

ELC Expansion: Exploring innovative delivery models to sustain rural communities

Executive Summary

March 2020



EUROPE & SCOTLAND
European Social Fund
Investing in a Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Future

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

This research project explores new models of rural childcare to support and sustain an inclusive rural economy in the Highlands. The project is funded by the Scottish Government and the European Social Innovation Fund and led by Care and Learning Alliance (CALA), a third sector Highland Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) provider, in partnership with The Shielling Project, the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI), the University of Edinburgh, NHS Highland, Highland Council, Skills Development Scotland, Cantraybridge College and Connecting Communities.

The research focuses on the key issue of how high quality, flexible, accessible and affordable early learning and childcare (ELC) can be provided in the Highlands while supporting and sustaining an inclusive rural economy. This is explored through the following four key work strands:

- the availability of a strong and sustainable workforce
- the use of 'alternative' places and times
- the value of intergenerational partnerships
- transport

In addition to the above four strands, six key, cross-cutting themes emerged during the research process. These themes (shown below) will be referred to throughout the report.

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- 1 • Expansion to 1140 hours
 - 2 • Raising attainment
 - 3 • Outdoor learning
 - 4 • Rural context/sustainable communities
 - 5 • Quality pedagogy
 - 6 • Flexibility and accessibility

The study includes a review of both national and international models of ELC as applicable to rural communities through a focus on the four main strands identified above. The findings and recommendations are summarised at the end of each section. It is important, however, to understand the context to this research and how the study was undertaken.

2. Context

The main driver and context behind this research and the need for providers to review their ELC provision, stems from key changes coming into effect in August 2020*. These changes will expand ELC funded provision, increasing the annual personal entitlement for children ages three and four from 600 to 1140 hours, and extend the provision to include eligible two-year olds. *(Due to Covid-19 the transition date has been postponed indefinitely and will not take place until the crisis has been averted).

The Scottish Government is committed to the ELC expansion agenda in line with the positive outcomes they anticipate for both individuals and communities, rural and urban. They recognise that different models of ELC service provision may be required to suit different localities. Also, it will be essential for providers to be increasingly innovative with existing facilities, using these in partnership with others and developing outdoor learning experiences for children.

The study assesses the impacts that flexible, accessible, affordable childcare can have in supporting and sustaining a rural economy and the challenges faced by parents living in rural areas.

3. Approach to the research

A qualitative sociological research method was adopted for this research project using mixed methodology. This included desk-based literature reviews, surveys, questionnaires, interviews, taster session case studies and visits to key informants. Data analysis involved re-reading the information gathered and drawing conclusions, with further meetings, surveys and visits being used to test any tentative conclusions.

Through exploring the four specific work strands this research aims to identify innovative models of ELC provision.

