

CHILD AND PARENTAL WELLBEING DURING THE COVID- PANDEMIC

Summary of Highland Research & Workshops

[Abstract](#)

Abstract from the UKRI Covid-19 rapid response project 'Childcare and Wellbeing in Times of Covid-19' – February 2022 research and workshop discussions in the Highlands

Introduction

This paper focuses on the research and discussions from the Highland workshops which were part of the wider research programme for UKRI Covid-19 rapid response project 'Childcare and Wellbeing in Times of Covid-19'. To see the full report and find out more about the research www.childcare-covid.org

Wider research project

The Covid-pandemic and the public health measures aimed at containing the virus, such as lockdowns, physical distancing and self-isolating, radically changed family life and daily routines in Scotland. The pandemic has had particularly dramatic effects on households with dependent children due to the closure of schools and childcare settings. The research focuses on how 'one year of Covid', from spring 2020 to spring 2021, affected the wellbeing of families with children aged 0-15. The findings draw on analysis we conducted using data from two representative, longitudinal British surveys – the **Understanding Society** and the **Next Steps Cohort study** – examining how indicators of behavioural and mental health of children and their parents changed during the pandemic. Secondly, the research presents rich new data from 50 qualitative in-depth interviews we conducted with parents living with dependent children in Scotland that elucidate changes to daily family life in more detail and the pandemic experiences and challenges children and their parents faced. The research forms part of a series of resources published from the UKRI rapid response project 'Childcare and Wellbeing in Times of Covid-19'. The full research report, other thematic briefing and working papers, blogs and presentations are available on the Childcare and Wellbeing website www.childcare-covid.org

Key Points from the overall Research:

- School and childcare closures and social distancing, while important public health measures to control the spread of Covid-19, affected the mental health and behaviour of children negatively in many occasions but also, led parents and children to find creative ways of spending their time. Older children struggled more due to reduced social interactions and travel restrictions than the younger ones, but generally recovered once lockdowns were lifted. Young children displayed more longstanding behavioural changes.
- The pandemic has had a negative impact on the wellbeing of parents. Both men and women living with dependent children were significantly more likely to experience an increase in symptoms of psychiatric disorder, feeling more stressed and having more conflicts with their partner during the pandemic than adults without children.
- The decline in wellbeing was greatest for mothers with two or more children, young mothers, and single mothers.

- Women shouldered the lion share of childcare and home schooling during Covid-lockdowns, leaving many exhausted and lacking regenerative 'self-time'. This may have long-term negative effects on women's health and gender equality.
- Juggling work with childcare, home schooling and domestic work was one of the strongest stressors for parents with dependent children. Access to informal support by grandparents and wider social networks was greatly missed by families during lockdowns.
- Access to outdoor space, establishing home routines and sharing care and domestic responsibilities between partners or 'household bubbles' were the most important factors supporting family wellbeing during lockdowns.
- Our research highlights the importance of crisis-resilient school and childcare infrastructure to support family wellbeing and combat gender inequality.

Key point from the Highland research and workshops:

- The workshops revealed that existing childcare infrastructure is not meeting the need of the communities. The lack of suitable childcare provision before and during lockdown left residents with little opportunity but to rely on informal care where it was available eg relative and friends. Participants indicated that the importance of informal childcare should be recognised more within the system.
- The lack of flexibility in childcare arrangements continues to reduce participants ability to access education and/or employment opportunities. In some instances participants said that they depended on flexibility of their employer to ensure that they can access childcare, this was particularly important during Covid lockdown where grandparents and other older relations could no longer care for their grandchildren due to the risk of infection.
- The importance of computers, Ipads, software and broadband became clear during lockdown where parents found that this infrastructure was important to help young people communicate and learn on line. Very often there were not enough computers for all the children and mobile phones were inadequate to access elearning.
- Many participants were critical of the access to the schools Hubs and the criteria for taking up this support. There was confusion over the accessibility and the hours that the support was available for, participants indicated that the 'key worker' categorisation should have been expanded to include those in the community sector who were working in the area during lockdown. Participants also indicated that the Hubs were not providing learning during the day and that working parents had to support their children with elearning late into the night.

- There is a need for investment plans for the area to include childcare alongside other economic and social planning.
- As we plan for the future we should assess the impact of the decision made during Covid and their far reaching impact on the socialisation of young people. We should consider using schools more effectively as childcare centres – ensure that community buildings are childcare compliant from the start and plan to develop community intergenerational centres where the whole community can come together in a safe, well ventilated space with access to outdoor facilities which can be used year round.
- Participants in the workshops wanted to be involved in the design of childcare solutions which better meet the needs of their community. There is currently little or no opportunity for parents to contribute to exiting childcare arrangements as they are planned at a higher level or left to the marketisation model. As we develop services for the future we need to listen more to what the community/parents are saying and coproduce solutions.

Methodology

As part of this project, we executed a **mapping exercise** and **co-production** workshops. This report will focus on the *Highlands*, particularly the area of Skye (Portree) and Lochalsh as an exemplar rural case.

For the mapping exercise, we used human geography field-research techniques (Cloke 2004) and outlined local childcare provision, community resources and specific challenges in our selected Scottish communities. This enabled us to grasp the general picture of childcare in the examined area and be well informed about the challenges these areas face from a geographical viewpoint. Thereafter, with the expertise and facilitation of the **Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC)**, we established local co-production labs (September - October 2021 and March 2022) including local stakeholders (parents, local providers, council members) to develop local, context-sensitive childcare solutions. The workshops were designed to complement the overall research methods by bringing parents, service provider staff and planners to think more collectively about the issues and suggest ways in which future services could become more resilient to emergency situations such as COVID. This also involved reflection on how participants saw the pre-covid baseline for childcare services locally.

Below, we briefly outline the two methods we used.

MAPPING EXERCISE:

Childcare settings, particularly for younger children, involve the physical intersection of people, place, social norms, resources, services, time-structures, as well as policy contexts,

which shift and change through the life course (Bowlby, 2012). Milligan and Wiles (2010) use the term 'landscapes of care' to describe the "*complex embodied and organisation spatialities that emerge from and through the relationships of care*" (p. 740, original emphasis) while McKie *et al.* (2002) developed the term 'caringscapes' to describe the spatial-temporal relationship between work and caring. In *caringscapes* or *landscapes of care*, time is more contextual and multidimensional than simple clock-time.

