

Childcare

Highland Community Planning Partnership

Update

June 2026



Childcare in our rural and island communities

Childcare Evidence Report

Update – June 2026

The Childcare Evidence Report (April 2025) <https://highlandsandislandsrep.scot/> was endorsed by HIREP and shared with Scottish Government Ministers in May 2025. The report offered a clear and compelling picture of the scale of the childcare challenges across our rural and island communities, the urgency of intervention, and the opportunities for genuine place-based solutions. Following on from the report, Scottish Government hosted a Childcare Roundtable, with key stakeholders and communities in Ullapool on Wednesday 25th March 2026.

The HIREP Childcare Evidence Report sets out, in significant detail, the growing childcare accessibility crisis across more than 100 rural and island communities in the Highlands and Islands. It demonstrates how distance, small population numbers, fragile service models, workforce shortages and regulatory rigidity combine to undermine provision. The discussions at the Childcare Roundtable reinforced these findings, with community representatives, local authorities, regulators and Scottish Government colleagues all highlighting the same systemic challenges and the need for urgent, flexible solutions.

The key evidence from the HIREP Report highlights childcare to be critical to population retention, attraction and economic growth. A lack of childcare reduces workforce participation, limits recruitment, contributes to underemployment, and is now a material factor in depopulation. Businesses from across the region, from hospitality to the public sector, report loss of staff or an inability to recruit due to lack of childcare.

Childcare is markedly more fragile in rural and island settings with challenges including very small cohorts of children affecting business viability, shortages of provision for 0–2 year olds and out-of-school care, scarcity of qualified staff, with competition from better paid sectors, higher costs and barriers for childminders, leading to no or very low numbers in many communities and building constraints and regulatory frameworks designed for urban contexts.

It is apparent that rural and island communities are not always adequately supported by the current national models of childcare. National childcare frameworks (including ratios, registration requirements, building specifications, and processes for service transfer) often fail to reflect rural realities. This results in services becoming unviable, planned innovations being blocked, and communities losing provision altogether.

The report proposes amended and new, place-based models of childcare and outlines the short, medium and long-term actions to enable pilots to be delivered. These include: financially supported childminding models, payment for care of childminders' own/family children, tailored regulatory approaches for rural settings, a Rural Childcare/Care Practitioner model which is mobile and potentially intergenerational, the Single Care Model and legislative change to the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 to enable seamless transfer of services.

Following on from the report, in March 2026, in Ullapool, Scottish Government colleagues hosted a Childcare Roundtable with c40 participants – online and in person. The participants spoke with consistency about the realities on the ground and their communities' lived experiences with the need for a genuinely place-based approach. Communities emphasised that every island within an island, and every rural locality, has distinct needs. National models often do not work and solutions must be local, flexible, and co-designed.

Communities raised the recurrent challenges of workforce recruitment and retention, high costs and lack of financial viability for small scale provision, the regulatory and legislative barriers and the lack of childcare outwith the statutory ELC provision – namely childcare for 0-2 year olds and out of school care. Several communities highlighted how Care Inspectorate interpretations vary, with pragmatic local examples not replicated nationally.

At the same time, there was recognition that communities are creative, resilient, and solution-focused, but need support to make local ideas viable and there is the need to take managed risks with innovation, supported by early engagement with Scottish Government, Care Inspectorate and Ministers.

Appendix A highlights the ‘here and now’ from the Highland communities invited to the Childcare Roundtable meeting. Their main interests which they would like to progress with are:

- Strontian – Single Care Model, CI Tailored Approach and Schools (Consultation) Scotland Act 2010
- NW2045 – Sutherland – Rural Childcare Practitioner and All Age Childcare
- Dunvegan NW Skye – Rural Childcare Practitioner and CI Tailored Approach

The Single Care Model is currently being piloted in Strontian and Ullapool and has just recruited a job share Project Manager post based in Ullapool, working across both locations.

