



**EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE PROVISION IN THE WESTERN ISLES**

Report by Chief Officer for Education and Children's Services

**PURPOSE**

- 1.1 The purpose of the Report is to update members on the current early years provision and estate.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 2.1 Currently across the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar estate there are 19 registered early learning and childcare settings. In addition to this there are also two nurseries and one childminder who operate as partner providers. In addition to that, there are eight additional independent childminders.
- 2.2 There are three Comhairle-operated settings and one partner provider nursery who have provision for under threes. Incorporated within the report is a breakdown of the present childcare provision across the Western Isles detailing capacity, current attendance figures, age groups and availability of spaces for each setting to provide member with an accurate account and update of the current childcare provision and estate across the Western Isles.
- 2.3 There is significant legislation, regulation and statutory requirements that govern and underpin early learning and childcare. The most recent being the change to legislation in relation to deferred entry to Primary 1, which has had a significant and increasing impact on overall operating capacity.
- 2.4 There is a growing number of children in settings who have assessed additional support for learning needs requiring extra support and staffing to meet their needs. In some instances, this also restricts the overall capacity of the setting.
- 2.5 The Early Years service has been experiencing challenges in the recruitment of staff over the last two years in particular. This is especially the case in some geographical locations and with Gaelic-speaking staff. The service is working to address this through recruitment fairs, engagement with school leavers and promotion of the Childcare Foundation Apprenticeship pathway.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle note the Report.

Contact Officer: Carol Burns, Early Years Service Manager

Appendix:

Background Papers:

## IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

<b>Resource Implications</b>	<b>Implications/None</b>
Financial	None
Legal	None
Staffing	None
Assets and Property	None
<b>Strategic Implications</b>	<b>Implications/None</b>
Risk	Failure to recruit sufficient staff to maintain levels of service.
Equalities	None
Corporate Strategy	<b>Support Children, Families and Young People:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Ensure schools and lifelong learning are at the heart of our communities, with particular emphasis on Gàidhlig, digital skills and new technologies.</li></ul> <b>Support Caring and Resilient Communities and Quality of Life:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Nurture the safety and resilience of our communities.</li></ul>
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	None

## BACKGROUND

- 5.1 The provision of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) and the associated statutory guidance and frameworks around the service has seen significant change and growth after recognition by successive governments of the importance of investment and service development in this sector.
- 5.2 The most significant single development in ELC in that time has been the expansion of entitlement to 1140 hours per year of funded provision. The Comhairle has invested significantly in infrastructure, staffing training and resources to build capacity for 1140 hours provision.
- 5.3 The current ELC provision across the Western Isles consists of:
- 19 Comhairle-operated ELCs – situated within schools and offering combinations of Gaelic and English provisions in different locations.
  - Two partner nursery providers operated by private or community entities.
  - One partner childminder service operating in conjunction with the Comhairle.
  - Eight childminder services operating on a private commercial basis.
- 5.4 There have been a number of issues raised recently about the range size and suitability of childcare provision across the Western Isles. The report aims to provide members with information about the current provision across the Western Isles, the duties upon the Comhairle to make provision and the issues and factors that are currently influencing that service.

## DETAIL

Information is provided in the sections below about factors that determine and influence the provision of ELC across the Western Isles.

- 6.1 **CAPACITY:** The table below provides information about each setting, including registered age range, maximum operating capacity GME and GLE roles and current vacancies. Please note that the maximum capacity relates to the maximum number that can attend at any one time, however, there are more children in total enrolled in the service but do not attend all day every day. As a result, totals will appear not to add up across the columns of the table.

Setting	Age Range	Maximum Capacity	GME Current Roll	GLE Current Roll	Vacant spaces
Back	2 - 5	40	17	18	5
Balivanich	1-5	56	25	25	6
Barvas	2-5	24	16		0
Breasclete	2 - 5	16	8		8
Castlebay	3 - 5	50	18	13	29
Daliburgh	2 - 5	16	7		9
Iochdar	3-5	16	12		4
Laxdale	2 - 5	32	13	13	0
Leverburgh	2-5	15	4		11
Lionel	2 - 5	25	13		12
Lochs	3 - 5	40	12	13	15
Point	3 - 5	32	18	19	0
Shawbost	2 - 5	16	15		1
Sty Childcare Centre	0 - 3	34	0	56	PM Spaces
Sty Primary Nursery	3 - 5	96	24	48	0
Tarbert	3 - 5	24	18		6
Tong	2 - 5	48	16	14	18
Uibhist a Tuath	1 - 5	48	21	14	13
Uig	2 - 5	15	7		8
<b>Partner Providers</b>					
Stornoway Playgroup	3 - 5	35		30	5
Cothrom Og	0 - 5	36	19		17

- 6.2 **PLACINGS:** There are no defined catchment areas for ELC provision and they are not subject to placing request legislation that governs school placings. Once children for whom an application to a setting has been received reach the required age of entitlement to a statutory place (which we have a legal obligation to provide) they are given priority. The expectation is that the local authority will inform parents what's available in their area and similar applies if the preferred setting has no capacity. In relation to depreciated capacity for later entrants (January and April intake) this is always going to be the case. The service has no flexibility with any mechanism to create retained placed for later entrants as we need to adhere to the guidance as set out by the Scottish Government as detailed in the table below.

