



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

Lynne Neagle
Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee
Welsh Parliament
Sent by email only

16 February 2021

Dear Lynne

Thank you for the opportunity to provide additional information in relation to the non-maintained sector following my appearance at committee on 14 January 2021.

Continuation of learning

The national continuity of learning plan focused predominantly on children of statutory school age (5+). There was no specific guidance on continuity of learning for the non-maintained sector. We are also concerned that this sector has not been included in the grant funding for recruit, recover, raise standards: the accelerating learning programme. The problem arises in part because these are childcare settings funded by local authorities to deliver foundation phase education. During the pandemic decisions were being made either for education in maintained schools or for childcare and this meant that sometimes the education needs of children attending non-maintained settings were not considered well enough at a strategic level.

Most non-maintained settings closed at the beginning of the first lockdown and many placed staff on furlough. There was confusion for a minority of settings at the beginning on whether practitioners who were on furlough could provide remote support for education, such as providing learning activities for children to complete at home. Practitioners in these settings were concerned about who should be responsible for ensuring continuity of learning for young children when settings were closed and staff on furlough. However, many settings continued to support children and families throughout the pandemic, for example by sharing activities for children through social media platforms. A few settings also delivered learning packs to parents for them to help their children with their learning at home.

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Generally, local authority advisory teachers and umbrella organisations helped settings with ideas for activities to share with parents, but this was not consistent across Wales.

There is concern about the parity of provision for children who receive their education in non-maintained settings and those who receive education in schools. Although work is progressing at pace on a curriculum for non-maintained settings, and in general local authorities have continued to provide support for settings, there is no national approach to making sure that children who receive their education in settings have access to continued support during lockdown. For example, settings do not have the same access to HWB as schools.

Financial position

Historically, the funding for education has been very low for non-maintained settings and significantly lower than the childcare offer's daily rate. Across local authorities, there are inconsistencies in the amount paid to settings to deliver early education and inconsistencies in how settings receive this funding. There are also inconsistencies in how local authorities use the Early Years Development Grant. We welcome the recent announcement that there will be increased foundation phase nursery funding to align education and childcare rates within the childcare offer.

Settings report that during the initial lockdown, there were inconsistencies as to when local authorities stopped funding settings who offered early education. This contrasts with schools who continued to receive funding. Before the pandemic, many settings were concerned about their sustainability and finances and the removal of funding exacerbated this.

Most settings report increased costs in providing effective virus controls to meet the requirements of their risk assessments. These include increasing staffing ratios and providing personal protective equipment (PPE). A few settings report that they were not supported with PPE provision, although the local authority provided PPE free of charge to schools. Settings must source and fund their own equipment and were often not part of a local authority purchasing system that would have helped them to reduce costs.

In a few local authorities, settings reported that they received good support to carry out risk assessments and to produce policies and procedures to help them reduce the spread of infection. However, in a few cases, relationships between settings and the local authority were fragile. For example, a few settings reported concerns around the application of the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS) grant, and this added to their financial pressures. These settings reported that they were told they would receive a daily rate for eligible children attending the setting and would need to submit registers to claim this funding. However, they later faced clawbacks of this funding, for example if a child had been collected earlier in the day than originally planned. The settings noted that this situation created additional financial pressure.

Settings are often concerned in the delay of funding from local authorities for children eligible for early education. In some local authorities, funding is retrospective, and this can mean that staff are not paid until funding is received.

Many settings are concerned that they have not been able to fundraise as previously. This has often been a lifeline to settings and has helped them with finances during the autumn term, when generally there were less children attending the setting. The latest lockdown is once again exacerbating the situation. Parents are removing their children from settings as they are often

working from home themselves and choosing to provide their own childcare. This has an impact on the funding settings receive and also makes it difficult for them to know how many staff they will need in the future to meet required ratios. The childcare offer is based on children's attendance. This makes it challenging for settings to plan and is likely to have an impact on their future viability. Most recently settings have been expressing concerns about the end of furlough in April combined with a rise in the living wage and increased business rates. These combined with anticipated redundancies may make settings that are just about managing at present unsustainable.

Other issues

During the spring term, many settings report concerns about staying open while schools are closed and an increase in anxiety amongst staff. They are concerned that schools, who offer education to children of the same age, are closed due to the risk of transmission, yet settings can stay open for all children. They report that parents do not always understand the rationale for this and are therefore more likely to keep their children at home. We welcome steps taken to align some of the issues raised by the sector such as the increased testing in settings and changes to the vaccination groups for practitioners who provide intimate personal care on a regular basis to those who are clinically vulnerable to Covid-19.

Settings experience additional burdens when responding to guidance published by Welsh Government about keeping children safe. Settings who offer early education have been told that they need to take account of the document for childcare settings as well as the one for schools. These are detailed documents, and settings report that it is not always easy to navigate both documents and to note where changes have been made when they are updated.

Yours sincerely



Meilyr Rowlands

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of
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