

Equality and Social Justice Committee – written response to the Committee’s inquiry by the Deputy Minister for Social Services

Childcare and parental employment: the pandemic and beyond

Background

1. Access to affordable and flexible childcare is often cited by parents, and particularly mothers, as one of the main barriers preventing them from working, or progressing further in their careers. The regulated childcare sector in Wales encompasses a wide range of provision, spanning both child minding and day care¹ with providers drawn from across the public, private and third sectors.
2. This mixed model is intended to ensure there is choice and flexibility for parents in the type of care they use for their children. However, a market based model means that registered childcare provision tends to be found in areas of higher demand, driven by higher population density and greater affluence.² Historically, childcare settings (especially full day care settings) also tend to be clustered along commuter routes. This can often mean that there are fewer choices for parents in rural areas and in less affluent parts of Wales and the distances families have to travel to access childcare in these areas can be greater. How we address these issues of distribution and equity of provision are key as we seek to ensure that there is accessible and affordable childcare for all parents.

Current levels of provision and impact of the pandemic

3. There are 3,336 childcare and play settings registered with the Care Inspectorate Wales, providing over 76,000 places for children aged 0-12. This represents a reduction of 8 per cent of settings, and 3 per cent capacity, as compared to levels pre-March 2020, and while this suggests the sector overall has weathered the pandemic reasonably well, there remain ongoing challenges in parts of the sector.

	Settings	Places
Full Day Care	995	38,715
Sessional Day Care	455	10,302
Out of School Care	350	13,715
Open Access Play Provision	14	1,051
Crèche	13	309
Childminder	1,509	12,191
Total Day Care	1,827	64,092
Total Number of settings	3,336	76,283

¹ Child minding is childcare provided by one or more people for children from 0- 12 within domestic premises that are not the child’s own home, for more than 2 hours per day for reward. Day care is childcare for children from 0-12 provided on non-domestic premises and includes day nurseries, out of school childcare, play groups, crèches and open access play.

² Welsh Government (2017) [Childcare Capacity in Wales: Mapping childcare supply against potential demand](#).

Source: Care Inspectorate Wales register on 8/11/2021³

4. Some settings report lower numbers of children attending and changes to patterns of usage compared to the period before Covid-19, resulting in an overall reduction in demand. Many out of school providers, for example have been unable to operate as a result of issues accessing premises, concerns about mixing across school bubbles and low levels of demand from parents working from home.
5. The pandemic did also create new demand for formal childcare. The restrictions on contact with other households over the past year have seen some families using formal childcare (as opposed to family or friends) for the first time, as seen clearly in the take-up of the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS) which ran from April to August 2020⁴. A fifth of the parents surveyed reported that they were not using formal childcare before C-CAS. We have yet to see what this will mean for demand and usage of registered childcare provision as we move forward. 96 per cent of parents surveyed as part of the evaluation of C-CAS reported that the scheme had made it easier for them to work, with 73 per cent saying it had enabled them to work more hours and 71 per cent reporting that they had been able to work more flexible hours as a result of C-CAS.
6. We provided a range of support to the sector in the immediate response to the pandemic, and have continued to do so as the situation has stabilised and settings were able to increase their operations. Details of the funding provided are in the Annex provided, along with a link to the most recent guidance.

Supporting Working Families

7. Despite the progress made in recent years for more equity in parenting, childcare continues to be considered and presented as an issue for mothers. This is something that has been seen to a greater degree over the past two years, with numerous reports citing the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on women and on working mothers⁵. Many of these reports⁶ point to the specific impacts of the restrictions on school operations and access to childcare, both formal and informal, with the resulting pressures of home-schooling and childcare largely falling to women. Even in two parent households, where both parents were working, women picked up more of the childcare responsibilities. There is evidence that parental gender imbalances may have widened, and research

³ These figures do not include suspended services as they can be closed indefinitely. They do include around 150 settings that have notified Care Inspectorate Wales they are temporarily closed due to COVID-19, including due to an outbreak of the virus, staff shortages, or a lack of demand.

⁴ See [Welsh Government \(2021\) Evaluation of Coronavirus – Childcare Assistance Scheme](#)

⁵ Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A. and Sevilla, A. (2020). The Gendered Division of Paid and Domestic Work under Lockdown. Bonn, (2365-9793). Available from: <https://covid19.iza.org/publications/dp13500/>.

⁶ UCL Social Research Institute EPI (2021) [Mitigating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents and carers during school closures: A Rapid Evidence Review](#)

suggests this puts women at a greater risk of poor mental health and loss of earnings⁷.