In the following case studies, we attempted to visualise the 'caringscapes' of families in the examined areas and understand the time-space challenges they encountered during the pandemic and beyond. This attempt aims at suggesting crisis-resilient childcare options to policymakers which could also facilitate life after/before emergencies.

CO-PRODUCTION:

In this process, we have used the definition of co-production as defined by the **Scottish Co Production Network**: *Co-production is about combining everyone's strengths so that we can work together to achieve positive change. (...) By using a co-productive approach, we can go further so that professionals and decisions makers work with people and communities, not just to influence how decisions are made, but to have a say in what's needed, how it's developed and how it can be delivered. Co-production goes beyond participation and partnership working because it requires people to act together on an equal basis.*¹

This was shared with participants to develop their understanding of the process. It describes how the way of working recognises that for organisations to deliver successful services, they must understand the needs of their users and involve them as equal partners in the design of services, this recent Scottish Community Development Centre animation summarises the process which framed how SCDC utilised the concept in this research².

What we delivered

We hosted 2 online workshops with a focus on Skye and Lochalsh (Highland Council). In the lead in to the workshop, SCDC held a number of online planning meetings with key stakeholders in which we clarified and agreed childcare definitions and that methods were culturally feasible for those taking part.

The sessions brought parents, service providers in front line roles and more senior staff from the public and third sectors involved in the planning of services together. In Skye and Lochalsh, there were 11 participants recruited to attend two sessions one week apart. Two dropped out of the second session due to competing commitments and an IT connectivity failure. The first workshop concentrated on the participants experience during the pandemic

¹ For more, visit <https://www.coproductionscotland.org.uk/what-is-copro> .

² For more, visit <https://www.coproductionscotland.org.uk/animation> .

and the second on generation of policy and practice recommendations for services which would be more crisis resilient in future. Participants in the workshops were as follows:

- 6 Local parents
- 2 Local childcare providers
- 3 Strategic childcare providers (Statutory and voluntary sector)

MAPPING SKYE AND LOCHALSH

Using human geography field-research techniques (Cloke 2004), we firstly outline local childcare provision, community resources and specific challenges in our selected rural Scottish community, i.e. Kyle of Lochalsh and Portree (Skye). Thereafter, in collaboration with the Scottish Community Development Centre, we present findings from two local co-production labs we did (September - October 2021), including local stakeholders (parents, local providers, council members). The intention is to generate findings which could help inform how services could be improved at a more local level, and in the Skye and Lochalsh area, this hopefully means contributing to thinking in Highland as a whole via the Highland childcare planning process.

MAPPING EXERCISE

Kyle of Lochalsh

The town of Kyle of Lochalsh is located in the North West Highlands, around 80 miles west of Inverness. Situated on the Lochalsh peninsula, the town's shoreline has views across Loch Alsh to the south and Inner Sound and the Cuillin Hills to the north.

The town is bisected by the railway mainline, which runs roughly north to south through the town, and the A87, which runs east to west. The town has a longstanding history as the gateway to the Isle of Skye. The legacy of this can still be seen today in the placement of the railway station and railway museum. First built in the late 1800s, the railway station sits on the water's edge near where the ferry connection to the Isle of Skye was located. The ferry has since been replaced by the Skye Bridge, which the A87 runs out to, connecting the town to the town of Kyleakin on the opposite side of the water. These towns have strong ties, with the primary schools operating in a cluster, sharing a head teacher. Residents of both, and elsewhere on Skye, have also campaigned against tolls on the Skye Bridge and set up a trust which now owns Eilean Bàn, the small island located beneath the bridge.

Lochalsh is one of the 40% most deprived areas in Scotland on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD, 2020). The area has a low population density compared to other parts of Scotland: 6.9 people per hectare, compared to 21.9 people per ha in Inverness or more than 40 people per ha in Edinburgh and Glasgow. However, for the area of Skye and Lochalsh the town is one of the larger settlements in the area, though smaller than Portree (which has a population density of 12 people per ha). 17.1% of people in the Lochalsh datazone are estimated to be under 16 (mid-year population estimates 2018).

Portree

Across the water lies the Isle of Skye, its capital – Portree, or Port Rìgh as it is known in Gaelic – is located at the east side of the island on the coast with views out to the Isle of Raasay. The town is around 113 miles from Inverness, and 35 miles from Kyle of Lochalsh.

Residential properties surround this shopping area, into the valley. Continuing northwards from the centre, is Portree Primary school, around a ten minute walk from the centre. Although surrounded by one and two story houses, the housing plot size and hillside location means the school has views out over the mountains. Many of the properties in this area have small to medium sized gardens with mature hedges, and many run B&B services, particularly on the eastern side of the town. Further north, is a relative new housing area also featuring two story houses with private gardens, but surrounding very small children’s play areas, which are dotted through the development offering a small enclosed area with a swing seat.

Next to this, heading westward, is the Portree Industrial Estate and supermarket which borders onto the A87. Across the road is another cluster of houses, which neighbour the West Highland College UHI, Portree High School (the island’s only secondary school), a leisure centre (Arainn Fhinn, The Fingal Centre) and the Gaelic medium primary school – Bun-Sgoil Ghaidhlig Phort Rìgh (around 20 minutes’ walk from the centre). The leisure centre features fitness sessions for families (Tues, 16:40pm; Weds, 13:15pm) and two open sessions for 8-11 year olds (Weds, 16:30pm; Friday 15:45pm), with swimming sessions for families running most weekday afternoons from 16:30pm (Mon-Thurs) or 13:15pm (Fridays).

Mid-sized residential properties and B&B’s are dotted along A87 southwards from the town along the coast, which also includes the Aros Centre, a visitor attraction housing exhibition areas, a performance venue, cinema, restaurant and play-area.

