Childcare and wellbeing in times of Covid: project outline

The University of Edinburgh

Welcome to this short presentation on an exciting new project we are running at Edinburgh University on childcare and well-being in times of COVID-19.

My name is Ingela Naumann. I am the principal investigator on this project and Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at Edinburgh University. And first of all, I would like to thank Children in Scotland for giving us the space to present our new project here and make you all aware that we are running this project.

As we are hoping that some of the findings we going to develop throughout the project might be useful for the public and stakeholders working with children and families.

So thank you for the space here in this learning week. Our presentation has two parts.

First, I will here give a short outline of our project. And secondly, my colleague, Alan Marshall, will present some first findings on our project that we have developed over the last few months. And as you can see, as we all are still in lockdown. I am sitting here at home. I have children and dogs around, so I hope we will not be disturbed too much. But if so, I need to ask your understanding and I hope you are well, whereever you are.

So first of all, we are a quite large project team for this, and we are based, partly at the School of Social Political Science, Edinburgh University, and partly we are working in collaboration with the Scottish Community Development Centre. So we are bringing together quite a bit of expertise in terms of qualitative research, of quantitative research in social policy in sociology, as well as expertise on early childhood education and care. This particular my field. And we're also bringing in expertise on community involvement and co-production via our colleagues, Mick Doyle and Paul Nelis.

If you're interested to learn more about our project, we have a website, childcare-covid.org. So please visit our website where we also are going to

post information and findings about our project as we are progressing.

So what is our project really about? It is about generally what I would call the COVID childcare crisis. While we acknowledge that COVID measures such as lockdown and social distancing, of course, were very important public health measures to save lives and contain the virus, to spread of the virus, they also had a few difficult effects. And what we're looking at is how the closure of schools, how the closure of early years and after school services really created some quite intense, child care challenges for many families with young children. And this particularly for families in more vulnerable circumstances. And this is really what our project is about.

On the one hand, we are going to look into how COVID has affected families, childcare, and wellbeing. So how has this new situation where extra-familial support in the care of children, both the early year services, after school, clubs, but also school affected families. And of course, the education aspect is very important. But schools also perform a caring role when it comes to supporting families. And we're going to look at how the falling away of these support services, including informal care, the support by grandparents, by friends, by other community members. How this has affected families when actually parents and guardians have become the sole carers for their young children.

How has this affected the well-being of children? The well-being of parents, the relations between family members. And what kind of childcare arrangements have families put in place during this period? To what extent have they been supported? By emergency childcare hubs, and have they been able to use these. But also what does it mean for developing responsive and effective childcare care support during the pandemic, but also afterwards.

So we're hoping that our project can contribute to a discussion about building back better, for after the pandemic. Because we are of course aware that families have been facing various challenges when it came to arranging childcare also before the pandemic. So what can we actually learn about the childcare needs of families and of different groups of families that have been intensified a lot during the pandemic to develop policy and practise for now, but also for afterwards. So the second aim of this project is to develop what we call a toolkit with suggestions for community-based implementation and practise pathways to support local crisis responses and inform early years and school care policy afterwards.

Our focus is really quite holistic. We are looking at at the needs and challenges with respect to childcare of families for children up to the age of 12 and younger. Because we are starting from the assumption that families

really do need childcare support for at least for children up to 12. So we're not distinguishing between the early years, if at school, after school care; we are bringing them together here.

We're starting also from the assumption that while research and policy often compartmentalises these different age groups into different types of services. educational services, care services, child support services. and school. It's maybe not the case that families see these always separate it that way. And families often look at it in a more holistic place. And of course, families deal with a lot of logistical challenges during their everyday life and trying to piece things together. So we're really trying to look into how families can be supported with their childcare puzzles during the pandemic, but also afterwards.

Just briefly how this project is set up. So it's a 12 months Rapid Response project and is funded by the UK Research and Innovation funding body at the ESRC. So the Economic and Social Research Council is our funder. From an academic side, we find 12 months is very fast. We know that for stake holders and policymakers in the field that seems a bit slow. So we're trying to bridge two worlds, the academic world and applied world here, It's a mixed methods project.

We have three different work streams or work packages. One, qualitative workpackage, conducting the in-depth interviews then a quantitative one, looking at what kind of quantitative survey data is available that tells us more about what we know about COVID and its impact on family well-being. And we have a third workpackage that looks at how to develop community coproduction and partnership collaboration in developing responsive and effective types of services, both during the pandemic and beyond. And we also fortunate to have a quite large number of project partners that are supporting us throughout the project, that are sharing their expertise. and put us right when we might forget something and help us focus on where gaps are in the data we're having, but also questions we need to explore further to support the development of childcare services in Scotland and in the UK.

I can show you a list of the project partners we have here. So for example, Generation Scotland, which is a large research hub. Early Learning and Childcare Directorate, Scottish Government or Public Health Scotland, for example. Children in Scotland as well, are supporting us and some other third sector organisations. So what are our three work packages? Work package one is conducting a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with parents of children, who live with children in their household, children up to the age of 12. We are supported by the NHS recruitment service SHARE. So we are using the NHS client database for this, so we can do some purposive sampling.