8. This is despite increases in paid paternity leave, access to shared parental leave and the right of all parents, including men, to request flexible working patterns. Regardless, the pandemic has, in many ways, reinforced traditional gender stereotypes and increased the barriers women face in either working or returning to the workplace. As people return to formal workplaces in the future, there are also concerns that for some women the loss of the flexibility offered by working from home will further impact career options. Availability of formal childcare has been shown in other countries to be an effective tool to stimulate childbearing among dual-earner couples⁸. Childcare provision also strongly increases the life satisfaction and well-being of mothers⁹.
9. While childcare settings were asked to restrict their services to the children of critical workers and vulnerable children at the start of the pandemic, with support from the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme, we moved quickly to open up access as and when it was safe to do so. Childcare settings have been able to offer their services to all families since June 2020, and while there were initially a number of Covid related measures in place which saw some restrictions on their operations continue, we have been able to reduce these as the wider public health circumstances improved.
10. Unlike schools, there were no restrictions on the operation of childcare settings while we were at Alert Level 4, reflecting both the reduced risks posed to and by children in their early years in particular and the need to support the vital child development these settings offer. Overall infection rates remain low in very young children, and outbreaks in childcare settings are also lower than in other sectors. This evidence, coupled with the benefits to children and the disproportionate impacts on working parents, particularly mothers, informed our thinking and response. Following a brief suspension we were also able to [restart the Childcare Offer](#) in September 2020, providing easements in the eligibility criteria for parents whose income had been temporarily impacted by Covid-19.

The Childcare Offer

11. The Childcare Offer builds on existing provision for Foundation Phase education for 3 and 4 year olds delivered in childcare settings. Local authorities are required to provide a minimum of 10 hours a week, though many provide more. We have published [advice](#) to local authorities to encourage them to understand the barriers to flexible delivery by providers and identify ways to ensure that provision is delivered to support parental choice.

⁷ Xue, B. and McMunn, A. (2021). Gender differences in unpaid care work and psychological distress in the UK Covid-19 lockdown. *PLoS One*, 16(3), e0247959.

⁸ WOOD, J.; NEELS, K. Local Childcare Availability and Dual-Earner Fertility: Variation in Childcare Coverage and Birth Hazards Over Place and Time. *European Journal of Population*, v. 35, n. 5, p. 913–937, 2019

⁹ SCHMITZ, S. The Impact of Publicly Funded Childcare on Parental Well-Being: Evidence from Cut-Off Rules. *European Journal of Population*, v. 36, n. 2, p. 171–196, 2020

12. The Offer was originally introduced as a measure to support working parents with the costs of childcare. Elements of its design were specifically included to provide the broadest support possible. The hours of funded childcare are flexible, with parents able to use them at any time of the day, or on any day of the week. Nor is there an upper limit on the number that can be used in a day reflecting that for parents on shifts sometimes longer sessions are required.

13. Annual evaluations of the Offer have been undertaken since the initial pilots began in 2016, and overall the Offer has been reported to be helping parents with their work-life balance and with family finances. Independent evaluators have evidenced the Offer has been more likely to affect women's ability to work more hours¹⁰¹¹. The most recent published evaluation, which came out in March 2021¹², was limited in scope as a consequence of the pandemic, but still found:

- over 40 per cent of parents said the Offer had improved their opportunities for in-work training and learning and development and that they used more formal childcare whilst accessing the Offer;
- More than half reported that accessing the Offer had increased their flexibility in the way they worked with 13 per cent increasing the hours they worked;
- A further 50 per cent said that the Offer had given them the potential to increase their earnings.

14. The evaluation also found that the Offer has been mainly taken up by parents who fall within the medium to low-income groups:

- at least 58 per cent of parents accessing the Offer earned below the national average annual salary level for full-time workers;
- Just over a quarter (29 per cent) of parents earned less than £15,600 and conversely, only a minority (5 per cent) earned £52,000 or above.

15. Publication of the year four evaluation findings is imminent and we are confident that these will again demonstrate the positive impact which the Offer is having on parents' employability.

16. However, it is important that we always remember the child, and their needs. This is why provision is restricted to registered and inspected settings, where there is confidence in the quality of the care received and appropriate safeguarding measures in place. We make funds available to support children with Additional Learning Needs to ensure they can access childcare on an equitable bases and receive support tailored to their requirements. Family Information Services are also able to offer parents advice and guidance on how to take-up the Offer, the best childcare provision in the area for their needs and other support services the family may need or wish to access.

