Dear Roz,

**Education & Skills Committee: Budget Scrutiny**

Thank you for your e-mail of 1 October 2019 requesting comment from the Scottish Childminding Association (SCMA) on the above.

We do not feel we have the financial expertise to offer substantive comment on the level of funding allocation appropriate to support the delivery of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) policy in the financial year 2020-21, but are happy to respond to the request to provide comment on funding priorities and pressures in this area.

Earlier this month, we published our ELC Audit 2019 and shared this with the Committee and a range of stakeholders. This report provides the latest data on the level of Local Authority approval of childminders to deliver funded hours. With only ten months to go until 1,140 hours of ELC should be available to parents/carers nationally our audit found –

**Three- and Four- Year Olds**

- only 12.6% of childminders in Scotland (n=599) have been approved by Local Authorities to deliver ‘funded hours’ for all 3- and 4- year olds (and even less (4.2%; n=199) are currently actually delivering funded hours during phased expansion)

- 4 Local Authorities have no childminders approved as partner providers to deliver funded hours for 3- and 4- year olds (and there are a further 8 Local Authorities where the number of childminders approved are still in single figures)

**Eligible Two-Year Olds**

- only 16.2% of childminders in Scotland (n=773) have been approved by Local Authorities to deliver funded hours for eligible 2-year olds (and even less (3.3%; n=156) are currently actually delivering funded hours during phased expansion)

- 2 Local Authorities have no childminders approved as partner providers to deliver funded hours for eligible 2-year olds (and there are a further 9 Local Authorities where the number of childminders approved are still in single figures)
Impact Assessments

- some Local Authorities have conducted Environmental Impact Assessments for ELC expansion, but none are understood to have specifically assessed the impact of their ELC expansion plans, investment and decision-making on childminding services in their area.

In parallel –

- while progress has been made by Scottish Local Authorities in recruiting an additional 4069 staff nationally to deliver ELC expansion in their nurseries, the childminding workforce in Scotland continues to contract and this is accelerating (-14.5% since July 2014 and -5.8% since July 2018); workforce losses and shifts across other providers in the childcare and social care workforce are also being reported 23.4;
- SCMA continues to receive anecdotal reports from members that childminders have been leaving childminding, either to work in Local Authority nurseries or completely, as a result of ELC expansion;
- a recent SCMA membership survey found that 21% (1 in 5) of childminders who responded reported that they had lost families from childminding due to not being able to offer funded hours5. Changing childcare providers can be distressing for children and families, disruptive and breaks the continuity of care. The survey also found that 67% of respondents were interested in delivering funded hours;
- the Scottish Government has recently reaffirmed it’s commitment to enabling parents to choose childminding as an option for receiving their funded hours in the Programme for Government 2019-20.6

Against this background, we have made a number of practical recommendations to the Scottish Government which we believe are proportionate, appropriate and have the potential to redress the current problems being experienced if accepted and implemented. These include –

- While recognising the provider-neutral nature of ELC policy, national guidance should be strengthened as a matter of urgency to require all Local Authorities to ensure a more balanced provider model within their delivery plans including all provider types (Local Authority, private, voluntary sector and childminding) and to avoid any bias in commissioning.

National recommended mixes of provision should be included, with Local Authorities required to provide evidence as to where this may not be possible (i.e. in remote and rural locations where ensuring a national recommended mix may not be feasible), but also providing detail of what steps may be taken to improve the mix of provision.

- Given the very low level of Local Authority approval of childminders nationally, all Local Authorities in Scotland should be required to develop supplementary Childminding Action Plans to demonstrate how they will escalate and accelerate their inclusion of childminding in ELC delivery prior to, and beyond, August 2020.

- The Scottish Government should support SCMA in undertaking research to understand the reasons behind the declining childminding workforce and then in implementing targeted measures to address this.

Building on the ongoing national ELC recruitment campaign and it’s success in attracting staff into Local Authority nurseries to support ELC expansion, this should include a complementary childminding-specific national recruitment campaign aimed at positively promoting childminding.
as a more attractive career and alternative option for entering the childcare workforce. This would be aimed at increasing recruitment into, and diversity within, the childminding workforce to support parental choice with regard to forms of childcare available throughout Scotland and particularly in areas of deprivation where childminding provision is low and inequalities are pronounced.