4. Strong and sustainable workforce

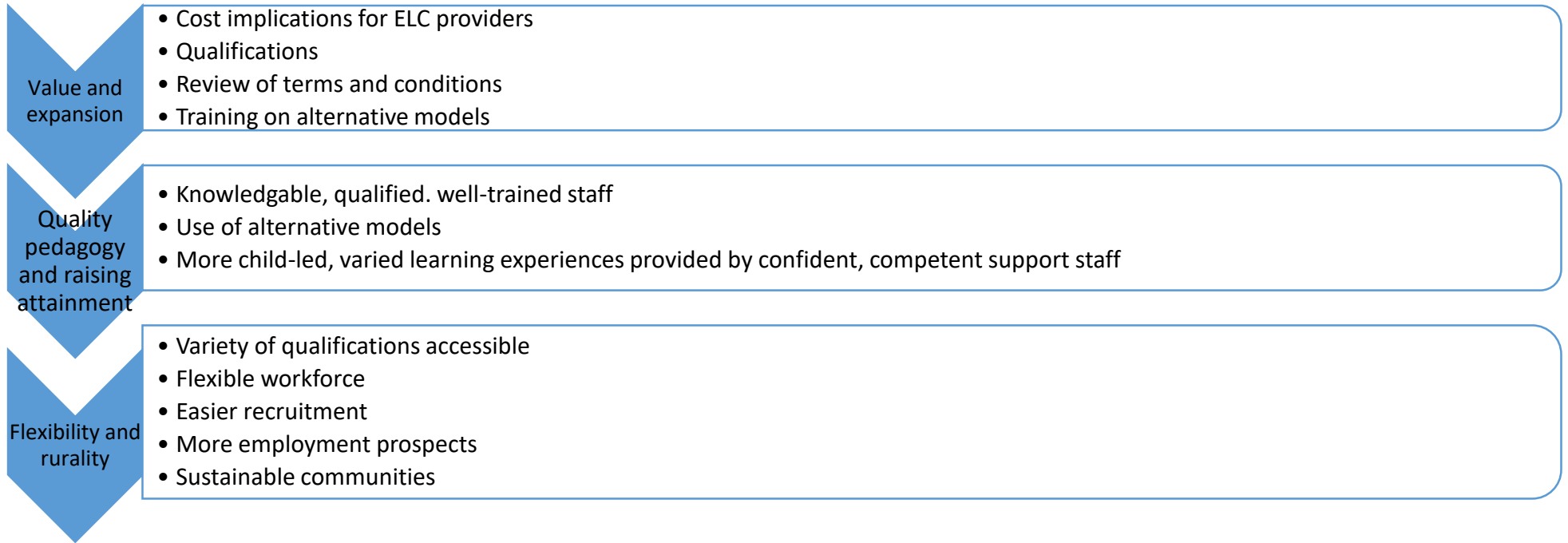
To meet the needs of the expansion agenda, it is clear that the sector must have sufficient numbers of suitably qualified, competent and confident workers. There are concerns over where these new workers will come from and it is likely that there will be additional challenges in rural, remote areas of Scotland. The research looked at what has already been done to reduce the impact of rurality and lack of diversity in the workforce and examined the flexibility of the current qualifications system to allow for a joint or dual qualification across more than one care sector.

The growth in more innovative models of ELC, for example intergenerational practice models (Section 7), alternative places and times such as outdoor or indoor/outdoor services (Section 6) and mobile provision (Section 8) may necessitate more creative use of the available qualifications or creation of new and different qualifications.

The public profile of ELC work was found to be currently neither positive nor indicative of professionalism. This low profile does not help ensure adequacy in numbers of prospective ELC workers or the sustainability of the existing workforce. In order to ensure the success of the Scottish Government's expansion agenda, it will be critical that the profile and value of work in this sector is considerably raised.

In examining this research strand a number of cross cutting themes were evident. These and the key recommendations in respect of a strong and sustainable ELC workforce are summarised below.

Workforce cross-cutting themes



Workforce recommendations

ELC providers

- Consider methods of consistently and systemically promoting the value of ELC practitioners' work and of careers in the sector for all.
- Encourage colleagues to consider the expansion in funded hours as an opportunity to provide more innovative and creative services.
- Be prepared to facilitate a range of training and qualification opportunities.
- Work closely with other social care providers and their local communities to ensure provision of sustainable, financially viable, community-based services.

Scottish and local government

- Consider a review of the salaries and conditions for ELC staff to ensure alignment and parity with those in other childcare sectors.

Regulatory and qualification authorities

- Consider reviewing the qualifications relevant to ELC and Care services to embrace relevant, current models of ELC delivery and the needs of Scottish communities.
- Higher Education establishments to review and promote to students the options for a dual or more generic qualification across ELC and adult care.
- All schools and careers services to consistently, knowledgeably and at an early stage, promote ELC as one of a range of potential, worthwhile career options to all pupils.
- Scotland's Universities and Education bodies to agree the equivalent value of a Foundation Apprenticeship via-a-vis Highers and other national qualifications.
- The Care Inspectorate and SSSC to work with ELC and social care providers to explore innovative ways of joint working and registration.

5. Alternative places and times

The focus of this strand was to assess if the use of alternative places and times can support providers in their attempt to maintain quality while expanding provision. The literature review and a survey to ELC providers in Highland determined that there is a perceived lack of capacity within existing buildings which could possibly be overcome by expanding outdoor provision. Taster sessions were arranged at Highland Wildlife Park and Cantraybridge College to assess the suitability of each site and local demand. Both were positively received.

Further partnerships were formed with national organisations, community land and forest owners, and offers were received from community councils, church presbyteries and through the Federation of Small Businesses. Although further taster sessions were not possible within the timescales of this research project, the positive responses received indicated that it is worth ELC managers, particularly those in rural communities, contacting their local facilities to discuss the possibilities of forming partnerships to enhance variety and quality of provision.