There was and still is a clear call for permission to innovate, to step outside current national childcare models where they are no longer fit for purpose, to recognise childcare as a strategic enabler and that change is both welcomed and enabled. Participants had a particular strong commitment to support small-scale pilots and “quick wins” while working on long-term reforms. As well as this, there was strong expressions of interest for the Single Care Model, the Rural Childcare Practitioner, intergenerational spaces and flexible staffing models with shared management approaches.

HIE and local authority colleagues stressed that childcare is fundamental to the “economic bundle” required for the region to achieve its population retention and attraction ambitions. Communities expressed a sense of urgency and, despite significant challenges, a sense of hope that new solutions are possible.

In response to the Childcare Roundtable Scottish Government acknowledged that access to childcare is a critical factor in sustaining rural and island communities, underpinning both economic development and population retention. While communities have already explored creative and locally tailored solutions, there are significant challenges caused by national regulatory, funding and registration systems that do not always reflect rural realities.

A key theme was the need for a “twin-track” approach: making immediate improvements within existing frameworks while pursuing longer-term legislative reform. Discussions highlighted issues such as hidden rural poverty, the lack of childcare for 0–2-year-olds, and the impact this has on workforce retention and depopulation. Participants also noted that delivering childcare in rural areas is inherently more costly and requires funding models that recognise its wider social and economic value. Overall, there was consensus that no single solution exists, but that coordinated, flexible, and multi-agency efforts—along with better support for community-led initiatives—are essential to improving access to sustainable childcare services.

Scottish Government recognised the importance of framing childcare through an economic development lens, while recognising local delivery realities in our rural and island communities. There was acknowledgement of shared national themes alongside unique local challenges, and a stated commitment to supporting change.

Taken together, the evidence and the discussions have illustrated that the region-wide childcare crisis is worsening, especially for 0–2 year old care and out-of-school provision. There is hopefully now a shared understanding across communities, practitioners, local authorities and national organisations that current national policies cannot deliver what rural and island families and children require.

There is a clear appetite for innovation, with a wide range of communities ready to pilot new approaches if only given the permission with national support, including regulatory flexibility, legislative amendment, financial support for new models, and a strategic commitment to rural and island childcare reform.

A recent collaborative bid to Scottish Government’s School Aged Childcare Fund seeks to test new models of wrap around care in more rural locations to find ways to deliver this vital service that is much needed by parents and families. Working with community trusts, local organisations, sporting groups, CALA and High life Highland, the bid aims to start or expand 7 new after school opportunities to meet Scottish Government commitment that Policy is meeting needs of Rural and island communities. The outcome of the bid application should be know by mid-late June.

Childcare is a cornerstone of economic resilience, population strategy, and community wellbeing across the Highlands and Islands. Rural and island communities are ready to innovate but cannot move forward without national flexibility and support. The work outlined above represents a significant opportunity to deliver meaningful, long-term improvement for our region.

Hayley Brown, Highland Council
Jacqueline McGuigan, HIE
Jaci Douglas, CALA

Appendix A - Community updates

Strontian (Single Care Model)

Main Interest – SINGLE CARE MODEL, CI TAILORED APPROACH and SCHOOLS (CONSULTATION) SCOTLAND ACT 2010

Childcare Evidence Report

Strontian	ELC – Y (partial)	No childminders or out of school care
Acharacle	ELC - Y	Childminder no longer in business and no out of school care available

- Within Lochaber there are 2 validated Local Place Plans: Ardgour (April 2024) and Duror and Kentallen (September 2024). Within Ardgour the community has ambitions to (1) Provide care for older people, home-based care and respite/residential care at Dail Mhor in Strontian and (2) Ensure there is childcare across the area to enable families to stay and work, supplementing Clovullin nursery; and to include a register of what is available.
- A group of parents established the Ardnamurchan Childcare Action Group and have recently undertaken a community childcare survey. They have been looking at possible solutions for the current lack of childcare in the area. There was a childminder in Acharacle who has now closed the business, and there is now no wrap around care and/or care for 0 -2 years olds available on the peninsula.

