



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

Building our communities



Sgoil nan Loch



Hannah Mackay, Sgoil nan Loch, and Ruth Mackay, Nicolson Institute



Sgoil Bhreascleit



Matilda Cheeseman, Sgoil na Pàirc



Bun Sgoil Steòrnabhaigh Folk Group

Sarah MacBain, Sgoil Bhreascleit (Duais na Coimhairle for overall performance).
L-R, Dokus, Sarah, Allan Campbell, President of An Comunn Gàidhealach

Early Learning and Childcare expands on Isles

By Katie Macleod

“The early years of a child’s life are the most crucial to a child’s development, and have a lasting impact on their outcomes later in life,” explains Becky Maclean, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar’s Early Years Service Manager.

With this in mind, Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) services are being expanded throughout the Western Isles – and across the country – under the Scottish Government’s plan to provide 1140 hours of free childcare to eligible children by August 2020.

This ELC expansion plan will see the government almost double the amount of free nursery time provided in Early Learning for all eligible two, three, and four-year-olds, in an attempt to provide greater choice and flexibility for families, and close the poverty-related attainment gap. As Becky notes, “current research shows that children benefit in social, emotional, and educational outcomes from attending nursery, especially those from more challenging backgrounds.”

“The main principles of the expansion are that we will provide 1140 hours per year of high quality ELC provision for every child, and that our service will have flexibility to support parents and carers who work or are studying; that there will be sufficient provision conveniently located geographically; and that the costs to parents of using ELC will be more affordable.”

Expansion has already begun in the Western Isles, with a successful trial run launched in Tarbert in July 2017, and an extended service offered in two term-time nurseries, Shawbost and Tong, over the past six months. A third nursery, in Barvas, will offer full-day, full-year provision starting in August. As part of the phased expansion plan, the Comhairle hopes to extend the 1140 free hours offer to families involved in these three nurseries after the summer.

The initial trial at Sgoil Araich an Tairbeirt was a positive one: all day early learning care was provided for 50 weeks of the year, and offered the families access to the full 1140 hours. “All children made use of more than the current statutory 600 hours, and feedback has been very successful,” says Becky, adding that the trial has now become a permanent service. Some parents observed that their children were more confident and sociable as a result of the increased hours, while other parents have been able to take on more work, increasing their family’s financial stability.

With additional funding from the Scottish Government recently confirmed – this year additional funding will reach £370,000, with another £3 million provided by 2021-22 – the rate of implementation of the programme in the islands will now increase. “Our plan for the rest of 2018-19 will be to extend a further six nurseries by June 2019, and take forward capital developments at Laxdale School,” explains Becky. “In addition to a new school gym and a refurbished canteen for all the school children, it will also include two new nursery playrooms, which will enable us to accommodate more children for longer. These rooms will open out directly to a dedicated outdoor nursery space and will provide all year service to those in the area.”

ELC service in the Western Isles currently consists of 20 nurseries based in schools, as well as five partner nurseries, which are a mix of community and privately-run groups. Prior to the expansion, the early years and childcare service in the Western Isles was largely made up of nurseries providing a maximum of 15 hours and 50 minutes of care per week, during term-time mornings only. Opening times, hours, and provision in general were relatively inflexible – but the recent and upcoming changes will transform the state of nursery provision entirely.

“Once expansion is complete, we will see all nurseries opening for at least six hours per day, and in consultation with parents, we will be setting the nursery opening hours which suit their needs,” says Becky. “Most will remain as term-time services, but each locality will have one nursery ‘hub’ which will provide service for 50 weeks of the year to ensure easier access to holiday provision.”

“Parents will be able to choose whether they wish to use their free hours during term-time only, or throughout the full year. This is a massive step for working parents, those who wish to study or find a job, or those who need extra time to support other family members.

“With free hours increasing from 600 hours per year to 1140 hours per year, many families will save money on the cost of their childcare, too.”