The town spans four SIMD datazones, with two of these in the 40% most deprived areas of Scotland, Table 1. It is important to note that SIMD includes data on a variety of topics, including income, employment, education, health, access to services, crime and housing (Scottish Government 2020e). As a whole, Skye has been identified as highly vulnerable to the downturn in international visitors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than 70% of tourists to Skye being international visitors. Tourism overall was estimated to provide £211 million to Skye’s economy and many jobs in the area are reliant on this seasonal trade (Moffat Centre for Travel and Tourism 2020).

Kyle of Lochalsh and Portree were also identified by the Scottish Public Health Observatory (ScotPHO) as being some of the most vulnerable areas in Scotland to COVID-19 (ScotPHO n.d.). ScotPHO’s measure takes into account a range of demographic, social and clinical indicators that are likely to affect the impact of the pandemic on communities and communities’ ability to mitigate the effects. The measure includes data on hospital admissions and long-term health conditions, the number of vulnerable and looked after children, households living in fuel poverty and mid-year population estimates.

Table 1: SIMD 2020 data for the Lochalsh & Portree datazone

Datazone (2020)	Location	Total Population	Working Age Population	SIMD 2020 Percentile (a ranked measure of the most deprived areas (1) to the least (100))
S01010672	Lochalsh	635	409	35
S01010678	Skye North East	678	442	34
S01010679	Skye North East	577	344	55
S01010680	Skye North East	635	360	35
S01010681	Skye North East	1186	767	45

Source: SIMD, 2020 - [SIMD \(Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation\)](#)

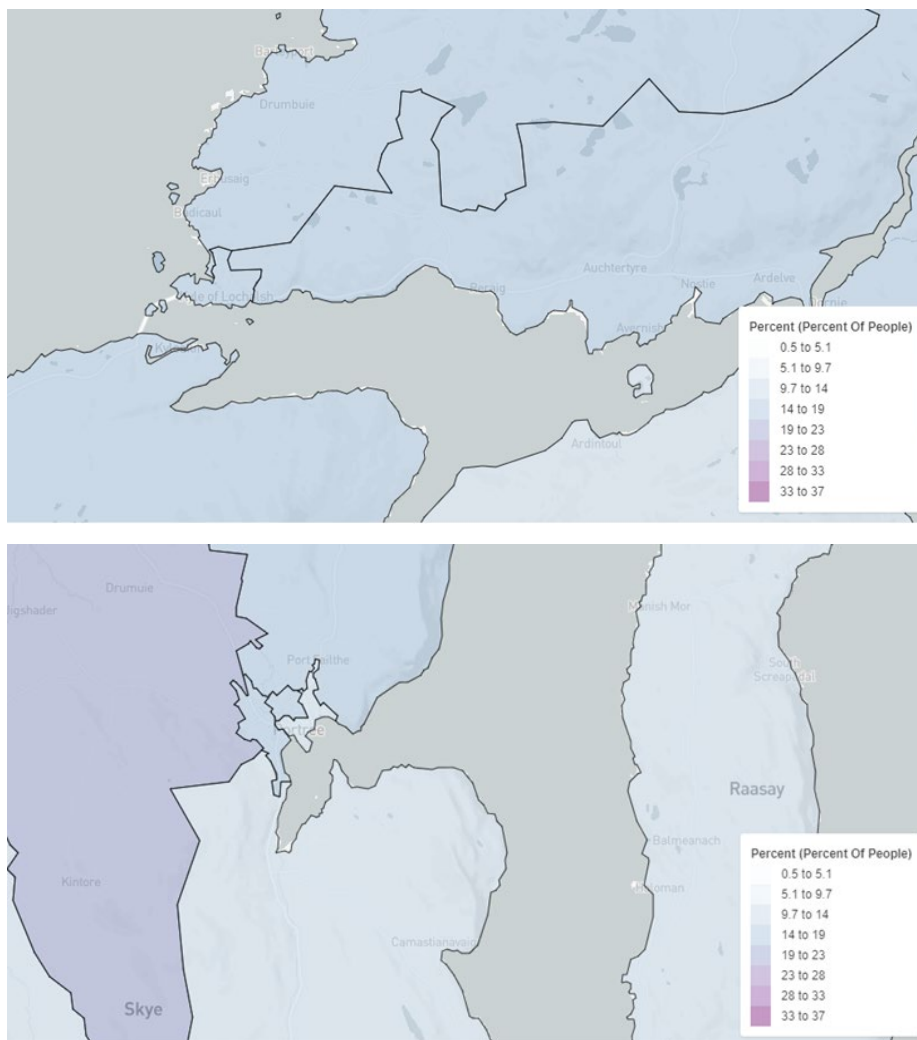


Figure 1: Population estimates for the people who are under 16 years old, from 2018 mid-year population estimates **a) (top)** Estimates for Kyle of Lochalsh **b) (bottom)** Estimates for Portree. (Source: Scottish Government, 2020 - [statistics.gov.scot](#))

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(<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>)

Childcare Policy Setting

Between 11.3% and 18.9% of the population in Portree is under 16 years old. This is broadly similar to Kyle of Lochalsh where 17.1% of the population is under 16 years old and to neighbouring areas, see Figure 1. The Highland's Council is the lead organisation for the delivery of children's services, working alongside NHS Highland, SCRA and Northern Constabulary as well as third sector partners and elected members, such as the Children's Champion (Christie and Duncan 2014).

In their 2017 Early Learning and Childcare Delivery Plan, the council committed to the expansion of funded childcare hours, with all local authority centres offering a minimum of 9am-3pm with associated school group options for four weeks in the summer (Highland Council 2017). When reviewing provision at the time, the council note the greater costs of providing services in the Highlands compared to an urban authority given the remote and rural areas that have very small number of children. The report also noted issues of rural poverty and fuel poverty, with families having to travel large distances to access services and having to spend around 10-20% more on basic everyday requirements on average (Highland Council 2017). In response to this they proposed a phased increase in hours, from 600 in 2017 to 1,140 in 2020, ensuring services across the Highlands could be developed sustainably.