Visits were made to eleven settings where outdoor provision was either established or planned. Pedagogically, the outdoor learning environment facilitates place-based and experiential learning focused on the natural environment and the seasonal and climatic fluctuations to which it is exposed. This fosters a greater understanding and appreciation by the children than could be attained in an indoor setting.

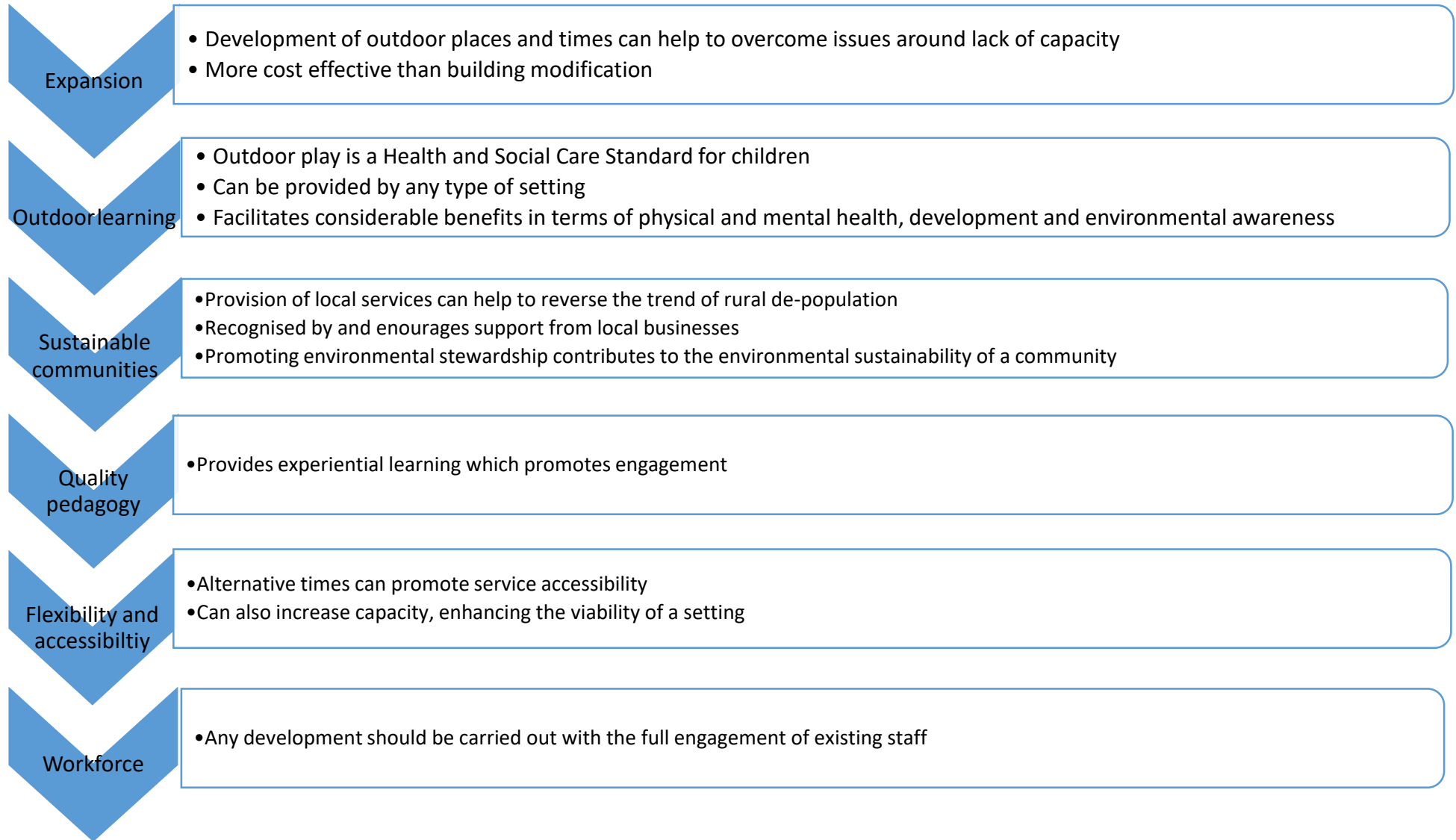
The many benefits in terms of physical health, development, mental health and environmental awareness were all affirmed during discussions with setting managers. All the benefits that can be attained from outdoor settings, however, can be achieved through considered development of indoor settings and may be more achievable in terms of finance or logistics.