Here and Now

There are severe staff shortages at Strontian Nursery where it is now only partially open through the week. There have been several articles within the press and the local councillor is working with Highland Council to look at solutions. The Local Authority is also looking at providing ELC provision for 2 year olds on the Ardnamurchan peninsula.

Highland Council moving ELC to single provider – discussions, led by Urram and their community childcare forum, have taken place with parents and staff at the current Strontian based ELC service which is run by Highland Council. Recognising that childcare for 3-4 year olds, term time only and only 9-3 was not meeting their needs and that to make any services sustainable they had to look at a larger all age all year 0-5yrs (and possible SAC) provision, Urram working with partners, have engaged with parents and staff to understand if moving the ELC to a single provider of 0-5 (or 12) would be acceptable. Due to the barrier of Schools Consultation Act, they understand that if all parents are supportive of the move then the Act would not apply and would be keen to test that.

Work clubs: Urram, working with CALA have launched a ‘work club’ approach which provides play based activities for children while their parents access work, training, induction or employability support in the next room for 2 days a week (one in Strontian, one in Acharacle) for 2 x 2 hour sessions a day. The development provides a foundation on which to build a wider childcare offer.

The work club also allows a small group of parents who are seeking to enter, sustain or increase their employment and provide data and evidence of need within that community which can be used to inform the work of the project in 2026 onwards. The project started on 24th February and the impact and benefits for parents and the children will be evaluated. Some funding from CALA/Highland Council Child Poverty Accelerator Funding is covering some of the start up for the Work Club.

Single Care Model (SCM): is an integrated child and adult care service delivered by multi skilled care professionals employed by a single employer with the ability to deliver both adult and childcare within a community under a single social care registration.

The SCM project aims to test care staff working across the age range of child and adult care under a single registration and management model. The remit could be providing morning adult care in the home and afternoon school aged childcare, utilising their professional skills, knowledge, and experience in this 'designed for purpose' rural pilot model of care. The model is out-with current legislation and regulations but working in this innovative and ground breaking way could provide a solution to current gaps for parents and their children.

CALA and Highland Council received funding from Child Poverty Accelerator Fund (CPAF) and are working with Urram and LUCT (Lochbroom and Ullapool Community Trust) and other stakeholders to develop a pilot within Ardnamurchan Peninsula and Ullapool area over next 2 years.

Update 29th May 2026

The Pilot now has staff member(s) in place, employed by local development trust Lochbroom and Ullapool Trust (LUCT) and partnership with Urram and a planning meeting is being held in early June to start to map out the initial stages which will include mapping, engaging with communities as well as key stakeholders – NHSH and Highland Hospice. The project will re-engage with the Regulatory Advisor group at a strategic level – which has SSSC, Care Inspectorate and Scottish Government at its key members and which provide an advisory role in supporting the development of the work. CALA has already highlighted the project to new H&I based MSPs and have started conversations on garnering support for the pilot. An introductory meeting will be sought by CALA on behalf of the SCM project and other innovations that meet current H&I challenges with new Minister for Children, Young people and The Promise.

Once the development and testing is complete, the evidence can be used to inform and develop national legislation, regulation and guidance, transforming how rural areas access and deliver care within their communities in a place based person centred way.

NW2045 - Sutherland

Main Interest – RURAL CHILDCARE PRACTITIONER and ALL AGE CHILDCARE

Childcare Evidence Report

Kinlochbervie	ELC - Y	ELC setting re-opened, no childminders or out of school care – businesses struggling to recruit staff due to lack of childcare. Plans for community run School Aged Childcare service from preschool building (unregistered)
Durness	ELC - Y	No childminders or out of school care
Melvich	ELC - Y	No childminders or out of school care
Tongue	ELC - Y	No childminder, no out of school care
Bettyhill	ELC -Y	Potential new childminder (not yet registered), no out of school care
Melness		No childminder or out of school care
Achiltibuie	ELC - Y	New childminder withdrawn and no longer operating
Scourie	ELC -Y	No Childminder or out of school provision
Lochinver		No childminder or out of school provision

