

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

6th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 3
November 2021

PE1883: Open all toddler and baby activities
within Tier 3 of COVID-19/future pandemic
lockdowns

Note by the Clerk

Petitioner Katrina Clark

**Petition
summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to
allow baby and toddler activities to be considered equally with other
indoor activities in Tier 3 of future lockdowns.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1883>

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that has been under consideration since 26 July 2021.
2. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. While not a formal requirement, petitioners have the option to collect signatures on their petition. On this occasion, the petitioner elected to collect this information. 33 signatures have been received.
4. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe B** of this paper.
5. A submission has been provided by the petitioner. This is included at **Annexe C**.

Scottish Government submission

6. The Scottish Government submission states that throughout the pandemic the Scottish Government recognised the need to support parents, young children and families. It explains, however, that public safety has had to be paramount, and measures and mitigations were put in place to reduce the risk of infection and spread of Covid-19. These measures, including those relating to baby and toddler activities, were kept under constant review.
7. Scottish Government guidance was available from September 2020 for unregulated organised children's activities, such as parent and baby/toddler groups. This guidance was developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders.
8. The submission states that within Level 3 of lockdown, parent and baby groups were permitted to take place indoors. It notes, however, that the number of parents/children able to participate in these was capped in order to reduce the risk of transmission.
9. Soft play centres in Level 0 and Level 1 areas began to reopen from 2 November 2020 in line with specific mitigation guidance. All soft play centres were able to re-open on 19 July 2021 when every area moved to level 0.
10. With regards to support for families, the submission details a number of initiatives and programmes introduced by the Scottish Government to support children and young people through the pandemic, including in relation to play and wellbeing.
11. The Scottish Government notes that due to the fluid nature of the pandemic that it is not in a position to rule out further Covid-19 related restrictions or advise on what these might be. The Scottish Government states, however, that its intention would be that any future restrictions would be specific, targeted and proportionate to the evolving risks of Covid-19.

Petitioner submission

12. In her submission, the petitioner notes that most of the groups in her local area were not running as a result of the advice and guidance issued for baby and toddler groups. Of the groups that were open, the petitioner highlights that most were franchise companies that required block bookings with social distancing.
13. The submission notes that even though the guidance was in place from late 2020 onwards, the general consensus from parents on social media was that baby and toddler groups were not available until March/April/May of this year.

14. The petitioner compares the issuing of guidance for baby and toddler groups in October 2020 with the reopening of pubs and cafes as an indication that age groups were not treated equally. As a result of this, the petitioner notes that she has heard of children in this age group requiring speech and language input, as they have not had the same opportunities to interact with other children as they usually would.
15. Concerns about the funding offered by the Scottish Government to encourage outdoor activities were raised by the petitioner. The petitioner stated that people in her Facebook group had said that the funding criteria was complicated, confusing and they were denied funding at times.
16. The petitioner's submission concludes with a number of proposed questions to the Scottish Government:
- If you can open up nurseries and schools will you also allow the same level of socialisation for children in Baby Toddler groups equally?
 - If you can open up pubs and cafes that allow older groups to socialise will you also at the same time (if babies/children are not at risk) allow baby and toddler activities like toddler groups and soft play if they are following the cleaning standard required of nurseries/schools?
 - If there is a need to fund a different type of activity outdoors will you also realise the value of the groups well established, well known within communities and help them with funding and make it easy to access, for the well-being of the babies/toddlers and parents?
 - If restricted numbers are needed to allow the funding to run extra groups, will there be support from the government to make sure there are groups running within each wider community within Scotland?
 - Will you provide support for parents who are having to navigate developmental milestones when they have no one within their social bubbles that can help with the socialisation, as well as play between children?
 - Overall will you make this age group i.e. between 0-3 years a priority also, and how will you deal with the after effects for children in this age group?

Action

17. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

PE1883: OPEN ALL TODDLER AND BABY ACTIVITIES WITHIN TIER 3 OF COVID-19 /FUTURE PANDEMIC LOCKDOWNS

Petitioner

Katrina Clark

Date Lodged

26 July 2021

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to allow baby and toddler activities to be considered equally with other indoor activities in Tier 3 of future lockdowns.

Previous action

I have contacted my local MSP Jackie Baillie who sent an email saying she sends her full support for my petition.

