



Childcare and parental employment: the pandemic and beyond

1. The extent to which current childcare provision in Wales sufficiently supports parents, particularly mothers, to enter, remain and progress in employment, and what changes might be needed to improve the effectiveness of childcare provision in doing this.

1.1 Funding

- Existing funding schemes to support childcare affordability have a positive impact on those who are eligible and on the childcare sector itself
- Brevity of time frames for certain schemes (i.e. age range of Childcare Offer [CO]) and the eligibility requirements (must be working) can lead to some parents (often mothers) needing to limit their working hours, avoid progression opportunities or refrain from re-entering the workforce altogether; or resorting to unregulated/informal childcare options

Action required: exploration of expansion of existing financial support schemes in terms of eligibility (including those not currently working, to support them into employment), and age ranges to ensure that long-term impact can be made on as many families as possible

1.2 Closures and sustainability of provision

- Need to ensure that there are sufficient, quality childcare opportunities available for all ages (early years and preschool, and to wrap around the school day for older children) and in the language of choice (welsh/English/bilingual – expanding Welsh medium in particular to reflect the 11% gap in provision noted by Arad) to meet the needs of working parents and children.
- 19% of Out of School Childcare Clubs have closed since March 2020 ([State of the Sector Report, Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs, 2021](#))
- Closure of elements of services (e.g. out of school provision no longer offered by some Day Nurseries due to demand for EY places) may be masked in CIW statistics
- New provisions opening might be masking local impact of closures and the availability of childcare in specific communities.
- Specific concern given the decline in registered childminders in Wales in recent years
- Continued funding for Mudiad Meithrin's Cynllyn SAS required (Sefydla a Symud / Set Up and Succeed) to ensure new provision continues to meet demand and is sustainable.

Action required: Ensure continued availability and accessibility of funding opportunities to mitigate impact of Covid-19 and other pressures on sustainability of Providers and to prevent further closures, with parity in support provided for all service Provider types.

1.3 Location – School Sites

- School based childcare (versus community venue-based options) preferable for parents/carers and more sustainable option for Providers (transport).
- Progression to Welsh medium education is also higher when Cylchoedd are based on school sites (96% versus 90%). Also refer to 1.7
- However, access to school sites by childcare providers is often hindered by:
 - Issues with opening up/locking up
 - Childcare not being sufficiently considered in the planning stages when building new schools
 - Increasing demand for school places leading to a lack of available room for onsite childcare
 - Issues around ownership/ management of Capital Build (for e.g. CO) premises on school sites, particularly where funding has been provided to facilitate childcare provision.
 - Increased rental costs charged by schools and Local Authorities
 - Continued concerns around Covid-19 and reluctance to allow mixing of year groups

Action Required: Childcare on school sites needs to be considered from the early planning stages, engaging with relevant stakeholders to ensure the space is designed in a CIW registerable way and there needs to be continued partnership working between Education and Childcare to ensure that community needs can be met in terms of both education AND childcare. This needs to include consideration of local Childcare that is not able to be based on school-sites to ensure that displacement does not occur.



1.4 Inclusion

- Families with disabled children are more likely to live in poverty
- Local Authority Childcare Sufficiency Assessments identify that there is insufficient childcare provision for these children.
- Welsh Government's tackling poverty strategy must plan to and provide care opportunities with adequate and suitable early education for all children, regardless of the type of additional learning need or disability they may have.
- There must be sufficient childcare for children of all ages who have additional learning needs / disabilities, to ensure that opportunities are inclusive and to support parents/carers to enter/remain/progress in employment.
- Scrutiny of the impact of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act is also essential, not only in terms of impact on children themselves but also on those who work with children and young people.

Action Required: Ensure that there is funding available and support to develop and sustain provision for children with complex needs, as well as funding and support to ensure that all childcare provision can be inclusive and accessible.

1.5 Community led Childcare

- Every community is different, and a choice of childcare provision that reflects the variety in these communities supports community cohesion (service type, language type, management type).
- The number of community-led, voluntary run Settings has diminished year on year, particularly impacting rural/disadvantaged areas (where there is already reduced childcare availability), leading to lower income/rural families being disproportionately affected in terms of ability to enter/remain/progress in employment (where privately managed provision replaces these settings, it will often require higher fees to cover costs).
- PACEY Cymru notes that childminding can also be an option to support rural communities where other childcare provision is not sustainable, including atypical hours, but childminder numbers are declining (see 1.2).

Action Required: Parents/carers and children have the right to access childcare that meets their needs and to be able to choose which childcare to use.

1.6 Atypical Hours

- Lower paid workers often work atypical shift patterns, and so the lack of availability of registered childcare during these hours can perpetuate this.

