

Play Scotland

Play and childcare settings: the impact of COVID-19

Report of Play Scotland survey

April 2020

Committed to PLAY



1. Executive summary

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.
7. Play Scotland will regularly update the play sector and the Scottish Government on the implications for play of the COVID-19 measures.

2. Introduction

This is a report of a survey undertaken by Play Scotland in April 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on play and childcare settings in Scotland. Responses were received from 263 organisations and individual childminders. Both quantitative and qualitative information was provided.

This Play Scotland report presents an up to date picture of the impact of COVID-19 on play and childcare provision in Scotland in the first phase of emergency measures. The situation has evolved rapidly since early April. These circumstances have happened at such speed that some information may already have changed. Play Scotland intends to regularly update information on the play sector in the coming months. Play Scotland would like to thank all providers for their responses at a time of great challenges.

3. Respondents to the questionnaire

The survey was disseminated via Play Scotland's social media and regular communications and attracted 263 responses. 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.

Respondents were from: early years childcare, out of school care, play and respite for children and young people, play ranger services, additional support needs provision for early years and out of school care, social work, health and wellbeing programmes. The biggest group of respondents, 46% (120), were childminders.

Childcare only - early years	9.54%
Childcare and education (i.e. pre-school provider)	23.28%
Out of school care	10.31%
Childminder	45.80%
Play ranger service	1.53%
Outdoor only provision	1.53%
Other (please specify)	8.02%
Number of responses	263

4. Restrictions on play

Respondents were asked whether current restrictions had severely, partly or not impacted on outdoor play opportunities in their communities. Sixty per cent (150) respondents said that outdoor play was severely curtailed with a further third (84) say it had been partly curtailed with only 7% saying outdoor play had not been impacted.

<i>Answer Choices</i>	<i>Responses</i>
Severely curtailed 59.76%	150
Partly curtailed 33.47%	84
Not impacted at all 6.77%	17
Number of responses	251
Not answered	12

5. Financial support for provision

Participants were asked if their provision was sustainable and if they were using government support such as the furlough scheme. Twenty-nine per cent (29%) were using existing funding with 24% using reserves. A third, 30%, were applying for government funding or using the furlough scheme. A small number, 18% (46) had access to other sources.

<i>Answer Choices</i>	<i>Responses</i>	
Sustainable	29.23%	76
Using reserves	23.08%	60
Applying/receiving government resilience grants	14.23%	37
Using furlough scheme	15.77%	41
Other (please specify)	17.69%	46
Number of responses		260

Respondents were asked if they had applied for funding. The majority, 69% (168) were unclear whether they would, 9% (22) had submitted funding applications and 22.5% (55) had not.

In open responses, respondents identified variously that they had existing funding from their local authority, had closed services, were using a mix of financial sources (reserves and furlough), were receiving less in fees or did not know the financial situation.

Quotes from respondents:

‘We expect to still be sustainable as the Local Authority are supporting us financially in return for our staff assisting with the care of children of key workers.’

‘Planning to use furlough scheme but currently using reserves.’

‘Open now as we believe it’s the right thing to do. Financially we probably should have furloughed staff due to the numbers of kids in.’

‘Using furlough scheme and applying for grants’

‘ELC sustainable due to SG funding via LA, OSC staff furloughed.’

The picture for financial support of services appeared to be very mixed and uncertain with concerns being particularly raised by childminders:

‘Very little for childminders. Many struggling to pay bills and people don’t see us as important.’

‘There are no provisions for childminding universal credit.’

6. Contact with families

A significant proportion of providers, 45% (118), had currently no contact with the families they usually supported. A small number, 23% or nearly a quarter, offered online or telephone support only and a further 20% offered a mixture of support. Only 3% had continuing face to face contact with families and 8.4% had reduced face to face to contact.

Providers were asked if they were offering any food as a result of children not accessing free school meals. A total of 73 (28%) providers who normally provided food were not doing so. Over half (53%) did not normally provide food, 15% were providing food as normal and 4% were providing it in addition to their usual offer.

<i>Answer Choices</i>	<i>Responses</i>	
Yes, but we normally offer food	14.89%	39
Yes, and this is an additional offer	3.82%	10
No but we normally would have provided food	27.86%	73
No, we do not provide food	53.44%	140
Number of responses		262

7. Providing additional services to support resilience

Over half were not providing alternative services (approximately 90 out of 178 respondents). Those who were providing additional services were either contributing to a hub service or alternative activities that their organisation had established or were volunteering for community-based support.

Those who were providing alternative services described an impressive range of contributions to existing play and childcare provision, to the hubs set up for essential workers and to their local communities. Others stated that they were shielding, supporting their own families and adhering to lockdown rules.

- ‘I am caring for school age children during school hours’
- ‘I can’t as I’m part of the shielding guidelines.’

a) Supporting hubs for key workers

A number of organisations were supporting the hubs for key workers or had offered their services.

'Our staff are assisting the Local Authority at the Primary School Hub for children of key workers which is situated next door to our premises.'

'Early Years Hub for at risk children and category 1 staff unable to arrange childcare. Mutual Aid group, regular calls for children/families with ASL.'