Background information

Throughout the pandemic, although we have all suffered, some people will suffer more long term, and personally I don't want that to be our children. I understand why restrictions need to be in place for the safe opening up of society after a pandemic, but even after a lot of restrictions have been lifted there are still a lot of limitations for young ones. There are now waiting lists for baby and toddler groups of parents. Young children have been isolated because of the pandemic but also not having access to baby/toddler groups. I believe that the opening of soft play centres should be considered to be as equal as other indoor activities given that they follow good hygiene guidance and use the track and trace system. In my view, soft play is a safe and healthy activity for child development and activities such as swimming classes are important too.

SPICe

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE1883](#): Open all toddler and baby activities within Tier 3 of COVID-19 /future pandemic lockdowns, lodged by Katrina Clark

Background

This petition is calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to allow baby and toddler activities to be considered equally with other indoor activities in Tier 3 (more usually called level 3 in Scotland) of any future lockdowns.

The petitioner states that, while they understand the need for public health restrictions over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is also a need to ensure that children are not unfairly disadvantaged. The petitioner goes on to state that soft play centres should be able to reopen at the same time as other indoor activities, following good hygiene guidance and using the test and trace system. Waiting lists for baby and toddler groups are also highlighted, and the petitioner states that young children have been isolated as a result of not having access to these groups.

The petitioner states they have contacted Scottish Labour MSP Jackie Baillie, who responded via email to give her full support.

Parent and baby groups

In September 2020, the Scottish Government issued guidance on parent and baby groups, which stated that no more than five adults could attend a class. [The guidance has since been updated; the list of updates can be viewed on the Scottish Government website.](#)

In October 2020, a petition on restrictions on attendance to parent and baby classes being capped at five adults maximum resulted in MSPs highlighting the issue in the Scottish Parliament. [Scottish Liberal Democrat MSP Alex Cole-Hamilton raised the issue at First Minister's Question Time on 1 October 2020, asking for the cap on](#)

[numbers to be reviewed](#). First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP agreed to do this, and the Scottish Government published updated guidance on 5 October 2020. [This stated that the maximum number of adults present in groups where children were under 12 months could change to 10. For groups where children were over 12 months, the limit would stay at 5.](#)

Announcing the change, the First Minister stated that the government understood the “vital importance of parent and baby groups, especially for supporting mental health and wellbeing in the early months after having a baby”.

She added that the updated guidance sought to strike the right balance between supporting mental health and wellbeing and trying to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Over the winter lockdown from 4 January 2021 until 12 March 2021, a Stay at Home order was in place and parent and baby groups were not permitted. [Upon easing in March 2021, for those living in Level 4 areas, only outdoor parent/baby and toddler groups could go ahead, with no more than 15 adults present at any one time with a group of under 5s.](#) For those living in Level 3 areas, indoor parent and baby groups were once again permitted.

The Scottish Government website currently states the ‘guidance is under review and will be updated to reflect the current situation’.

Soft play

Under the Scottish Government COVID-19 restrictions, soft play centres are required to remain closed in levels 2-4, but can re-open in levels 0 and 1 if they comply with guidelines around ventilation, face coverings, cleaning, managing and operating the soft play frame, taking bookings and holding parties. [Guidance for the soft play sector is set out on the Scottish Government website.](#)

Many soft play centres have been closed since March 2020. [Soft play business owners held a demonstration outside the Scottish Parliament on 8 June 2021 in protest at the ongoing restrictions.](#) The Scottish soft play owners’ management group said that the reasons why restrictions for the sector were tougher than for other leisure activities, such as ten pin bowling, were unclear.

The Scottish Government announced in October 2020 that one-off grants of up to £50,000 were to be made available to soft play businesses, with grant awards based on rateable value.

On 2 June 2021, Finance Secretary Kate Forbes MSP announced additional funding for Local Authority Discretionary Funds, which included £7.5m to support hospitality, including soft play in Level 2 areas.

On 15 June 2021, the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland commented that further delay to the reopening of soft play centres in Level 2 areas would be “unforgivable” without further support.

Lynne Currie
Senior Researcher
14/07/2021

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Scottish Government submission of 12 October 2021

PE1883/A - Open all toddler and baby activities within Tier 3 of COVID-19 /future pandemic lockdowns

In response to your request of 5 July for the Scottish Government's views on the action called for in above petition. I will start by stating that, thankfully, we are now at Beyond Level 0 as a country, and the majority of the restrictions have been removed.