Action Required: Establish and sustain atypical childcare models

Targeted, pre-registration funding to increase the numbers of registered childminders that is long-term, available and easily accessible across all areas of Wales to support atypical working patterns (see 1.2)

1.7 Welsh medium childcare

- Insufficient Care Inspectorate Wales registered Welsh medium childcare provision across Wales, for all age ranges (pre school and school age). Welsh medium Out of School Childcare is more likely to be unregistered (36% versus 17% of English medium, [Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs Impact Report March 2021](#))
- The availability of early years and school age childcare on or close to school site can impact on parental choice of school, and so may result in parents opting for English medium education.
- This lack of availability may also lead parents/carers to remain economically inactive.

Action Required:

Establish, register and sustain Welsh medium childcare. Extension of existing early years Welsh medium provision to include childcare for school age children.

Targeted recruitment of people with Welsh Language competency into the childcare and Playwork sector.

Continued support to the childcare sector to upskill staff in Welsh Language to enable more Providers to meet the Active Offer.

Continued funding for Mudiad Meithrin's Cynllyn SAS (Sefydlu a Symud / Set Up and Succeed) to ensure new provision continues to meet demand and is sustainable



2. What impact the Childcare Offer in particular has had in achieving the Welsh Government's objective of "helping parents, particularly mothers, to return to work or increase the hours they work".

ARAD evidence on the Childcare Offer suggests that it has allowed for more flexibility, an increase in earnings for some families and more disposable income. However:

- Only 47% of the eligible population are using the offer, 3% of applications are for children with additional needs.
- 11-17% of parents said in CO surveys that they could not access Welsh medium childcare.
- Scheme does not currently support childcare costs before age 3 and after 4 when there is often still support required to ensure parents/carers are able to remain economically active.
- The costs of providing childcare are high because of the regulation and requirements in meeting ratios of qualified staff; however many of these childcare and playwork practitioners are on minimum wage.
- There is a need to enable and encourage individuals to train and apply to work in specific areas, for example early years care and education, childcare and playwork. Expanding the Childcare Offer to include parents in training or education would be a way of doing this.
- PACEY Cymru note that the Welsh Government has enabled childminders to receive Childcare Offer funding for the care of a child who is also a relative but who does not live with them, such as grandchildren. This has enabled those working parents to keep their children at the childcare setting of their choice, providing continuity of care and supporting parents to return or increase their hours in work.

Action Required: There is a need to look at models of funded, registered childcare being provided when a child turns 2. This comes with associated recruitment challenges and further discussions on remuneration and skills gaps.

Support to ensure that existing provision (all Provider types and for all ages of children) is encouraged and supported to achieve registration with CIW (benefits of registration can be found [here](#)).

3. The impact of limited childcare availability on Wales' productivity levels.

3. 1 Holiday Childcare

- Accessibility and cost of care during the school holidays in particular can be a challenge for working mothers.
- Other initiatives and programs used as unregulated childcare such as SHEP, Playworks Holiday Programme, can impact on the short-term viability and long-term sustainability of existing Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) registered settings, particularly those offering holiday childcare, unless services collaborate when planning, and unless registered childcare is considered at a strategic level.

Action: Ensure the [Exceptions Order](#) is reviewed and supports the sustainability of regulated childcare (see 8.1). Ensure a holistic approach is taken to existing and future schemes to support children's rights, wellbeing, the childcare sector and the economy.

3. 2 Atypical Hours

See 1.6. Implications on take up of job roles that require atypical hours.

3. 3 Closures and sustainability of provision

See 1.2. If there is a lack of availability of childcare provision, this will impact the ability of parents/carers to gain/retain employment and thus have a negative impact on the local economy.

4. How childcare arrangements have affected parental employment during the coronavirus pandemic, particularly in relation to mothers. What lessons might be applied to provide better support during any future lockdowns or increased restrictions.

- Anecdotal reports - burden of childcare fell on mothers during lockdown, with many having to remain on furlough, reduce working hours or battle the increased stress and mental wellbeing implications of juggling childcare, homeschooling and working from home.
- Schools provided different criteria for access to school hubs. Equitable processes in any future instances of lockdown are needed.
- Need education and childcare to work together to ensure community needs can be met – collaborative solution finding that puts equal emphasis on both education *and* childcare.



Parent/Carer quotes from the State of the Sector Survey (Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs, 2021)

- “No childcare during lockdown meant I was forced to work full time whilst having my son with special needs at home the whole time. It affected my mental wellbeing and also his social skills were severely affected.”
- “Had to cut down hours at work significantly and claim certain benefits which I had never had to claim before.”
- “It has had a real impact on my mental health this year and potential to earn income. It has meant that the youngest child (4) has had limited interaction with children her own age.”
- “I desperately need my after school and breakfast club to reopen. I am losing at least £300 a month because my partner needs to work part time and I cannot do overtime. I experience in work poverty.”
- “School run holiday club has not run due to low uptake which makes it very difficult during holidays when I have to work.”

5. Whether Welsh Government-funded childcare provision is flexible enough to support employment of parents, particularly mothers, in different demographic groups and experiencing different circumstances.