We're both looking at rural families, living in rural, and in urban settings. We are starting from the assumption that the challenges and experiences of families living in urban or rural areas, they are quite different. There might be different aspects that are important. And also because we are aware that this is a field, where we need to think a bit further how to develop policy and practise, as the challenges and access problems to childcare services may be quite different in rural and urban settings.

So we're trying to contribute to this issue, of developing different ideas and pathways for implementation and policy; effective policy in different settings. We're looking at families from different backgrounds. So different socio-economic backgrounds, being aware that for some families, this has been really quite difficult. Families living in constrained housing situations, families with reduced financial resources during COVID, where parents have been furloughed or unemployed. But also we're looking at families from different ethnic backgrounds. Also how family life in their relationships to other community members as we've all now been locked into our very core, very, very smallest unit of a family, so to speak, between parents and children in most cases.

We're looking at families with protected characteristics, for example, thinking of single-parent families, but also families who had extra support through the community or social policy prior to the pandemic. Families with underlying health conditions for example. So different household structures, but also different parental occupations.

There might be other challenges, for example, dual earner families, that relied quite extensively on childcare, suddenly being in the situation where they both have to work and home school and care at home, and also including key workers. So what we really want to understand in work package one is the childcare needs of different groups of families and also specific access challenges, not just during the pandemic, but also before, to support an understanding of how we can build back better really also for afterwards.

And we're going to have a series of expert interviews with stakeholders and decision-makers in the field, both early years and school age, childcare, to hear their views about how the situation has evolved during the pandemic. And then we hope to synthesise these findings, this new data that we are collecting, with our other work packages. Work package two, our secondary data analysis package, here we look at quantitative evidence on how COVID has impacted family well-being and childcare. And we're looking at

quite a wide range of data. As you can see, both convenient samples for example COVIDlife, which is a survey from Generation Scotland, or Public Health Scotland surveys Growing up in Scotland, but also some representative data the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing for example.

And this is also to show, we are trying to gather evidence that helps scale up our evidence beyond Scotland, UK-wide, and we look at some more specific Scottish data too. Alan Marshall will tell us more about some of our first findings from these different, from our initial data analysis of some of the waves of survey data we have.

Then we have a third work package, which is our more explorative work package really, where we are trying in a quite innovative way, trying to combine traditional social science methods with more engaging and co-production collaborative methods together with our colleagues from Scottish Community Development Centre, we are going to develop two co-production childcare labs. In a rural and one in an urban setting, with local stakeholders, policymakers and parents.

And we're going to explore the experiences and the possibilities, and constraints as well, of course, for effective ways to develop community-based local childcare solutions for vulnerable and hard to reach groups of families in particular. Because we think a focus on these groups of families who have been hardest hit by COVID is quite important to build a better understanding of what kind of service provision, both during the crisis and beyond, is necessary to support families in their childcare needs. This work package has a new explorative method we're calling the social-geographic mapping exercise.

And here, in these two rural and urban settings, we like to have a look at what is the situation both geographically and socially in terms of childcare resources? What are the childcare services that are available? What are the community spaces? What are the issues around transport and housing for parents, and opening hours. To create a map of what the actual childcare logistics in local settings look like. And also to create some kind of mapping device for local communities to start thinking about how to overcome access problems, and challenges for families. This is quite hands-on and something that has maybe not been done much social policy yet. To think about the local situation of what actually are the local barriers despite entitlements, for example, for families to access services.

So this is what we're going to do in work package three. And then we hope that again helps to synthesise evidence and findings with the other two work packages and lead into what we call our policy toolkit.

So at the end of our research project, we're going to, of course, in a traditional way, develop a research report and working papers. But we're mainly aiming for putting up our findings publicly on our website in what we call a toolkit, which will present a childcare policy topology. identifying childcare needs of different groups of families, providing analysis and different tools that can support policymakers to think through the different potential access and take-up problems of different groups.

We will put in a What Works tool, what has worked particularly well both during and before the pandemic particularly for hard-to-reach target populations and make childcare accessible to them. And we're going to provide tools for thinking about how we can successfully develop local childcare both for during the pandemic and beyond. By suggesting implementation and practise pathways, but also recommendations for how to develop effective and responsive childcare provision locally and nationally. We'll have a series of outputs, of course, some academic articles of course. But also we are trying to present our research findings as we go along on our webpage.

We're going to have some blog posts and research summaries. We are also planning a series of development and training workshops for co-production and some dissemination events. And here I will stop. So to give space for my colleague, Alan Marshall, to present you some of our quite exciting and quite strong findings we have already, from secondary data that shows how COVID has affected family well-being. And I'd like to also point out that we are going to have a live Question and Answer session on Wednesday, the 24th of March.

If you would like, you could look in, and we can answer further questions regarding our project. And we're always happy to take on board suggestions and comments as well that we could possibly develop into our project. Our project will run until more or less the end of this here. And we are aiming to present more final findings in late autumn this year, but some early findings as we go along. Thank you very much for listening.

Thanks.