Throughout the pandemic the Scottish Government has recognised the need to support parents, young children and families. The package of guidance and support referenced within this response is evidence of that. However, public safety has of course been paramount, and measures and mitigations had to be put in place to reduce the risk of infection and spread of Covid-19. These measures, including those relating to baby and toddler activities, were however constantly under review.

Specific Covid-19 guidance was developed and available from September 2020 to ensure that unregulated organised children's activities, such as parent and baby/toddler groups, had the guidance they required to deliver these services safely. This was developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders, such as CALA Childcare and Early Years Scotland, to ensure as many organisations as possible had access to tailored information appropriate to their service users' needs.

At Level 4, the level before full lockdown, these activities were permitted outdoors, and could take place where it was safe to do so. Again, the numbers permitted to meet at any one time were limited to reduce transmission.

Within Level 3, parent and baby groups were permitted to take place indoors. This was largely in line with other similar indoor activities, which included adults as well as children, such as non-contact sports. There were caps placed on the numbers that were permitted at any one time to

further reduce the risk of transmission. These were based on clinical advice based on the best evidence available at the time.

The Scottish Government recognises the adverse impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on families with children and young people and the key importance of outdoor play to children and families' health and wellbeing.

Throughout the pandemic, the Scottish Government worked closely with the play sector to support families with play and learning at home during lockdown through a range of channels. The Parent Club website and related social marketing campaigns included advice, information and resources aimed at supporting families to cope with being at home together for long periods. Play was at the forefront of our messaging as a means of helping children adjust to the changes in their lives, assist with learning and lead to positive interactions with their families, as well as making transitions back to school and nursery after a period of restrictions.

In recognition of the impact of Covid moving much of play outdoors, we also launched the Outdoor Community Play Fund in July 2020 to enable more children and families in disadvantaged communities to enjoy outdoor play. The Fund supported 23 charities across Scotland in 2020/21 delivering organised outdoor play activities, equipment and clothing for children and young people to help as many of them as possible to play outside, be active and meet friends. The Scottish Government invested a further £500,000 in the Outdoor Community Play Fund to support organised play activities throughout Scotland in 2021/22.

We worked closely with the play sector, including Play Scotland and Smart Play Network and others, to provide non-digital support to vulnerable families, including physical play packs and materials for different age groups of children. The activities that are within the pack range from group work to individual work, with some involving play, challenges and a choice of freedom in the completion of them – all key characteristics of play identified in the Play Strategy.

The Scottish Government provided £20 million to local authorities and a coalition of national organisations to deliver a Summer 2021 Programme

with opportunities and online resources accessible to all children and young people, to support their mental health and wellbeing and helping them to socialise, play, and reconnect - and recover from the pandemic. These local programmes focused on improving wellbeing through a variety of activities for all those aged up to 25. This included enhancing outdoor play opportunities within the local community and supporting baby and toddler groups to engage with young children and their parents and carers to improve health and wellbeing, confidence, attachment and support play and learning environment at home. Comprehensive guidance has been provided to local authorities and to national offer partners for providing these enhanced activities, with key focus on supporting the right to play.

Soft play centres were able to re-open from 2 November 2020 in areas in protection level 0 and 1, having regard to specific guidance which was developed in collaboration with the sector, regulators and clinicians, setting out clear mitigation measures to reduce the risk of virus transmission, such as enhanced cleaning regime, restricting numbers at the centre at any point to ensure physical distancing can be maintained and any equipment which may be more difficult to clean (such as ball pits) would be removed or closed. We recognise that the COVID-19 restrictions impacted adversely on the soft play sector in Scotland and a range of support was provided to soft play businesses including through the Contingency Fund and the Strategic Framework Business Fund.

All soft play centres were able to re-open on 19 July 2021 when all of Scotland moved to level 0 and as of 9 August, when all of Scotland moved beyond level 0, the soft play sector has been operating under the same guidance as all businesses and workplaces in Scotland, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): safer businesses and workplaces guidance](#). This guidance is for all businesses and workplaces and provides advice on measures which should continue to be taken to continue to reduce risk and support staff and customers. In addition to the safer workplaces guidance, central guidance has also been published on [how to stay safe and help prevent the spread of COVID-19](#).