Criteria:		Eligible From:
Where a child's 3 <sup>rd</sup> birthday falls on or between these dates:	1 <sup>st</sup> March – 31 <sup>st</sup> August	August (Autumn Term) of that year
	1 <sup>st</sup> September – 31 <sup>st</sup> December	January (Spring Term) following their birthday
	1 <sup>st</sup> January – last day February	April (Summer Term) following their birthday
<u>Or</u> where a 2-year-old child's parent(s)/carer(s) are receiving out of work benefits or certain tax credits (see below)		The term following the child's 2 <sup>nd</sup> birthday (for those already on benefits/tax credits) <u>or</u> the term following the date when the parent(s) become eligible for out of work benefits/tax credits
<u>Or</u> where a 2-year-old child is Looked After, is in a Kinship Care placement, or lives with an appointed guardian (or has been since their 2 <sup>nd</sup> birthday)  <u>Or</u> a parent was themselves Care Experienced e.g., Looked After		When arrangements are agreed and recorded as part of the Child's Plan. Contact Early years Office for more information.

- 6.3 **DEFERRED ENTRY:** A change in legislation that came into effect in 2023 now means that parents of children who have not yet achieved the age of five at the start of the first day of P1 can defer entry to nursery/ELC and receive another full year of funded provision. This applies to all children with birthdays from mid-August to the end of February in the year they are due to enter school. This legislative change significantly extended the eligibility period for deferred entry, which was previously children with January and February birthdays only. The deferral period moved from a two-month window to one of six and a half months. This means that, in any given year, approximately half of children due to come into school may be eligible to defer and receive another year of ELC funding.
- 6.4 Since this legislative change came into place from August 2023, there has been a notable increase in the number of deferrals being made for children to stay on in ELCs for another year and this is having an impact on the overall capacity of settings.

Academic Year	Number of Deferrals
2023 - 2024	16
2024 - 2025	47

- 6.5 In addition to the overall number of deferrals, it's important to consider the impact such a process is having on Gaelic Medium P1 entry. The table below shows that, for the 47 deferrals in 2024-25, there have been more deferrals submitted by parents with children in GME settings.

Total Number of deferrals	Gaelic Medium Education	English Medium Education
47	28 (60%)	19 (40%)

- 6.6 **RATIOS:** The Care Inspectorate, in their registration processes, determine the required adult to child ratios in children's day care settings including out-of-school care and expect that the that these ratios are maintained, as detailed in the table below. When the ratios are combined with the capacity limitations on the setting itself, it determines the number of registered attendees a setting can have.

Age Range	Ratio
0 to under 2 years	1 adult to 3 children
2 to under 3 years	1 adult to 5 children
3 to under 8 years	1 adult to 8 children

- 6.7 **ADDITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDS (ASN):** Early Learning and Childcare settings are seeing increases in the number of children in settings with additional support needs (ASN), some of which present with very significant needs. In such circumstances additional resources are provided and services work with the Comhairle's ASN Service Manager and her team to ensure needs are assessed and plans are put in place to meet these needs.
- 6.8 In circumstances where it's assessed as being required, an extra member of staff covers the hours that have been allocated to support the child. This is referred to as audit hours. To source staff to take on the role of covering audit hours can be particularly challenging considering the current staffing issues that the service is experiencing. As a result, some services are not able to operate to the capacity that they are registered for and need to cap numbers to provide a safe high quality learning environment for all the children.
- 6.8 **STAFFING RECRUITMENT:** One of the most significant areas affecting the sustainability and growth of ELC provision across the Western Isles is the recruitment of staff, especially those with relevant qualifications and Gaelic speakers with sufficient fluency and language competence to work in GME ELC settings. This is currently most pronounced in areas such as Harris, where recruitment of staff for the two settings in the area have been very challenging. The service has been working to grow its own workforce as well as aiming to recruit new staff at every opportunity.
- 6.9 Work has been undertaken with the Accredited Skills and Training team and secondary schools to offer a Foundation Apprenticeship pathway which is promoted within our schools. The Early Years team also directly support unqualified staff to undertake SVQs, allowing them to achieve qualified status in-post and build capacity for future promotion, adding resilience to the service., Recruitment fairs have been conducted in the community with the aim of attracting people to Early Years careers and there is a close relationship with schools in trying to encourage leavers to consider career pathways in childcare, especially those that are Gaelic speakers. Where conventional recruitment has been challenging, incentives have been applied and restructuring has been used to ensure staff ratios are maintained.
- 6.10 **CHILDMINDERS AND 0-3 PROVISION:** It is recognised and appreciated that there are a number of parents trying to source 0-3 childcare provision at the moment, especially in particular specific communities, but there no statutory requirement for the Comhairle's Early Years Service to provide this. We are continuing to endeavour to recruit childminders through a variety of media, highlighting the benefits and financial incentives available to them in terms of startup funding (£250 on registration with a further £250 available thereafter) and an annual resource grant of £500. We do however have an obligation to provide nursery places for the children who reach the statutory required age of enrolment or who are eligible for a 2-year-olds place. Currently all children with a statutory requirement to a nursery place are receiving their entitled provision.

## CONCLUSION

- 7.1 The expectation of the content of this report is that members are presented with a factual account of the current early learning and childcare provision across the Western Isles and to provide a detailed explanation of the governance and legislation that inform how early years' services operate. It is important to highlight that, although the Early Years Service is experiencing many challenges at this time, it could not run without the commitment and dedication of the existing staff who currently provide high quality childcare across the Western Isles and, in doing so, have ensured that every child with a statutory entitlement is receiving it.