A number of examples of different approaches, including dispersed settings, outdoor learning, collaborative spaces and development of outdoor environments for learning were observed in the study and are detailed in Section 6 of the report.

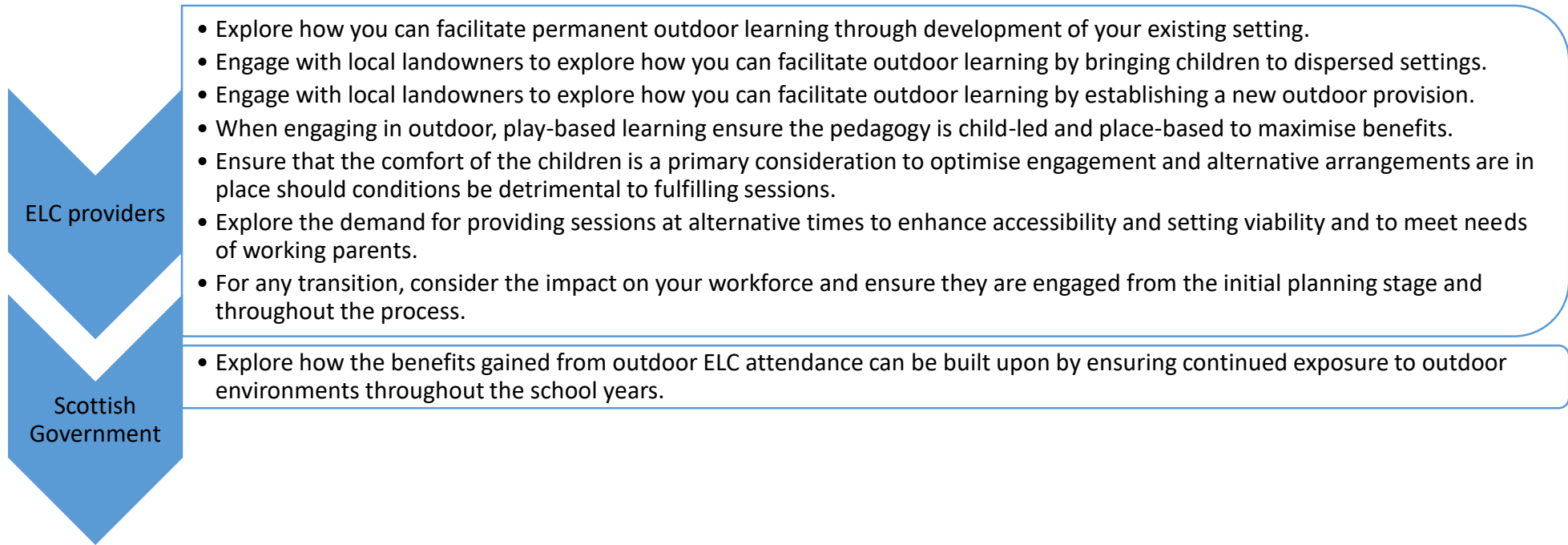
Providing ELC services out-with the traditional times could be a means of increasing capacity and potentially providing choice and flexibility for families and children. Furthermore, it can enhance provisions' economic viability and communities' sustainability. Survey responses suggested there would be demand for extended daily hours, weekend and holiday opening for ELC services, especially amongst shift-workers.

There were several cross-cutting strands identified within this section. These and the recommendations are summarised below.

Alternative places and times cross-cutting themes



Alternative places and times recommendations



6. Intergenerational practice and partnerships

The research project explored the growth of intergenerational practice and partnerships and its relevance as part of the range of ELC provision potentially contributing to successful expansion in funded hours and enhancement in quality of services provided (Section 7).

Intergenerational practice is defined as interactions that bring together younger and older generations for a common purpose (St Monica Trust, 2018). Although these 'interactions' can take place in a variety of settings such as ELC centres, residential care homes, day centres and schools they have commonalities and are predicated on the belief that each generation brings value to the interactions and the engagements between the generations are purposeful and planned, rather than simply to provide a change in routine or setting.