You may also be interested to know that the Scottish Government is providing funding of £60 million to local authorities over this parliamentary term towards renewing play parks in Scotland to ensure that all children have access to quality play in their own community. This

investment will help deliver on children's right to play and engagement with children, young people and families will be at the heart of the play park renewal programme, in keeping with our Play Strategy and our ambition to make Scotland the best place to grow up.

The suite of restrictions and related support measures that are referenced above do of course relate to past lockdowns and I note that the petitioner asks specifically about future lockdowns. Given the fluid nature of the pandemic, the Scottish Government is unfortunately not in a position to rule out further restrictions.

The Scottish Government has no current plans to deploy targeted and proportionate restrictions, given the various harms that they can cause on the economy and broader society. However we must keep the option of rapid deployment of restrictions in reserve should the picture of the pandemic change and such action be judged necessary and appropriate.

We are unable to advise on the specific nature of any further Covid-19 restrictions, should they been judged necessary, however I can reassure you that any restrictions would be specific, targeted and proportionate to the evolving risks of Covid-19. They would aim to alleviate Covid harms while allowing us to recover and rebuild for the future.

Petitioner submission of 25 October 2021

PE1883/B - Open all toddler and baby activities within Tier 3 of COVID-19 /future pandemic lockdowns

I started my Facebook group to start Baby and Toddler Activities again in Scotland because while other age groups such as nursery age, primary school and secondary schools were going back last year, the advice and guidance for baby/toddler groups meant that most of the groups in my locality were not running because of the restrictions.

So, while nursery children of all ages could go in and interact with each other, the baby and toddler groups which eventually did open were mostly franchise companies. This meant that you had to book in blocks where the parents had to sit with their children many metres apart. Children of all ages should have been able to interact and socialise.

When reviewing the guidance for running toddler groups that was made public on October 5 2020, I realised that the groups would mostly be for parents with babies under 12 months. For older toddlers, only five parents within the group which made it an impossibility for most established toddler groups to run.

As all research based evidence suggests the first 3-5 years of a child's life are the most important in terms of development. Apart from play which you admittedly focused on, socialisation is as equally as vital. Even though there was guidance in October 2020 for the provision of toddler groups, the general consensus from parents on social media when asked was that baby/toddler groups were not available until March/April/May of this year. This means more than a year without socialisation for some babies/toddlers.

Also, I would like to point out that it was in the summer of 2020 when pubs and cafes were opening for adults and older groups however the guidance for baby and toddler groups wasn't prioritised until October 2020. Again, age groups not being treated equally. I understand that the effects on the economy and business were adverse, however the effects on the pre-nursery age group and their parents were also adverse. I

have heard that many children of this age group have since had speech and language input and are not as interactive with other children.

In terms of socialisation, a lot of learning happens in this age group from sharing, playing fair, playing side by side, and even just feeling comfortable around other children. These are just some of the examples of the things that were getting taught at baby and toddler groups before they were closed.

With regards to the funding for outdoor activities, people within my group said the funding criteria was complicated, confusing and at times were getting denied. Another comment from the third sector was that 23 charities or groups is not a lot across the whole of Scotland depending on whether the charities/groups reach a large area, which means that it has become a postcode lottery. Rather than sending a big sum for funding once there is a problem, is it not better to pre-empt that without toddler groups there is a problem and support the groups already in place as much as we can when we can, so that many more groups/businesses survive?

My questions for this government are:

1. If you can open up nurseries and schools will you also allow the same level of socialisation for children in Baby Toddler groups equally?
2. If you can open up pubs and cafes that allow older groups to socialise will you also at the same time (if babies/children are not at risk) allow baby and toddler activities like toddler groups and soft play if they are following the cleaning standard required of nurseries/schools?
3. If there is a need to fund a different type of activity outdoors will you also realise the value of the groups well established, well known within communities and help them with funding and make it easy to access, for the well-being of the babies/toddlers and parents?
4. If restricted numbers are needed to allow the funding to run extra groups, will there be support from the government to make sure there are groups running within each wider community within Scotland?
5. Will you provide support for parents who are having to navigate developmental milestones when they have no one within their social bubbles that can help with the socialisation, as well as play between children?

6. Overall will you make this age group i.e. between 0-3 years a priority also, and how will you deal with the after effects for children in this age group?