While plans for the delivery of the new funded hours was paused during the early phase of the pandemic, as of May 2021 the council reported that they were on target for all eligible 2, 3, and 4 year olds to have access to 1,140 hours by August 2021 (Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning 2021b). Families can access the 1,140 hours across two settings, where there is an offer of hours in each setting. This enables more families to access the full provision, where providers are still increasing their hours due to infrastructure developments or staffing requirements, and supports the sustainability of settings (Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning 2021a).

Emergency Childcare Hub during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the initial lockdown (March 2020), schools and childcare services were closed. Emergency childcare was provided through childcare hubs across Scotland. The nearest childcare hub to Kyle of Lochalsh and Portree was Portree High School, identified in Figure 2 by the purple icon.

Initially hubs were run at 20-30% of the stated capacity of the school, with the number of children in a classroom limited to around 8 children. Hubs were staffed on a rota basis by volunteers who included teachers, pupil support assistants, early years practitioners, school office administrators, head teachers, and volunteers from High Life Highlands (a Highlands Charity group who led sports activities with pupils) (Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning 2020).

National level guidance outlined that children of key workers and vulnerable children and young people would be eligible to attend the emergency childcare hubs, but that if children

could be safely cared for in their home they should be, to minimise public risk (Scottish Government 2020c). In Scotland, key workers were broadly defined in three groups, see Table 2. Vulnerable children were identified through support services, such as those on the child protection register, who are looked after, in receipt of free school meals, who have complex additional support needs, or those affected by poverty and deprivation (Scottish Government 2020c).

Local authorities were encouraged to prioritise the use of private nurseries and childminders for keyworker children to help support the sector to stay viable (Executive Chief Officer Performance and Governance 2020). In the Highlands, even if the government had not encouraged the use of private providers, this would have been necessary as the council early years service model relies on a large number of partner providers. The rural geography of the region mean that council-only run pre-school settings are often impractical. The council thus has no suitable council settings to provide care for 0-2 year olds and insufficient capacity in the council's pre-school settings to meet demand for early years places for 3-5 years olds across the region (Executive Chief Officer Performance and Governance 2020).

While in pre-pandemic times, this partner approach works to help meet demand in the region, during the pandemic this created particular challenges for the Highlands. In the pandemic, councils were required to continue to pay partner providers irrespective of whether they stayed open to provide childcare for key workers (Executive Chief Officer Performance and Governance 2020). For many partner providers staying open and receiving their usual payments would mean they would be operating at a loss, as social distancing reduced their capacity considerably (20-30% of usual capacity or 2 households for childminders). Those that closed would be eligible for both their usual payment and would be able to apply for support under the furlough scheme and other business support payments. To mitigate this the government encouraged an approach whereby providers could seek additional funding from councils to ensure that if they opened they would break even. Given the higher number of partner providers and higher pre-existing costs of the childcare provision in the Highlands this created considerable financial risk for the Highland's council.

In the end, childcare hubs ran from 30th March 2020 to 15th July 2020 when normal providers re-opened. Limited summer childcare was provided at the hubs for category 1 keyworkers up until 10th August 2020 who had no other alternative childcare available (The Highland Council n.d.). Schools were open for vulnerable children and children of key workers during the 6-8th January 2021, with school transport operating as usual for those children. From the 11th January 2021, these settings switched to providing learning and teaching (instead of childcare) for vulnerable children and key worker children, with a phased re-opening of schools from February. School ELC, partner providers and childminder settings also opened during 6-12th January for vulnerable children and children of key workers to follow their usual attendance pattern. A list of key dates during the pandemic in Scotland is available in Appendix 7.

Childcare Infrastructure

There is a range of different services in the area for children aged 0-12. However, these services are spread across much greater distances, and are fewer in number. Figure 2 provides

a map of these services across Kyle of Lochalsh and the Isle of Skye, an interactive version is available here: [Highlands Childcare Map - uMap \(openstreetmap.fr\)](#). Appendix 1 (Kyle of Lochalsh) and Appendix 2 (Portree) provides a full list of services identified.