The social changes that have taken place in most developed countries over the last generation have resulted in a reduction in the level and quality of contact and interaction between the generations. Intergenerational practice gives value to the contribution of old and young alike and with this comes the recognition that both groups have something to learn from the other.

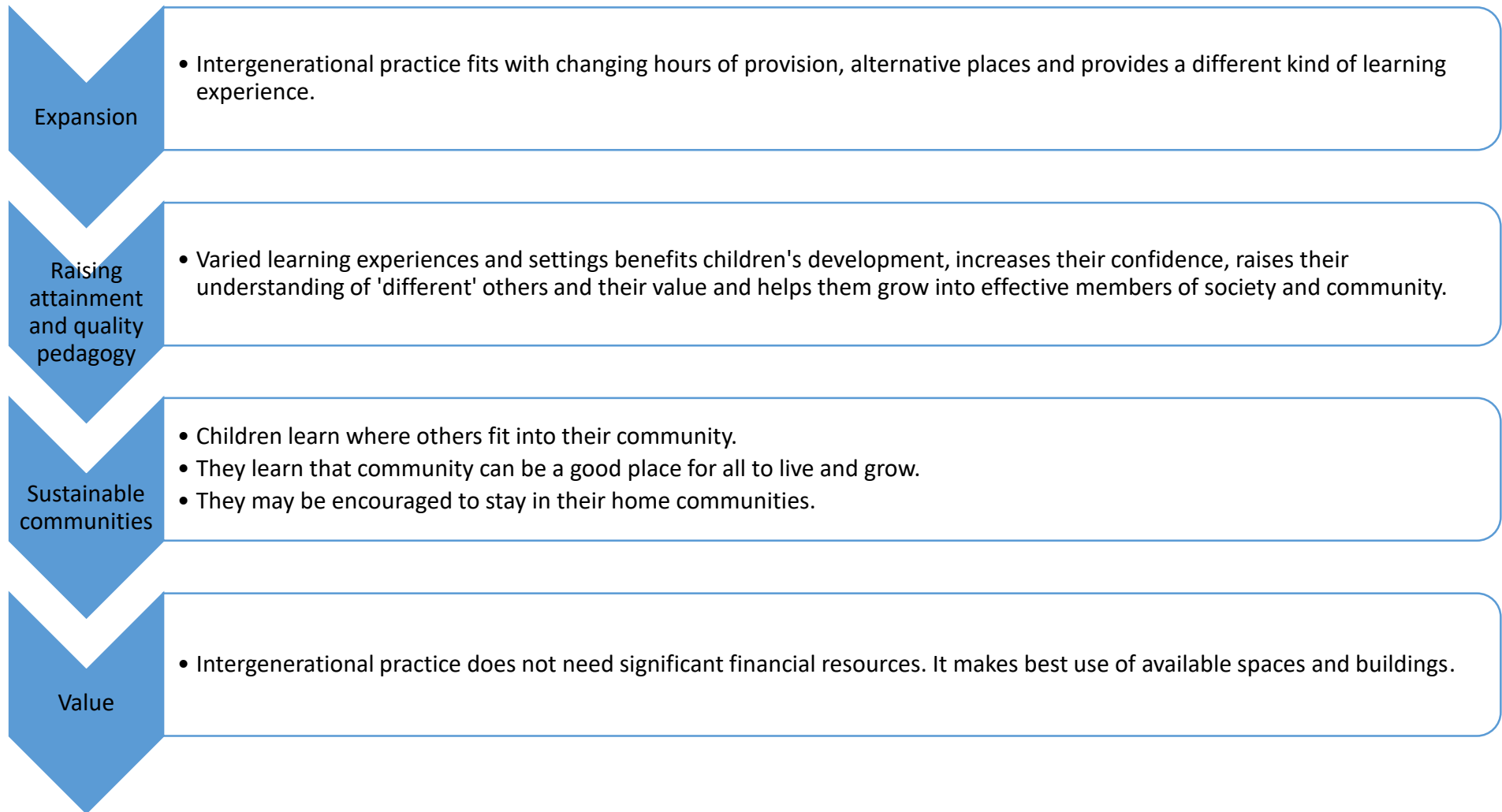
In direct relation to intergenerational and ELC settings there has been considerable growth in the number and level of this practice throughout the UK, including Scotland. Some ELC centres have embraced intergenerational practice to the degree they have co-located with residential care homes for older adults. The first of these in the UK was Apples and Honey who have been located within the grounds of Nightingale House in Wandsworth, London, since 2017. This co-location enables purposeful interaction between the older residents and the children several times each day. However, the experience and success of smaller scale Highland intergenerational projects such as Junior World, Nairn, with various care homes, provides evidence of the benefits of other models of intergenerational practice.

