

Natalie Don, MSP, Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise,

By Email [ministercypkp@gov.scot](mailto:ministercypkp@gov.scot) 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023

Dear Natalie Don, MSP,

### **Childcare at the heart of the Programme for Government 2023 – 2024**

I am writing to say how pleased we were to see childcare as a major focus in terms of the Scottish Government's anti-poverty strategy which we appreciate is also strongly linked to equality for women, children's rights, and overall human rights. The continued commitment to expanding school age childcare for children in lowest income families is very welcome, however, we were disappointed that there was little mention of, or support directed to, current and existing school age childcare services.

Regards the future expansion of school age childcare, we have shared with our members a recent Q&A produced by the Scottish Government School Age Childcare team, which provides further information and assurances about the developments and projects which are currently underway. This is all very promising however, it doesn't address the fact that many services are facing ongoing financial difficulties as a long-term result of COVID restrictions, cost of living crisis, and also major workforce recruitment and retention issues. Not being able to appropriately staff services or being unable to clear debts accrued during COVID pandemic means that services are beginning to close despite being needed by parents and carers to take-up or remain in employment, education or training. If parents cannot access school age childcare now, it will put more families into poverty.

Our parent survey (see summary notes below), demonstrated that families in the priority groups for school age childcare expansion and those across many backgrounds are currently struggling to access school age childcare they need so badly.

Thank you for approving a budget to cover PVG checks for new starts as every little helps for struggling services. Also, the uplift to £12 an hour for those providing funded ELC will be of immense value to this part of the childcare workforce, although, unfortunately, this will make it harder for the remaining childcare sector, in particular, school age childcare to meet their current recruitment and retention of staff challenges which are ongoing. As our recent workforce survey demonstrates practitioners in school age childcare have an average pay of £10.69 per hour within a range of £4.60 to £16 per hour yet have to meet the same qualification and regulation requirements as ELC staff.

Some type of emergency investment from the Scottish Government is needed right now for the existing school age childcare sector, based on the findings of Scottish Government's own financial sustainability health checks. The current sector will provide the foundation for the expansion and without it, the expansion will struggle to succeed. With the Scottish Budget coming up we ask that you do your best to get this struggling sector some much needed support. We are always happy to meet to discuss these issues and, once again, thank you for bringing childcare to the heart of government policies.

With best wishes,

Irene Audain MBE

Chief Executive, Scottish Out of School Care Network

**Please note that this is an open, public letter shared with our membership.**

## References and notes:

[Financial Sustainability Health Check of the Childcare Sector in Scotland - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultations-petitions/html/2022/01/2022-01-13-financial-sustainability-health-check-of-the-childcare-sector-in-scotland.pdf)

[osc-worforce-survey-results-2022.pdf \(soscn.org\)](https://www.soscn.org/resources/consultations-petitions/html/2022/01/2022-01-13-financial-sustainability-health-check-of-the-childcare-sector-in-scotland.pdf)

The results show that staff love working with children, and especially older (school-age) ones. However, the workforce continues to face pressure and stress caused by regulatory expectations and requirements, paperwork and ongoing staffing difficulties alongside part-time hours and low pay.

LIMITED OR LACK OF LOCAL SCHOOL AGE CHILDCARE PARENT AND CARER IMPACT SURVEY

**Download the report here:** <https://soscn.org/downloads/reports/limited-or-lack-of-sac-parent-carer-impact-survey.pdf>

The survey addressed the issue of whether parents and carers have access to sufficient school age childcare to meet their needs, and to investigate the impact on their families where they have insufficient or no access to school age childcare. Data is based on 344 results.

This report demonstrates that for parents and carers, especially those in identified priority groups such as parents of children with additional support needs and lone parents, but across the whole socio-economic spectrum, the impact of not accessing sufficient school age childcare is currently preventing many from realising their full potential to work, to contribute to the economy, and to avoid being plunged into poverty.

As the detailed results show many parents and carers are losing family income, employment and educational opportunities which helps keep families out of poverty.