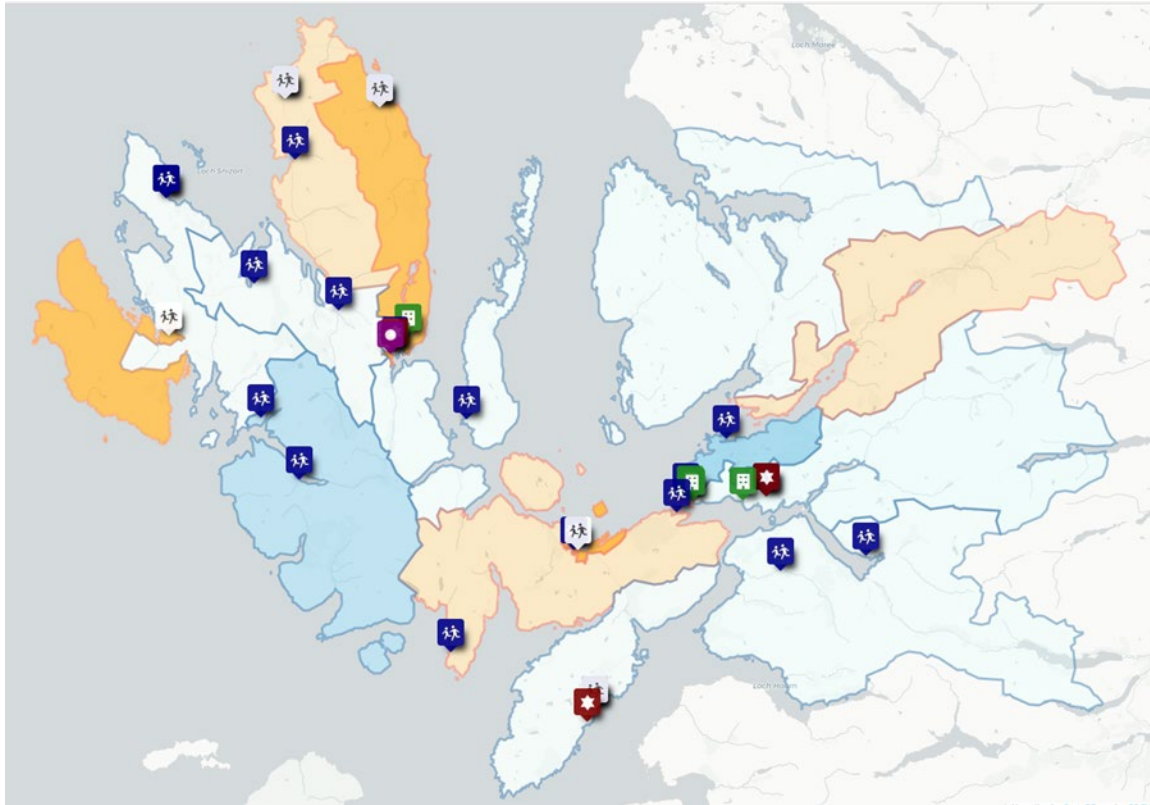


Figure 2: Map of formal childcare services and schools for children aged 0-12 in the Kyle of Lochalsh and Portree area. Note: Local Authority primary schools are represented by the blue children icons; Private nurseries by the red star icons; childminders by the green buildings; the emergency hub is shown by the purple circle icon; Gaelic Medium primary schools are shown in the black and white children icon. The datazones are shaded according to the SIMD2020, with orange and red areas representing more deprived areas and blue and light blue representing less deprived areas.

Map base data: © OpenStreetMap Contributors (under ODbL).

Services for children aged 0-3

There is little choice of services in the area for children aged 0-3. For those living in Kyle of Lochalsh, there is one childminder located in the town (10 mins walk from the centre, 0.5 miles) and another in the nearby village (6 mins drive, 3.8 miles). Both of these services are registered to provide care for children 6 children (of whom no more than 3 are not yet attending primary, and no more than 1 under 12 months), with hourly fees of between £4.50 and £5.

The nearest private nursery to Kyle of Lochalsh is Fàs Mòr located a half an hour drive away (21 miles). Fàs Mòr is a Gaelic-medium childcare facility on the Isle of Skye, registered to provide care for up to 45 children aged 0-12. The centre is open from 8:45am to 5pm Monday to Friday, with a flexible hourly rate of £5.20 (or an early booking rate of £4.20).

For those living in Portree, on the Isle of Skye, there is one childminder located nearby (37 mins walk/7 min drive, 2.1 miles), who is registered to provide care for 6 children (of whom no more than three are not yet attending primary school, and no more than 1 under 12 months). The service is open 8am-6pm, with an hourly rate of £5. School pick-ups are not available. There are two other childminders registered on the care inspectorate website as providing services in Portree, however no further details about these providers could be found.

There is one private nursery located in the area – Portree Nursery – which was set up by a group of parents who were frustrated by the lack of suitable playgroup provision in the area. This service offers day care facilities for babies from 4 months to 5 years, at an hourly rate of £4.60. There are a range of morning, afternoon or full day sessions available, with fees paid for the full hours the child is booked in for. To prevent the nursery operating at a loss, holiday retainers are used, with children entitled to 4 weeks not charged and 2 weeks charged at half fees.

In collaboration with the local Gaelic medium primary school, a Gaelic-medium mother and toddler group and playgroup runs for babies and 2 year olds in Portree. Playgroup sessions are £4 per session, with sessions running from 9:30-11am. The mother and toddler group (Rionnagan Beaga) has been suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to this sessions ran on a Monday (12:30-2:30pm) and Thursday (9:30am-11am) at a price of £1 per session for those under 6 months, and £2.50 for those over 6 months.

Services for children aged 3-5

Alongside the nurseries and childminders outlined in the previous section, once the child reaches 3 (or an eligible 2 year old), there are nursery classes at many of the local authority primary schools. For those living in Kyle of Lochalsh, Kyle Primary School operates a nursery class for 20 children aged 2-4 (no more than 5 under 3 year olds). This is an English medium nursery class. Kyleakin Primary School, located a 10 minute drive across the bridge (2.5 miles), also operates a full-time nursery class for 12 children (30 hours a week).

The nearest Gaelic medium nursery class is at Broadford Primary School, which operates both a Gaelic and English Medium nursery session. The nursery is open 9-3:30pm Monday to Thursday and 9 – 1pm on a Friday, and is 15 minutes' drive (8.7 miles) from Kyle of Lochalsh.

For those living in Portree, as well as the private nursery, there is a Gaelic Medium nursery – Portree (Gaelic) Nursery. The nursery is registered to provide day care for up to 30 children aged three to those not yet attending primary school. It works in partnership with the Highland Council, providing funded places from age 3. The nursery is open 8:45am – 5pm, Monday to Thursday, and 8:45am to 12pm on a Friday.

Services for children aged 5-12

Primary Schools & Afterschool Clubs

There is one primary school with a catchment area covering Kyle of Lochalsh – Kyle Primary School. The primary school is located in the northwest of the village in a quiet residential area. The grounds overlook the Sound of Raasay. The school is located in one of the 40% most deprived most deprived datazones in Scotland (SIMD, 2020). The school has 37 pupils attending, with less than 10% of pupils from an ethnic minority. Around 60-70% of the pupils have home addresses in the second most deprived quintile on the SIMD (SIMD2) and less than 10% from one of the most deprived datazones in SIMD (SIMD1). Free school transport is available for pupils living more than 2 miles from the school. This is managed by the Highland Council.

Afterschool clubs at the school rely on volunteers from the school staff, parents or members of the community. The school usually operates a football club and a shinty training club. School transport is not available after normal school dismissal time.

Kyle Primary school operates as a cluster school with the nearby Kyleakin School, and shares a head teacher. While Kyle of Lochalsh is not in the catchment area for Kyleakin School, the school is located 2.3 miles from the village (5 mins drive). Kyleakin School has 25 pupils attending, with less than 10% from an ethnic minority. The school is located in one of the 50% most deprived SIMD datazones (SIMD5). 80-90% of pupils' home addresses are in the third most deprived quintile datazone on the SIMD (SIMD3), less than 10% are from the most deprived quintile (SIMD1). As with Kyle Primary, transport is provided for children who live further than 2/3 miles from the school who are within the catchment area.

