rent/facilities, and transport, will help services stay economically viable throughout the year, and enable them to explore more flexible options for provision.

We recommend encouraging subsidised childcare arrangements between providers and large local employers/corporations, as this would benefit providers, parents, and businesses.

We also recommend exploring the further expansion of funded places to include school age children and children under 3 years old, to reduce short term and long term barriers to employment and education, and make services more economically sustainable.

Increase community collaboration

Our findings suggest that collaboration between different childcare actors involved is key to successful provision in rural and island areas.

We recommend establishing blended offer models provided by different community services to increase staff retention, better support children with additional support needs, and provide a wider range of activities.

We recommend creating partnerships with local authority employability or career schemes, especially those focused on young people, Gaelic speakers, or parents who are looking for work, to reduce barriers to sustainable recruitment.

We also recommend increasing spaces to share experiences and learnings from different community and local government organisations to encourage communication and collaboration amongst different actors.

7.3 Closing remarks

These conclusions and recommendations have been raised to help with the next steps that the Scottish Government are taking in the development of school age childcare in rural and island areas. We suggest recommendations are taken to account jointly in the running of any further pilots in order to ensure a holistic approach to tackling the different challenges faced in rural and island areas in accessing and providing school age childcare. We also suggest more local consultation is needed to shape solutions for individual communities.

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How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact socialresearch@gov.scot for further information.



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