'I am working 2 days per week with 2 families who are frontline staff. I am allowing them to change days every week depending on what service and days they need.'

For a number of services, their offer of support had not been taken up by local authorities.

'We offered to help with council childcare for key workers' children and were thanked but not used to date.'

'Open for keyworkers but no one has used me as the councils are offering hub funding, so we stand NO chance of getting anyone.'

b) Alternative activities

A number of providers had identified alternative ways to support the children and families that used their services. This included providing online play resources or activities or staying in touch with families online or through delivering play parcels or 'goody bags' to families.

'Providing fun goody bags to all the children who use our service.'

'We've set up a two-way storytelling session. We read stories for the children and post on our Facebook page. They read stories for their Kindy friends and parents post on our page. Children are letting us know the stories they want to hear. Parents and grandparents also contributing/commenting.'

'Using social media and zoom to provide online activities for children, young people and their families and using zoom to continue to catch up with children and families.'

'Supporting parents through our parent zone page (3000 families as members) encouraging resilience, play and educational resources.'

'We're doing morning and afternoon check-ins every day. A member of staff each has 8 children to contact on a daily basis. Activity timetables are sent out each day for families. Specialist classes such as music and library are pre-recorded videos and the children can join in. A member of staff sends a video of them reading a story every Thursday and singing a song every Friday.'

'Delivering Play Parcels to families.'

c) Community volunteering

Other respondents stated that they were volunteering within their communities, supporting those who were vulnerable and/or self-isolating.

'I helped set up our Resilient Community 2 years ago. This service is collecting orders of food and medicines from nearby town, as well as keeping an eye out for people requiring support.'

'I'm not doing anything with my mindees. However, I am working with our village hall to support those in isolation in our community.'

'Pharmacy runs, buying supplies and resources, food shopping, online check ins and groups.'

'I have signed up to Scottish Government volunteers.'

8. How Play Scotland can support play and childcare organisations

Service providers were asked how Play Scotland could support their work. Responses fell into the following three categories:

a) Providing ideas and resources for play

Many respondents wanted Play Scotland to continue to provide play ideas which took account of the current restrictions on play. They wanted low cost ideas to support play at home and play in gardens where families had access to outside spaces. Respondents wanted ideas to share with parents and carers through social media and which could be used in homes with limited space or small gardens.

'Ideas for activities which we can pass on to parents.'

'Ideas and resources for what to do outside e.g. things to make walks more interesting.'

'Ideas for mixed age groups.'

'Programme suitable for those unable to leave home or gain outdoor space.'

b) Providing a voice for the play sector

A number of organisations highlighted the importance of Play Scotland continuing to advocate on behalf of its members and provide Scottish Government and public bodies with information on what was happening with play provision. They also wanted Play Scotland to raise the issue of funding and financial support for play and childcare.

'Highlight to government the vital need for childcare workers to maintain contact with families if they wish to through social media (even when furloughed).'

'Advocacy for import of our work, and that our sector is vital.'

'Sustain measured information, sharing ideas/good practice and continue to feedback to Scottish Government.'

c) Unsure what support needed

A significant number of organisations, and service providers, stated that they were unsure what support they needed at a time when their service was closed, their staff furloughed or because they could not identify what support might be useful. A number of organisations had adapted their service to meet the current situation.

'Can't until we re-open.'

'Unknown at present as on lockdown but online services/advice would be good.'

9. Support needed from other agencies

Respondents were asked what support they needed from other agencies. Many respondents were concerned about financial support. This included emergency government funding as well as loss of income from services. Childminders were worried about their self-employed incomes.

Respondents were concerned how, and if, services would be able to re-open. A number questioned whether their services would be required for hubs. Providers wanted information about when and how to resume their services after the emergency measures eased.

Providers wanted practical advice on PPE, hygiene and clarity about support and advice from other agencies such as the Care Inspectorate and local authorities. Some respondents were unsure what support they needed.

a) Financial support

'As an educational establishment, we do not fit criteria for business grants, furloughing scheme so financial impact is devastating to our business.'

'I'm a self-employed childminder now with no income.'

'Reassurance from government if the isolation passes June, will there be financial support available?'

'Financial if we are to continue as hub for small numbers.'

b) Access to information

'Any that will help'

'SCMA is a great help and support.'

'Advice on furlough and staying open.'

'Waiting for HMRC to contact us re help.'

c) Specialist support

'Mental health support for parents/carers.'

'Close working with health and social work for our most vulnerable families.'

'Number of child planning meetings ahead in preparation for transition.'

d) Support in resuming services

'When the service will resume, it is expected that families will be cautious of any additional social contact and so we are expecting a reduced number returning to use the service. This will obviously have severe financial implications that we cannot yet foresee a way out of.'

'Help with sustainability of service, how will we resume?'

'Any that will enable the kindergarten to stay open in the long term.'

'More information about when we are insured to restart.'

10. Main concerns

Respondents were asked to identify their top three concerns. In line with responses to other questions, finance was of great importance including the sustainability of businesses for childminders as well as funding for the third sector.

The impact of COVID-19 on services and children and families' wellbeing was a major concern. The mental health of children and families and staff was highlighted as a serious and worrying issue.