Kyleakin Primary School operates two afterschool clubs – Shinty (Thursday, 4:30pm-7:30pm) and Badminton (Friday, 1pm-1:45).

Both Kyle and Kyleakin Primary Schools operate composite classes, i.e. classes cover more than one age range. These classes take account ability and social grouping. Kyle Primary School currently has grouped classes covering P1-4 and a separate class for P5-7. Kyleakin Primary School has one group for P1-3 and a second for P4-7.

The nearest Gaelic Medium Primary School is Broadford Primary School, which runs two Gaelic Medium composite classes, P1-4 and P5-7. Pupils do not need to be native or fluent in Gaelic to attend the classes. Kyle of Lochalsh is located outside the catchment area for this school, and so pupils attending the school that live in that area will not qualify for school transport. The school has a total roll of 91 pupils, with more than 90% taught in Gaelic. The school is located in the 40% most deprived SIMD deciles. Less than 10% of pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds. 50-60% of pupils have home address in the third most deprived SIMD quintiles (SIMD3), while less than 10% are from the most deprived SIMD quintile (SIMD1).

The nearest afterschool club to Kyle of Lochalsh is run at Fàs Mòr located a half an hour drive away. This runs from 3:15pm to 5pm during school term time, and from 8:45am to 5pm during

school holidays and in-service days. This runs for children aged 5-12 years old, at an hourly cost of £6.50.

For those living in Portree, there are two primary schools located within the town – Portree Primary School (English Medium) and Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort Rìgh (Gaelic Medium). Portree Primary School has 158 pupils attending. The school is located in the north east of the town, in the 50% most deprived SIMD deciles. Less than 10% of the pupils are from an ethnic minority, with 70-80% of pupils having home address from the third most deprived SIMD quintile. Less than 10% of pupils have home addresses within the most deprived quintile (SIMD1). Prior to the pandemic, several afterschool clubs were running at the primary school: Master Builders Lego club (3:30-4:45pm, Tuesday); Junior Creative Dance (4-4:45pm, 6-10 years old, Wednesday); Teen Hip Hop (5:30-6:15pm, 10-13yrs, Wednesday); Beginners Ballet (5-5:45pm, Thursdays); Boys only youth dance (4-5pm, 6-15 years, Thursday).

Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Phort Rìgh is the first sole Gaelic Medium School in Skye and Lochalsh, and serves 141 pupils. Pupils in the catchment area have priority for the school. The school is located in the 40% most deprived SIMD decile, with less than 10% of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds. 80-90% of pupils have home addresses within the third most deprived quintile of SIMD (SIMD3), while less than 10% of pupils from the most deprived SIMD quintile (SIMD1).

There are a number of different afterschool clubs that were running at the school prior to the pandemic, including: Club Ealain (P2-P7, 3:30-5pm, Monday); Music lessons (3:30-4:30pm, Tuesday); Highland Dancing (4pm-8pm, Tuesday); Isle of Skye Youth Band (4pm-5pm, Wednesday); Shinty (P4-7, 3:30-5pm, Thursday).

There are also a number of clubs that run at Portree High School, however the majority of these run after 5:30pm. On a Friday, Skyedance run a mini ballet class (4-6, 2:30-3:15pm).

Across all primary school, pupils with additional support needs are generally catered for within their local school but with specialist support and advice as needed. Parents of children with additional support needs can make placing requests to any school in Scotland, even if that school is outside of the local authority area they live in. The nearest special school to the area is St Clement's School, 69 miles away from Kyle of Lochalsh and 115 miles from Portree, near to Inverness. The school roll is 42, and provides for children aged 3 to 18 years old.

Gaps in Childcare Services

For those living in Kyle of Lochalsh, there is a very limited number of services that are nearby for children aged 0-3. For working parents, they would have to travel half an hour (totalling two hours a day) to access the nearest private nursery, which is located on the Isle of Skye. Otherwise they have a limited choice of a handful of childminders that operate nearer.

By comparison, for those living in Portree there is a greater range of childcare services which are nearby – even if there is still a limited number of these individual services. Portree also offers parents a choice of services, operating both Gaelic Medium and English Medium

nursery classes and primary schools. While parents in Kyle of Lochalsh would have to travel noticeably further to access Gaelic Medium education.

Alongside day care services and education settings, Portree schools also provide a wide range of afterschool activities in both English and Gaelic. For children in Kyle of Lochalsh, there is a limited number of afterschool activities, which are dependent on the availability of volunteers/parents.

There appears to be a lack of breakfast clubs running at any of the primary schools in the area. For those in Kyle of Lochalsh looking to extend their childcare outside of the school day, childminders would be the only option, and even then not all of the registered childminders offer school pickups.

CO-PRODUCTION

Workshop One:

The research team presented a summary of the issues and insights emerging from the desk research. This was designed to orientate participants with the research as a starting point for the workshop. A method called Story Dialogue (CHEX, 2007) was then used to explore their experiences and develop these insights further. This is an established approach using an individual's experience of issues or services to stimulate wider reflections. The workshop stories used the overall 'Generative theme' **Experience/ of accessing childcare during COVID and how this differs from pre-covid services?**

The process involved listening actively to two stories, one from a parent and one from a local service provider, who also ran the childcare hub during lockdown. The group then reflected on each story to generate insights using questions to the storyteller and broader '**So What**' and **What Now** questions exploring policy, services and practice.

To facilitate the dialogue smaller groups made use of Google jam Boards to capture the content of conversations. It was also recorded to facilitate a more accurate record.

Extract from Parent - Story Teller:

"I have 4 children and have two jobs. When covid struck there was no childcare and no school. My mother in law was shielding so she wasn't available, luckily my brother was able to lend a hand as he was furloughed. Home schooling while working 2 jobs was a logistical nightmare – there was a lot going on at work. My oldest son needed some additional educational support. It was difficult to support all the kids with the attention they needed. We had very busy days from 8am to 9pm at night which was exhausting. I had the possibility of using the Hub but the timing did not suit our family – using the Hub would

have been the equivalent to 2/3 hours added on to the kids school day. When my brother left I had no option but to bring the kids to work, they remained in the car while I was working.”