Regardless of the setting in which the intergenerational practice takes place the benefits for both generations are common across these and were evidenced by the observations carried out for this research.

Intergenerational practice has also brought benefits for communities, rural and urban. For Scotland to achieve the Scottish Government's aim of sustainable communities all in these communities must be inclusive and respectful of the worth of the other members, regardless of age and stage.

A number of cross-cutting themes emerged during the research into intergenerational partnerships. These and the recommendations for this strand are summarised below.

Intergenerational practice and partnerships cross-cutting themes



Intergenerational practice and partnerships recommendations

ELC providers

- Provide training on the meaning, purpose and benefits of intergenerational practice, to all ELC practitioners and students.
- Actively support and encourage all groups to plan and develop intergenerational practice within their local area.
- Consider August 2020 a single point in the continuum of delivery of ELC services that routinely have intergenerational practice as part of the curriculum.

Scottish and local government

- Consider establishing a designated intergenerational practice champion in each local authority area.
- Actively promote intergenerational practice in ELC (and other sectors) and embed such practice within national policy and guidance.
- Consider the opportunities for intergenerational practice at the initial planning stage of all new community building projects.

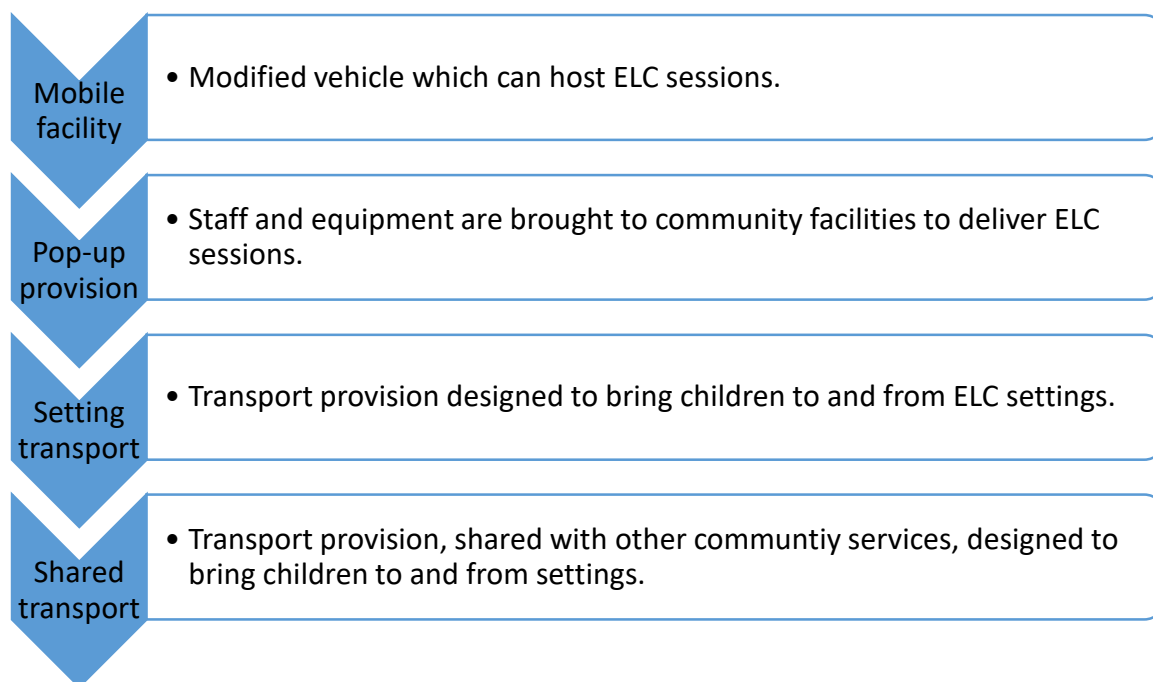
7. Transport

The focus of this strand was to assess the viability of using mobile nurseries in rural settings and determine how transport options could potentially be used to benefit the young learner, their family and extended community.