**Eligible 2’s: ELC Uptake**

The most recent ELC Expansion Delivery Progress Report reports an encouraging 45% increase in uptake in funded hours for Eligible 2 Year Olds between April and August 2019. However, uptake remains below target nationally and is understood to be very variable locally. We believe much work remains to be done in increasing uptake within Eligible 2’s and are working to support this, most notably in Aberdeen and Glasgow where our Integrated Service Models are linking in vulnerable families accessing our Community Childminding services with uptake of funded hours in the Eligible 2’s. We believe this model has the potential to be replicated in other parts of Scotland to both increase uptake and help vulnerable families.

**Additional Support Needs**

We are aware that many childminders are involved in supporting children with Additional Support Needs (ASNs) due to the lower adult to child ratios (1:6) which exist within childminding, in comparison to other forms of childcare. This enables childminders to provide more one-to-one quality support, which is flexible, nurturing and relationship-based. In addition, it is our experience and understanding that this support is often successfully delivered through a blended model of childcare involving both childminders and local nurseries, where the additional support provided by a childminder can often be the difference in a child with ASNs being able to start and then continue to attend nursery, supporting transitions at this critical time. Unfortunately, there is little data to evidence the prevalence of support for children with ASNs in childminding and we are planning to gather some information on this area. Anecdotally, we are aware of increasing concerns from childminders around Scotland that these children with ASNs who benefit from blended care may be overlooked. Their concerns are due to the current focus of local implementation activities, in many areas, on delivering the numbers of places required by August 2020 principally through high-captacy single (nursery) providers, rather than on what type of childcare (nursery, childminding or blended) may be best for the child. The results of our most recent ELC audit confirm the very low levels of childminders involved in ELC delivery in advance of 2020 and the reduced opportunities arising for parents to be able to access blended models of childcare as a consequence.

**Colleges**

Noting the Committee’s higher-level interest in relation to the funding of Colleges within their ongoing scrutiny of the budget, we are aware of a practical and increasing operational difficulty involving Colleges and childminders. Over the last few months we have been receiving increasing reports from childminders around Scotland that they are experiencing unacceptable delays in receiving payment from local Colleges for their childminding services provided to parents who are studying at College and who receive support with their childcare costs. In one recent case, a childminder in Edinburgh was awaiting £580.00 in payment from a local College and it took over 6 weeks to process this. Childminding is not a high-income profession and delays in receiving payment for services, particularly if a childminder is providing childcare for more than one child of a student, can put severe pressure on business sustainability. Small childcare businesses should not be expected to absorb delays in payment from larger institutions. Potentially this could be a practical impact arising from higher-level funding challenges and we felt it appropriate to raise this, as it presents yet another challenge for
childminding services at a time when they are experiencing pressures in relation to inclusion in ELC delivery.

**Summary**

As noted within our ELC Audit 2019, we are very supportive of ELC policy and believe it has the potential to help thousands of families across Scotland with their childcare costs and will help to reduce inequalities in areas of deprivation. However, we also believe that in implementing this national policy at a local level, Scottish Local Authorities should respect parental preferences and ensure that all forms of childcare, including childminding, can be accessed equitably by parents for their funded hours entitlement in line with the ‘provider-neutral’ nature of the policy.

We know that a number of local authorities understand the value of childminding and have made some progress in approving childminders. However, five years after 600 funded hours were made available, the audit results show that nationally, and in many cases locally, the numbers of childminders who are currently involved in ELC delivery is both deeply worrying and unacceptably low. The decline in the childminding workforce is also becoming critical. Urgent action is required to adjust the balance of providers in delivering funded hours (where this is lacking) and to ensure that we do not lose sight of parental choice, regarding which childcare may be best for the child and to support the delivery of the Programme for Government 2019-20. As such, we believe that our recent audit recommendations should be included in ELC priorities going forward.

We hope that this information is helpful to the Committee in understanding current pressures and priorities from a childminding perspective and would be happy to provide any further information which we can.

Kind regards

Graeme McAlister
Chief Executive

**References**

1. Early Learning and Childcare Audit 2019, Scottish Childminding Association, October 2019
2. Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Delivery Progress, Improvement Service and Scottish Government, September 2019
3. Early Learning & Childcare Statistics 2018, Care Inspectorate, September 2019
4. National Day Nurseries Association 18/19 Workforce Survey Scotland, NDNA, August 2019
5. SCMA Membership Survey 2019