“During 2nd lockdown things were easier, my eldest son attended the Hub but there was not a lot of things for him to do.

My mother-in-law is now back looking after the kids. There is still no after school provision for my kids. There was a trial of afterschool, but cost was a major barrier....it would cost £44 per day.”

Additional insights generated by questions from the group:

Supportive comments were made regarding the work of staff and services operating in a very difficult context with everyone doing things in new ways in a rapidly shifting landscape. That being said the questions from the group and resulting discussion inevitably raised issues around the options and choices available to parents and whether there were more effective service alternatives.

They also highlighted that parental work roles dictated what could be done and how this could concentrate responsibilities on one parent, although employer flexibility helped with this. The lack of specialist resources available to support children with additional needs was also raised.

Issues around the relative inflexibility of the Childcare Hub arose although some of these may have been around communication.

Reflections on the story highlighted how, despite the overall stress of the situation, lockdown one, where everything stopped, was a more positive experience for some parents creating a very family focused time - but the second lockdown, in winter and when schools were meant to be functioning online, was very challenging and stressful for some parents, particularly those managing alone for any reason. In this case, neighbour support was very important for some.

“If you don’t have a support network it is really difficult. I was left to do everything – I told the school that I couldn’t engage with their programme – there was a level of expectation that young kids have the relevant skills and hardware to participate. School work was difficult, but my child did take to it by the 2nd lockdown. If I had an option I would like to home school my child as a result of this experience”. (Workshop participant)

The severe limitations on pre-pandemic childcare framed the discussion and the impact of distance in remote rural settings, transport and costs.

“We rely on support within the family and when something happens it has a big effect. There is not a great deal of back up in provision when you live in a rural area. Childcare is only available if we can make a 50 mile round trip. We need more flexibility in the service provision.” (Workshop participant)

There was hope that the experiences might provoke a rethink of these issues with a more child and family centred approach emerging,

“This experience highlighted that something has to give ... We need to have a conversation as a society about what we expect from working and non- working parents.” (Workshop participant)

Children suffered significantly from the isolation and from secondary stresses arising from intense pressure on some parents, one key informant in the lead in to the workshop described how her own child was affected by the isolation:

“I went outside and she was crying around the corner and she was completely inconsolable. So I sat with her and I sat on the bench and I eventually got it out of her and she said to me that she was crying because her wish hadn't come true and she had wished really hard. And I said what was your wish and she said I wished my doll was alive. So that I could play with her.” (Workshop participant)

Extract from Local Childcare Providers story

“We closed our doors mid-March and thought that we would be closed for 2-3 weeks. We spent the previous week as a Board looking at the finances and how we could retain staff, pre the furlough announcement....There were many unknowns at this time. Highland council asked us to open as a Hub. The criteria were strict and was for key workers. All the families were known to us. The biggest issue was getting hold of PPE as we use it every day.....”

“During 2nd lock down we were very busy – people at work and parents wanting to normalise their family and therefore there was a need for formal childcare. The biggest issue as a provider is getting to grips with guidance about infection control which has changed on a regular basis.”

Some insights generated by questions from the group:

Covid appears to have highlighted the role of childcare and increased demand. Recruiting staff is very difficult though existing staff have returned to work when they could.

Providers have seen a difference in social skills of children like patience, sharing and socialising. Some children are not meeting the milestones for development.

It wasn't feasible for some people to get to Portree to use the Hub due to distance. There was a view that there was one approach for everyone – and that this was not very child centred. In response, providers identified a fairly rigid framework for operating the hubs:

“The criteria for the Hubs came from the Scottish Government – we had to work within the guidelines to establish the Hubs. The Hubs had volunteers, and staff to make sure we could make the needs. The number of children attending Hubs were shifting. We were also safeguarding children – we worked within strict rules and guidelines.” (Workshop participant)

Participants also felt that to deliver meaningful blended learning, there as a need to get the schools to have more flexibility about online provision and potential for 1 to 1 support was identified as important. Particularly in remote rural schools which have to operate composite classes.

This situation highlighted a need for investment plans for the area to include childcare alongside other economic and social planning. Some participants felt that it would be good to see a community take this challenge on in providing childcare where children are at the centre.

Other emerging themes – So What, Now What

Below is a selection of the wider themes arising from the story telling process:

- Parents and providers acknowledge that wrap around care is significantly (and in some cases, completely) lacking. This has a huge impact on their working options.
- Employers were flexible during the pandemic. It is important that this continues to accommodate workers.
- Access to childcare is differentially and unfairly affected by whether families use Gaelic or English provision. This was not viewed as fair by some participants.
- There is a need for people who experience childcare issues to be more involved in the planning process.
- We don't place enough value on childcare in the early years – there is a need to consider and plan childcare involving communities and development agencies to see this as a key part of wider social and economic planning and support workforce development accordingly.
- The economics of setting up and running out-of-school care is difficult, it takes around £30k to set up and run a properly registered childcare facility (council provision). In our rural communities, we don't have the numbers to underpin this in the current funding model where subsidy follows primarily the child.

- Childcare, work and housing are therefore closely related - including those working in childcare.

Workshop two:

The second workshop was built on insights from week one, which were written up and shared with the group between sessions, together with information on the purpose and process of co-production. A short facilitated session agreed some key mutual behaviours necessary for the session to be successful:

- The need to recognise our shared purpose to use experience to improve services
- That this involves setting aside existing roles & treating each other as equals
- It requires taking each other ideas seriously
- Supportive respectful challenge is welcome
- A more equal power relationship as a basis for dialogue
- Working towards joint Ideas that meet childcare needs
- That these should be needs' led rather than resource led at this stage
- And that the session was a starting point – not an end point

The rest of the evening involved three mixed groups of parents and providers working together in small groups using a variation on the World Café technique³ to address three themes.

- Improving childcare service & infrastructure
- Making services more crisis resilient
- Support child and parent well-being

Participants were asked to think about the issues from the themed groupings and consider these in terms of what might be appropriate.