The research demonstrated the widespread use and popularity of mobile nurseries in Scandinavia and their historic use in New Zealand and Australia. It highlighted their potential to enhance quality and variety by transporting children to diverse settings, promoting learning through exploration, adventure and outdoor play. Quality ELC provision in fragile rural communities is seen as essential, enabling parents to return to work, making valuable contributions to the local economy.

Within rural communities, mobile service provision is commonplace, from mobile banking, libraries and health service provision. Early Years Play sessions are brought to communities by the Play, Talk, Read bus and in some Scottish areas there are mobile crèche facilities or a Play Van.

It was, therefore, important to determine the role of mobile nurseries and other transport provision in enhancing ELC provision in rural communities. The research focused on the four types listed below:



Once a transport solution has been identified the best option for that setting should be considered. Vehicle leasing, use of pooled vehicles and partnerships with community transport and service groups are all potential options for transport provision.

The cross-cutting themes and recommendations for this research strand are summarised below.

Transport cross-cutting themes

Expansion

- Potential to overcome capacity problems where providers do not have full time access to their setting.

Outdoor learning

- Facilitates outdoor learning at dispersed settings.

Sustainable communities

- Enhances service viability and their role within the community.
- Potential for partnership arrangements and intergenerational engagement.

Quality pedagogy

- Facilitates varied learning opportunities.

Flexibility and accessibility

- Can enhance accessibility of rural settings.
- Can facilitate provision out-with traditional operating hours.

Transport recommendations

ELC providers

- Explore how the use of transport solutions can enhance the quality and variety of provision by taking your children to dispersed settings.
- Explore how the use of transport solutions can enhance the accessibility and viability of your provision.
- Explore partnership arrangements with other services which require transport solutions to operate and how these can benefit all travellers.

Local authority and private networks

- Explore how the use of transport solutions can enhance the quality and variety of provision through the purchase of and pooled use of a vehicle to be used as either a mobile facility or to bring play and learning equipment to various settings.

8. General

In drawing together our conclusions, a number crossed over all or several of the four main research strands. These are as follows.

Introducing environmental stewardship to the curriculum

The transition to 1140 hours occurs in an increasingly environmentally aware era. All providers should consider incorporating environmentally friendly learning activities in the curriculum, thus encouraging environmental stewardship.

Mandatory training in outdoor learning and intergenerational partnership engagement

To ensure quality and safety in any service diversification staff must be fully and appropriately trained and engaged with the relevant area of practice.

Probationary periods for new settings in rural areas

In some areas a shortfall in provision is likely to require the establishment of a new ELC setting. For new settings waiting to be commissioned by a local authority, the initial operational period can prove extremely challenging. Until the commissioning process for a new setting is complete it would be beneficial if the Care Inspectorate could grant a probationary commission to that particular setting, enabling them to attract children and families with immediate effect.

Increased parental involvement

ELC settings should also be considering how to further maximise parental engagement either during or out-with ELC sessions.

General recommendations



General

- Training for all ELC practitioners in outdoors and intergenerational training as part of their qualification and for qualified staff, mandatory.
- Local Authorities support newly developed ELCs, particularly in rural areas by allowing funded hours on a probationary period whilst the new facility settles in, so long as they have had initial Care Inspectorate visit/approval.
- ELCs to see how they can increase parental involvement in ELC activities, particularly outdoor activities where ratios of children to adults are less.
- Explore the potential to promote environmental stewardship and awareness and encourage parental support out-with ELC time.

8. Conclusion

This research explored the background to the Scottish Government's early learning and childcare expansion agenda, its aims and its expectations for both individuals and communities. The study identified that there is not one solution for ELC providers in overcoming the challenges arising from the transition to 1140 hours. Vast disparities exist in terms of the scale of ELC settings and the social, financial and environmental fabric of the community within which each operate.

The research has discussed the importance of ensuring that settings each have a strong and sustainable workforce. From this foundation, and in cognisance of the community within which they operate, settings should consider developing intergenerational partnerships and the use of alternative places, times and transport solutions to optimise the flexibility, accessibility and quality of their provision.

It should also be stressed that, while the expansion to 1140 hours is a huge transition, all settings should consider how they can deploy the proposed innovative methods in a beneficial manner before, during and after the transition for the benefit of current and future young learners.

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