

Maree Todd MSP, Minister for Children and Young People

By email (3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021)

CC John Swinney MSP, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education

Dear Ms Todd,

**Urgent need for financial and other support to the School Age Childcare sector in Scotland.**

I am writing to ask that an immediate package of specific financial support is made available for the school age childcare sector in Scotland as many services are facing the real prospect of closure within the coming months, which will have a huge impact on the wellbeing of children and families as well as the economic recovery in Scotland. Parents cannot work or study without childcare.

In our recently conducted financial survey (the results of which we have already shared with you), 50% said that they would close within the next 5 months, and this was mostly when they were able to open with limited capacity PRIOR to current restrictions. We anticipate that due to ongoing expenses with greatly reduced or no income, that an even larger number of services are facing closure sooner than the survey results suggest. To put this into context, prior to the pandemic, out of school care was the second largest sector providing care for nearly 80,000 children in over 1,000 services in city, urban and rural settings. We know that small rural services are especially vulnerable at this time and some have already closed. There is a sense from the workforce and families that the sector has been largely forgotten at this current time.

In the Out of School Care Draft Framework 2019, you say it is “important to recognise the vital role out of school care plays in providing essential childcare services for families and a wide range of experiences for children.

Available evidence points to the importance of out of school care for the whole family... We also know that out of school care, including holiday childcare, has a vital role in addressing both economic and social exclusion.” (Ministerial View, p1)

NOW is truly the time to recognise the importance of out of school care through dedicated financial assistance- although it is not a statutory service, it forms part of the infrastructure of support to parents and families alongside ELC and education, and must be recognised accordingly.

With yesterday’s announcement about the (hopeful) return of ELC services and P1-P3 on Feb 22<sup>nd</sup> many out of school care services have contacted us dismayed that they will not be able to re-open for this age-group and only continue to provide critical childcare. There is anger that children can return to school yet our skilled sector professionals cannot care for them, despite demonstrating that they were able to keep children and staff safe from COVID prior to the current lockdown- infection and transmission rates within out of school care were low.

This sector is extremely fragile now and is in danger of collapsing. The despair we are hearing from individual providers is breaking my heart. Crucially they want to re-open safely and carefully for the sake of the children and families they serve, many of whom are frontline workers and desperate for childcare. These are workers who are keeping the nation fed; are in manufacturing; cleaning and care services across the country; teaching staff... the list could continue. Many of these parents have not

stopped working and cannot work from home, yet without guaranteed childcare their daily struggles are intensified.

The sector is raising the following issues:

ELC has continued to receive funding throughout the pandemic and childminders have been allowed to remain open, yet school age childcare services have received only one specific grant as part of the re-opening grant (Transitional Support Fund) to cover extra costs, and nothing since then. Our survey also showed that many services were ineligible for, or unable to access the mix of business or third sector grants and loans set out for businesses. They point out that even smaller scale support, like a grant for outdoor clothing, was only for ELC and not the whole childcare sector.

It is important to remember that out of school care staff must meet the same registration, qualification and training requirements as ELC workers, yet the staff are feeling marginalised and forgotten. Some, who have never closed but have been there for keyworkers and vulnerable children throughout, are especially upset, and I quote:

**“We have been putting our lives on the line but what thanks or support do we get?”**

School age childcare services generally have high additional costs that the job retention scheme does not cover. Many have high rent costs, all have to pay pension and national insurance, as well as other insurance and registration fees all needed to operate legally. Reserves are running low and already staff are being made redundant and services are shrinking.

There has never been a high incidence of Covid-19 in services, who all clearly follow health guidelines stringently and are used to operating with small cohorts of children to minimise contact between age groups and if from more than one school. Staff and parents also follow stringent rules to ensure everyone's safety.

I know I do not have to convince you of the benefit to children's health and wellbeing of being able to play and to socialise with other children, which is so essential to child development and wellbeing.

Services tell us the current grant (Temporary Restrictions Fund) falls far short of their costs in order to be able to re-open at least for keyworkers and vulnerable children. Given small numbers of children the amount likely needs to be trebled or indeed quadrupled per child to even begin to cover costs. For children with disabilities and additional support needs, costs are higher again, and indeed any one to one personal care should be factored in for access to testing and vaccinations. Of course, we and the sector, will understand where there are clear scientific reasons for this, but if they cannot re-open then they need funding to cover all the hidden costs that the job retention scheme does not cover.

We know progress has stalled on the policy framework for school age childcare, understandably due to the pandemic, but right now the school age childcare sector needs action and investment, not promises of a future policy, good as they are, as they may not survive to benefit from this at all.

This second biggest childcare sector have done, and will continue to do their best: they want to support their children, families, communities and economy by the work they do. They have been personally brave in stepping up in a pandemic, and they are thoroughly demoralised when they see, for example, a package of £25 million for “weddings” support, compared to a tiny amount of £3 million across the whole non ELC or childminding sector, and still not specific to school age childcare.

We know you as the Minister, have given thanks and very warm words, but this is not enough, we know you want to see school age childcare grow and develop, but this will not happen if many are

forced to close. We need specific action and financial investment now and we will support you in making the case for this as best we can.

As part of this we are making this an open public letter, which we will share with all the services, desperate for support.

I thank you for your commitment and ongoing support to us and our sector, and hope you can take firm action on our behalf. I look forward to hearing from you.

Finally, I would like to leave you with some comments we have received from services:

- “Totally deflated. Have tried everything to try and help the country through this horrendous pandemic but we’re constantly eroded from all sides. Desperately in need of help, running at consistent loss.”
- “The service is being crushed financially. Increased costs with no rent relief, staff needed to manage bubbles but a reduction in usage leaves the service at a loss. If we could have a rent-free period to support the provision of the service that would be beneficial. Our service is the only one in the area, for us to close would impact the entire community and would have detrimental effects for the families who utilise the service or who may do so after returning to work. The OSC must remain a viable service to ensure a continuation of service for years to come.”
- “We do indeed need continuing financial assistance or will have to close once this all ends. Furloughing staff is not the answer for our sector as staff are all needed despite the drop in numbers due to picking up from different schools and supervising all spaces which will still be the situation if and when the restrictions of bubbles are lifted. The precarious situation is very stressful especially worrying about having to cover redundancy payments if we have to close and concerns about having to make this decision as well as losing my own employment and letting down those families that do still need us.”

Best Wishes,



Irene Audain MBE

Chief Executive

Scottish Out of School Care Network