A survey was undertaken by Play Scotland in April 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on play and childcare settings in Scotland. A total of 263 responses were received from play and childcare providers. This Play Scotland report presents a timely and up to date picture of the impact of COVID-19 on play and childcare provision in Scotland.

At the time of responding, the majority of services, 59% (154), were closed, 9.6% (26) were fully open and 31.03% (81) had limited opening. Sixty per cent (150) respondents said that outdoor play opportunities were severely curtailed with a third (84) stating that outdoor play had been partly curtailed.

Over half of providers were using existing financial resources to support their services. A third were applying for government funding or using the furlough scheme. A small number, 18% had access to other sources.

Respondents were asked if they had applied for funding to support them in the current situation. The majority, 69%, were unclear whether they would, 9% had submitted funding applications and 22.5% had not.

A significant proportion of providers, 45%, had no contact with the families they usually supported while 23% offered online or telephone support only and a further 20% offered a mixture of support.

A total of 73 (28%) providers who normally provided food were not doing so currently. Over half did not normally provide food, 15% were providing food as normal and 4% were providing it in addition to their usual offer.

Over half were not providing alternative services (approximately 90 out of 178 respondents). Those providing additional services were either contributing to a hub service, providing alternative activities or were volunteering in their communities.

Organisations wanted Play Scotland to continue to provide ideas and resources about play. They wanted low cost ideas for play at home and for playing in gardens where families had access to outside spaces. Respondents also wanted Play Scotland to continue providing a voice for the play sector.

Respondents were asked what they needed from other agencies. The majority highlighted financial support as a priority. They also wanted information about resuming their services after emergency measures eased. Childminders in particular highlighted financial challenges.

Of the top concerns, finance was a priority along with the impact on services and children and families' wellbeing. The impact on the mental health of children, families and staff was highlighted by many. There were concerns about the impact of restrictions on children's play and their health and wellbeing alongside concerns about vulnerable families and issues of child protection, domestic violence and parental alcohol abuse. The impact of poverty was noted including access to food for families. There was concern about staff wellbeing and staying safe in services.
Respondents were asked what support was needed after isolation measures were lifted. Many were concerned about the funding and viability of their service and the exhaustion of their financial resources. They saw the period after isolation measures were lifted as very uncertain. There was wide acknowledgement that there needed to be a period of readjustment – for children and their families and for staff.

Suggestions for going forward after the current emergency measures centred on finance, government support, advice around staying well and safe, and a general sense of being positive and getting back to some kind of normality.

Play Scotland will provide regular updates on the play sector in the coming months. It will work closely with the play sector to highlight the central importance of play to the wellbeing of children, families and communities. It will continue to highlight the necessity for children’s play and its providers to be supported in order for Scotland’s children to be safe, well and protected during this difficult time.

Recommendations

1. The Scottish Government, local government and grant-making trusts should work with the play and childcare sector to ensure that services have adequate financial support to resume services.

2. The Scottish Government should work with the play sector to provide guidance to families and the public on the importance of play for children’s wellbeing, and particularly outdoor play, in line with COVID-19 measures. Specific attention should be given to the needs of children and families with a range of complex circumstances including poverty and financial insecurity.

3. Information should be disseminated on how play and childcare providers can ensure that their services meet requirements for safety, hygiene and social distancing etc. in current and future phases of COVID-19 measures.

4. Guidance should be developed for outdoor play in community spaces, particularly for children with no access to gardens – so that children can play safely outdoors, in line with COVID-19 measures.

5. The Scottish Government should consider the implications to the children’s sector of a pause in implementing the 1140 hours and provide up to date information as soon as is feasible.

6. The Scottish Government, in partnership with the play and childcare sector, should take into account the views and experiences of children and their families, to ensure that services meet children’s needs.