- In Kinlochbervie, HIE is aware of vacancies in the village where a working parent has applied, been successfully selected and then declined a job post due to a lack of all age childcare within the village
- Highland Council, through their ADAP funding, undertook some evidence gathering research into adapting and new models of childcare and adult care. This has come about from working with communities to find out what they would like to see as a childcare offering in their community. There is interest from several rural and Island communities in a childminding model working outwith a domestic setting (Skye, Kinlochbervie, Uist). Communities are also interested in a subsidised childminding model (Arisaig, Uist, Argyll Islands) which would enable financial viability when there are smaller numbers of children needing care.

Here and Now

There are no childminders in the NW2045 area. The childminder in Bettyhill withdrew before registration.

Through NW2045, they have a childcare forum which is made of community members, local councillors and parents. HIE, CALA and the Highland Council meet with them on a regular basis. They are very fortunate, and with many challenges, have secured the openings of their rural school nurseries – even when there are less than 8 children attending.

Highland Council have made attempts to speak with the communities in NW2045 about a subsidised (now referred to as supported) childminder but communities are resistant due to possible impacts on their current school ELC provision. It is difficult also for Highland Council due to 0-2 year old and wrap around provision being non-statutory. From HIE's perspective and our population ambitions, there is a need for both as the nursery setting is just for 3-5 year olds, 9am

until 3pm with no holiday cover – the nursery setting does not include the all age childcare that a childminder can offer.

NW2045 have made attempts to speak with the community to recruit childminders, but again there is resistance from residents as they would like to do this, but not from their own homes, In Kinlochbervie, the community are keen on the model of a 'Rural Childcare Practitioner who could work from their village hall, which is close to the primary school.

Dunvegan and North West Skye

Main Interest – RURAL CHILDCARE PRACTITIONER and CI TAILORED APPROACH

Childcare Evidence Report

Dunvegan	ELC - Y	Unregulated childcare available – Community Trust investing in a new nursery but major hurdles with CI
----------	---------	--

- In Dunvegan, North Skye the under 50 age population is plummeting with children spread over a vast geographical area. The Community Trust are in the process of establishing some registered childcare within the community but are experiencing major hurdles with the Care Inspectorate.

Here and Now

To date there are no registered childminders on Skye. We are aware of an individual in Kyleakin, South Skye who is currently working towards becoming a registered childminder.

Shared from Dunvegan Community Trust:

- Over 50 respondents of a recent survey have or are planning to have children in the next 10 years. Nearly all of those seeking childcare have found it difficult or impossible to access formal childcare
- The proportion of Dunvegan families that travel to Portree (40-mile round trip) for work is low. 50% of parents earn less than £26k pa. 60% of this cohort are classed as being in fuel poverty, with little spare income for travel expenses necessary to access the daycare nursery provision in Portree
- Two people with extensive childcare experience wanted to register as childminders but haven't been able to due to their homes not being suitable

Future:

- Dunvegan Trust own a former industrial building and has plans to create a childcare facility within it but the legislative space requirements could render this opportunity unachievable. Proposals to build 18 new affordable homes in Dunvegan will heighten the local need for childcare

Parental Input:

- Four years travelling to/from Portree to access childcare when working in Dunvegan is financially, physically and emotionally draining.
- No provision for under 3s and no wrap-around care. No family on Skye, barely managing with kindness of friends. No support for school holidays. Employer very flexible but need to work full hours to pay mortgage and bills
- There is no childcare available and anyone who has tried to register has gotten tangled in miles of red tape. But it's all wrapped up in the wider need for pre-3-year-old childcare. Portree Nursery shut their waiting list in February. So there is nowhere for people to turn to if they need to go back to work after maternity.
- The area desperately needs childcare for under 3s. Without it people can't work and contribute to the community. It stops people from being able to build a life in the area causing them to leave. This could include vital workers for the area in teaching, healthcare and hospitality.