Families cannot pull themselves out of poverty without there being an infrastructure of reliable, affordable, and accessible childcare, especially school age childcare as so many parents must cut their hours, or indeed leave their jobs, as there is not enough school age childcare available, or it is not affordable, even with help with childcare costs.

## Key Findings

- Nearly half of parents reported insufficient or no access to school age childcare, and the impact on them is profound.
- Nearly two thirds are experiencing more stress,
- More than half of them are reducing working hours.
- More than a third report reduction in household income because of this.
- Under half rely on friends or relatives to help.
- For those that do, more than a third of them say this causes stress for their relatives and friends and impacts negatively on their relationships.
- Lone parents are particularly impacted.
- Parents and carers of children with disabilities and additional support needs have the least access to suitable childcare.

- With over one hundred additional comments, the constant juggling, stress, impact on child and family wellbeing and halting of professional careers, alongside guilt, frustration and financial problems are all made clear.
- For those with sufficient access to school age childcare, some offered additional comments to say that without this in place, they would be “plunged into poverty.”
- Others mentioned that they use friends and family as they could not afford to pay for childcare.
- Many respondents knew about help with childcare costs via tax credits or tax free childcare but nearly a quarter of all respondents did not know about both.

Some additional comments on stress and impact of lack of access, first, from lone parents:

“Lack of childcare is my biggest obstacle in getting back to work and training for better job opportunities. Let alone (the) financial impact has on me as a single mum it also has a tremendous impact on my mental health leaving me feeling helpless.”

“I’ve been on the after-school club waiting list since May 2021. I have to squeeze my working hours in during the school day, I have a couple of left over hours I have to add on in the evenings. When I’m required to be into the office this eats into my work time which increases the add on time I have to work in the evenings. It is extremely frustrating and stressful and as a lone parent I have no time for myself. I am exhausted, underpaid and under supported.”

“I have had to work from home rather than be in office to ensure I am available to collect my children from school. This also interrupts my working pattern/meetings as I have to keep free time around school pick up.”

But even where there are two parents, it can still be a struggle:

“Unfortunately, we don’t have any family or friends to assist us with childcare, we have to unfortunately take it all upon ourselves during school holidays and industrial action days and not able to work and earn income.”

“Strain on our relationship due to having to juggle work and childcare.”

For parents and carers of children with additional support needs there is even less access, or even higher dependency:

“There is a serious lack of before and after (school) childcare for children with disabilities. I have 2 autistic children and there is nowhere suitable for them to attend. This is a huge issue that needs to be addressed.”

“My child has a complex disability. The maximum holiday support available to us is 4 x 4 days a year (9 until 3pm). Her school is only special school with an after school club and there is a huge waiting list. There is a severe lack of private childcare. The inequality with mainstream provision is discriminatory to say the least.”

“The only way I can get work done is to change my working hours so that I can work while the child sleeps as much as possible. This means very early rises (5am or earlier) and weekend work. Over long periods of time, this is unsustainable due to wellbeing deteriorating and poor health. Because our son has special needs, this has further complications for the sort of childcare that would be suitable for him. After-school clubs often don't work for him because of the sensorial difficulties he has. Whilst we have access to funds

to help with his care, these are extremely limited and inadequate to cover the real cost of looking after him outside of school hours.”

To the benefits for the children and families who do access school age childcare:

“My son has additional support needs. By accessing after school club, he is able to play with his friends in the local community.”

“If my son couldn't get a place at my out of school care, I would have to give my job up due to my son having autism, it's very difficult to find childcare or to get family and friends to watch my son as he is very challenging.”

Although those who said they currently had enough school age childcare, were not asked to complete the remaining questions, some did provide further comments which are also enlightening.

Without school age childcare “Children and I would be pushed into poverty.” (Lone parent, three children)

“If our OOSC and holiday club couldn't run I would have to significantly cut my working hours or even leave my job as an NHS Consultant.”