Respondents highlighted the impact of restrictions on children's play, indoor and outdoors, and their health and wellbeing. Children's social needs were not being met in the current situation. The impact of the lack of structure in children's lives was emphasised. A number of respondents identified school transitions as an issue.

There was concern about vulnerable families and in particular child protection, domestic violence and parental alcohol abuse. The impact of poverty was noted including access to food for families. There was also concern about people's health in relation to COVID-19 in relation to staff and staying safe and well in services.

a) Financial

'Can business still continue?'

'Financial viability.'

'Lack of money.'

b) Impact on wellbeing

'Impact [of] stress on family unit.'

'Loss of stimulating play.'

'Mental health of families.'

'Children's confidence.'

'Lack of social time for children.'

c) Emergency measures

'Infection control.'

'Lack of PPE.'

'Catching the virus and being forced to close. How will key worker parents find suitable alternative care?'

'Kids playing near each other.'

'Staff putting themselves at risk.'

11. Support after isolation measures lifted

Respondents were asked what support might be needed after isolation measures were lifted. Many were concerned about the funding and viability of their service and the exhaustion of their current financial resources. There was general recognition that there would be a long-term impact on the finances of organisations and income of childminders.

There was a wide sense that the period after isolation measures were lifted was very uncertain and that it was difficult to see that far ahead. There would need to be a period of readjustment – for children, their families and for staff.

Many identified that support would be needed for children and families in the post isolation phase. Staff teams would need support for their wellbeing. There was also concern whether families would return to use their services and what guidelines might be in place.

Suggestions for support after the current emergency measures centred around finance, government support (such as small grants for restarting services), advice around staying well and safe, and a general sense of being positive and getting back to some kind of normality. A number of respondents wanted clarity on the Scottish Government's 1140 rollout.

a) Finance

'Money. We are desperately short and have had to curtail our plans for the autumn term. This is due to having to cancel fundraising events.'

'Again, it's financial. People have lost jobs, 1140 hours the effect it has on private centres if it stops.'

'It would be ensuring that we have funding in place to hit the ground running when things return to normal – we are aware just how much children and families will need support to return to some kind of normality.'

b) Readjustment

'General thoughts about how to practice safely, should we reduce our registered number of children, how will that impact on our income.'

'Support to get children out of flats/vulnerable children into the outdoors.'

'Getting back to normal and seeing my families again.'

'Hopefully still be here delivering play for ASN children. Are planning on being around for summer but children being off school so long it cannot be good for their mental health.'

'Not really thinking of this at the moment as every day is a new day.'

c) Suggestions for support post isolation

'Yes – people may not return due to redundancies, due to introduction to flexible working patterns – working from home. Current 1140 provided by settings will these continue??? Not enough information surrounding this.'

'Parent/staff groups for parents to talk about their isolation experiences.'

'Support of clear information on health and hygiene practices. Ideas for learning to start off with...to get confidence back.'

'My worry is lots of children will have been using electronics and this may impact outdoor play. A campaign to encourage curiosity outside with resources would be a great help.'

'It really depends on what the restrictions are after lockdown has finished. People will be wanting to get back out to parks as the weather gets better, but will this be allowed?'

12. Recommendations and conclusion

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 their services. This should take account of any reduction in numbers of children due to social distancing requirements.
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 during all phases of COVID-19 measures. Specific attention should be given to the needs of children and families with a range of circumstances including: poverty; poor housing; disability; young carers etc.
3. Information should be widely disseminated on how play and childcare providers can ensure that their services meet the requirements for safety, hygiene and social distancing in current and future phases of COVID-19 measures. This should take account of play across all settings (indoor/outdoor play provision, early learning and childcare, school, etc.).
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 for early learning and childcare and provide up to date information as soon as is feasible.
6. The Scottish Government, in partnership with the play and childcare sector, should explore ways to hear the views and experiences of children and their families, to ensure that services meet their needs during the current and future phases of COVID-19 measures.
7. Play Scotland has a commitment to regularly update the play sector and the Scottish Government on the implications for play of the COVID-19 measures. It will continue to represent the interests of children and families, play and childcare settings, to the Scottish Government and public agencies.

Conclusion

This report highlights the immediate impact of the COVID-19 emergency measures on play and childcare in Scotland. It found that children's outdoor play had been severely curtailed since the end of March and that providers were in a difficult financial situation, closing, reducing or changing their services in a rapidly evolving situation. There was a need for financial support across the sector to keep services viable and for play and childcare provision to be sustainable in the future.

The survey found there were many uncertainties for services. Providers were concerned about the wellbeing of the children, families and staff they worked with. They wanted ideas and resources from Play Scotland and information and advice from the Scottish Government, local authorities and others. It was recognised that there would be a period of readjustment after isolation measures were lifted with many factors impacting on services. There was a call for support to the sector in the next phase of the response to COVID-19.

Play Scotland will continue to profile and highlight the impact of COVID-19 on children's play opportunities. Play is of vital importance to the wellbeing of children, families and communities. Children's play needs to be supported in order for Scotland's children to be safe, well and protected during this challenging time.