- Policy ideas at Scottish or local level
- Changes to how existing services are delivered
- New services ideas
- New roles/status for childcare

Proposals for action arising from the workshop

³ For more information please visit: The World Café – World Café Method. <http://www.theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method/>

Childcare Infrastructure

- Provision was often expensive and didn't fully meet parent's needs. It was felt that it created low expectations of what was possible, suppressing demand for services. This called into question the funding model requiring guaranteed levels of use by fee paying parents and suggested a need for a new approach to investing in childcare services sustainably. This approach needed to allow for the sustainable provision of breakfast and after school care in line with working parent's needs.
- The challenges of remoteness and rural transport makes access to services very difficult creating inequalities of access. Therefore, more accessible local solutions were needed and/or more accessible affordable transport options. The reliance on family support was a crucial alternative to scarce and often expensive childcare, but the fact that this was largely unavailable during the pandemic illustrates its fragility.
- Childcare should be viewed as part of sustainable community infrastructure linked to housing, rural schools and economic development. Participants felt strongly that it should be core funded appropriately rather than relying solely, or largely, on parental fees. There should be more emphasis on ability to pay based on disposable income after essential cost like transport are considered. Funders and policy makers should involve parents and communities directly, in addressing these issues and testing new approaches. This was felt to be consistent with new policy thinking on place making and rural sustainability, as well as child and family wellbeing.
- There is a need for further dialogue around the wider needs pre fives & how to increase provision for the pre 2s
- These investment issues will not be resolved quickly, and more localised short-term solutions were also identified. These included local training for childminders and potential childcare staff; helping local providers, like childminders, overcome challenges of regulation and procurement rules; more creative use of public and community resources for childcare purposes, including school buildings and school transport to increase access to childcare.
- The anomaly arising from different funding arrangements for Gaelic medium education - including free wrap around provision for some, while others not using Gaelic provision had very limited or expensive provision, should be addressed. While no one suggested levelling down in such circumstances there was a strong sense from some that the situation was unfair.
- It was also suggested that community approaches could be used to increase the supply of childcare by supporting community-based peer support e.g. parent and toddler groups, especially for those who did not have family locally to fill gaps in services. However, the point was made that these types of services were not an alternative to formal appropriately regulated childcare services.
- Relaxing restrictions on school buildings and ensuring all new build community buildings are childcare compliant would be a useful and practical development. It was proposed that remote rural schools should be seen as wider childcare hubs

presenting more sustainable choices for communities and families and helping to address the issue of rural depopulation.

Crisis resilient services

- To strengthen partnerships between parents, childcare providers & planners, co-production should be used in planning for crisis resilient services. This should include how to increase access to affordable technology for blended learning.
- The pressures on staff, and the value of Covid Childcare Hubs were recognized as was the fact that they and their families were also affected by lockdown. Parents appreciated the role of services in helping those with access to work and to deal with their isolation.
- Should they be required again, suggestions were made on the need to improve communication in terms of eligibility for access to services like the Hub and the need to clarify how services could be more flexible in catering for a wider range of child need than parents believed was the case in this crisis. This is crucial to enable more people to consider making use of the Hubs – especially given how difficult it can be practically to do so,
- There is a need to recognise staff supporting voluntary and community services as key workers with the requisite childcare and other supports need to fulfil this role.
- The background challenges of distance and transport issues prompted people to suggest that the solution in remote rural areas was in keeping a more dispersed network of local services open with appropriate mitigations in place, rather than concentrating it all in a central locations which added long, time consuming distances to the process of using it. This often-placed support beyond the practical reach of some families who needed it in financial and other terms.
- Consideration should be given to practical issues such as access to PPE and how to manage the impact of constantly evolving guidance on infection control and other matters, especially as this was beyond the control of individual providers.

Child and Family well-being

- There were examples of key workers having to take children to work and some children affected by lack of essential socialisation, with the life skills impacts this created. These were powerful messages from the workshops. The impact on school transitions and challenges of online learning in composite classes in remote rural schools highlighted other important local experiences.
- Some households were balancing carer, parent, teacher, key worker and taxi driver roles in long stressful days during the lockdown. The workshops concluded that there was more that could be explored in responding to this and that resilient childcare - and new services to support home learning and combat family isolation should be a key part of future pandemic planning, informed by parent and children's voices, and linked to building back better as whole.

- Potential improvements were identified including the implementation of improved baseline childcare support identified earlier to create a more resilient infrastructure for supporting families with consequential societal benefits on issues like access to work, improved income and wellbeing.
- It was also suggested that a dialogue focused on child and family wellbeing in the pandemic should take place with families to inform future resilience planning for some parents – really serious wellbeing impacts were evident which should be acknowledged, and future support planned for in case this situation arises again. Childcare providers could possibly play a role in providing a conduit for parents needs to be identified and met, including peer to peer support.
- There was also a call for emergency provision to reflect on whether more could be done to support children at key transition stages such as nursery to primary or at p7.

The workshop ended with a structured reflection on the overall discussion using three prompts which invited participants to share views live in the chat. Responses are illuminating in terms of where people feel the process of reflection and partnership working could go. These are recorded in the table below.

Let's start...	Let's stop	Its radical but
....by having a further conversation with parents	.....making it so difficult to comply with all the rules, which in return limits services particularly in rural areas.	.... let's really fix community transport not just talk about it
....putting childcare on the community planning table	..... thinking that childcare is not a collective issue.	....let's properly invest in our rural communities and support the families living in them.
.....creating more opportunities in rural communities	..... working in isolation	.... let's make childcare central to policy decisions.
.....the conversation with childcare as a priority to society.	.....the general assumption that it is the mothers responsibly	....let's value parents as the best people to look after their children.
.....properly valuing and supporting the role parents provide in society.	.....putting up barriers to excellent childcare	...but let's make childcare more readily available (and free lol)
....a conversation with the SG re parents staying at home	.....ignoring the issue rural communities face around childcare.	.....let's think about unique and different models of

.....thinking it's only an
education issue

delivery, not more of the
same that isn't working

This paper presents a summary of the Highland research and workshops to see the full report and find out more about the research. Please go to: www.childcare-covid.org