- Limited registered Welsh language provision (see 1.7)
- Different perceptions towards childcare of different cultural groups within communities – Settings need to market in a way that is welcoming/accessible to all demographics in the community and to ensure their service meets the needs of all.
- There is a need to prioritise increasing the number of early years/childcare practitioners who are Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic. Putting plans in place will allow more children to see their race represented among their carers and role models.
- PACEY Cymru believe childminders have the potential to offer more flexibility to meet individual family's childcare needs and working patterns, however this depends on sufficient availability across all areas, including in rural and areas of deprivation.

6. The impact of high-quality formal childcare provision on reducing the attainment gap, and the potential benefits of extending childcare provision to tackle inequalities.

- Quality, affordable childcare enables parents/carers to access employment/training opportunities, lifting families out of poverty and breaking the often-generational link of poverty, educational attainment and career opportunities.
- Positive data around the impact of access to high quality childcare in mitigating attainment gaps at school entry (and [the importance of equity in this access](#)). If existing funded childcare opportunities (e.g. the Childcare Offer) were extended to children from low-income/non-working families, this could help to support school readiness and development opportunities
- Access to quality play experiences, such as those offered by childcare providers for school age children, is also linked to social, cognitive, emotional and physical development. Thus, exploration of additional affordability schemes to support equitable access to school age childcare would also benefit children.
- Efforts to widen access to these early years and school age childcare opportunities (including widening the regulated provider types that can offer these opportunities e.g. childminders) and to support affordability for parents/carers will be a positive investment and reduce reliance on costly and less effective school intervention programmes.

Action required: Opportunities for universal access to funded provision across Wales explored.

7. What Wales can learn from other models of childcare provision operating in the rest of the UK and internationally and emerging practice in terms of supporting parental employment, and the extent to which these models might be transferrable to the Welsh context.

- The Scottish Government - funded childcare for one- and two-year-olds, starting with those from low-income households. Plans for free ["wraparound" childcare](#) for the lowest-income families. Children in that bracket will receive free care before and after school and also over the holidays. This will address some of the issues outlined in 1.1
- [The OECD Building a high quality Early Childhood Education and Care workforce](#) seeks to:
 - Ensure that unfavourable working conditions do not accumulate on some ECEC staff and that the status and reward of ECEC professions are aligned with staff responsibilities.



Working to address the need to improve the status of the Childcare and Playwork workforce, professionalising it and validating and rewarding working conditions.

8. How financial and practical implications such as availability of childcare would need to be considered by the Welsh Government in any future policy developments to extend childcare provision.

8.1 Review of the exceptions order (National Minimum Standards)

- A continued commitment to prioritise the review of the **exceptions order** ([National Minimum Standards](#)) and ensure that changes are made to support **quality services and safeguarding** of children. All children have the right to access quality, regulated childcare facilitated by qualified staff and where suitable policies and procedures are in place to safeguard them, and unregulated provision (e.g. sports camps and activity clubs) are having a negative impact on the sustainability of registered provision.

8.2 Accessible Funding to support ongoing sustainability

- Funding and support must be made available for all types of childcare (Out of School Childcare, childminders, day nurseries, playgroups/Cylch Meithrin) as well as all management types (limited companies, sole traders, unincorporated committees, charities and CIOs) to ensure that no one 'falls through the cracks' post Covid-19 and to prevent any further closures that will impact communities across Wales.

8.3 Priority given to supporting retention and recruitment within the childcare sector

- Requirements from funders such as Local Authorities and the Welsh Government are placing increasing workload pressures on childcare providers.
- We would like to see a continued commitment to recognise the professional status of the workforce (as outlined in the Childcare, Play and Early Years Workforce Plan, 2017) and consideration of ways in which pay could be brought in line to reflect this, as well as public promotion of the professional status of the workforce.
- Retention/recruitment issues are leading Settings to run at reduced capacity, temporarily close, consider de-registration or permanently close.

8.4 Commitment to ensuring that the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) approach considers barriers, as well as unintended consequences and is implemented in a way that supports children, families and the childcare sector itself.

- We want to see the reinforcement of a commitment to moving to the ECEC approach and revised plans and timescales for this.
- Funded services need to include childminders universally across Wales, where meeting the criteria, in order for them to be available as a childcare choice for parents.
- Barriers including access to registerable venues, extension of existing provision and recruitment of suitably trained staff will need to be considered and addressed, to ensure that there are sufficient childcare places available to meet demand, and that provision of care within ECEC does not lead to reduced availability for younger and/or older children.
- Further exploration is required in terms of how Playwork provision, particularly holiday childcare that is not registered as education provision and does not (nor should not) provide education but rather is managed in line with the Playwork Principles, will fit within/alongside the ECEC framework. If ECEC leads to Playwork provision (such as CIW registered holiday clubs) being precluded from offering care to certain age ranges, and thus unable to access schemes such as the Childcare Offer, this is likely to decimate the sector.
- Consideration needs to be given to the quality measures to ensure that there is clarity to avoid confusion and unnecessary burden for childcare providers.