17. There were around 16,800 children taking up the Childcare Offer in July of this year. This is the highest take-up since the Offer began and represents 48 per

¹⁰ [Evaluation of the Childcare Offer for Wales: year 2 | GOV.WALES](#)

¹¹ [Evaluation of the Early Implementation of the Childcare Offer for Wales \(gov.wales\)](#)

¹² [Evaluation of the Childcare Offer for Wales: year 3 | GOV.WALES](#)

cent of the estimated eligible population. There are, however, significant variations in take-up of the Offer across Wales. We consistently see higher levels of take-up across North Wales and in the larger cities, than we do across the South Wales Valleys. Research undertaken into these varied patterns concluded there were a range of issues including:

- Lack of awareness of the Offer by some, or how to apply for it;
- Inability to evidence meeting the employment requirements (due to working inconsistent hours, or not having payslips due to self-employment);
- Concerns about impacts on wider benefits entitlements;
- Lack of childcare in rural areas, or a specific lack of childcare able to accommodate parent working patterns;
- A perceived lack of adequate childcare available in their preferred language;
- A preference for the use of informal childcare from within the family.¹³

18. These matters will all feed into local authorities Childcare Sufficiency Assessments, which are required to look specifically at the sufficiency of care for working parents and parents seeking work or training opportunities. They are also issues that have informed our vision for a comprehensive Early Childhood Education and Care system, [launched](#) in 2019.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) – Expanding Provision

19. Our ECEC vision is centred on the principle that all children should have a high quality stimulating learning and care experience in any education and care setting they attend. We want a Welsh ECEC system which will reflect our ambition for society to be more equal, as follows:

- child development sits at the core of our approach, and our ECEC principles;
- the impact of poverty on children’s life chances should be our guiding principle in considering priorities, and in particular breaking the poverty cycle; and
- we should build a Welsh childcare system based on progressive universalism, gradually expanding subsidised provision.

20. Developmental disadvantage is apparent before the age of three and by the time they start school children from the lowest-income families are on average 16 months behind those from higher-income families. This attainment gap increases over time, with the social, emotional and economic impacts lasting a lifetime. Investment in a broad range of support across the early years is needed to address these gaps and support transition into formal education. We have long understood this, which is why we have focussed extensively on supporting children and their families in some of the most disadvantaged areas in Wales through our Flying Start programme. The programme has consistently supported families through a range of services including enhanced health visiting, childcare for 2 year olds, parenting and speech, language and communication support. Early analysis of one local authority area suggests that those children with higher Flying Start childcare attendance rates tended to meet their expected outcomes

¹³ [Hughes, Buddug and Jones, Kathryn \(2021\) Parent beliefs, behaviours and barriers: childcare and early education | GOV.WALES](#)

in all areas of learning more often than those with lower attendance¹⁴. Our Renew and Reform programme also has a focus on addressing the attainment gap. It includes a specific strand on the early years, with £13m in additional funding to support provision in schools and childcare settings within this financial year.

21. Restrictions due to the response to the coronavirus pandemic meant that some face to face child development assessments may not have taken place, and some delay may have gone unnoticed. To help address this a temporary Child Development Fund has been established and has so far made £11.5m available to local authorities between October 2020 and March 2022. The fund is targeted at services and support for children under five years of age, to ensure developmental needs are identified as soon as possible before they escalate to a point of crisis. In addition to the Child Development Fund, £7 million of additional funding has also been made available to local authorities (via the Children and Communities Grant) to help ease the pressure on, and reduce waiting times for, vital early help and support services in support of children young people and parents in response to the pandemic.

22. We have looked at evidence from around the world to help develop our vision for ECEC, drawing heavily on Scandinavian models which have some of the most generous ECEC provision in the world whereby *all* children receive subsidised early education and care. In many Scandinavian countries this is based on a child's legal entitlement to early education and care provision. We are also looking at practice within the UK, for example at Scotland who have increased their funded childcare provision to nearly a quarter of 2 year olds, as well as all 3 and 4 year olds. However, to move from where we are now towards a universal ECEC system will require a number of steps, as well as more funding towards the specific costs of childcare faced by a family. Specifically we need to:
 - Develop and build the sector to ensure that there are sufficient ECEC places;
 - Invest in the ECEC workforce to ensure that staff numbers are sufficient and that staff are confident and knowledgeable practitioners;
 - Raise the quality of provision by ensuring the pedagogy underpinning the Foundation Phase is spread throughout early years provision.

23. We need to invest in additional ECEC places. Even assuming not all children wanted to access their entitlement, we would still need more places if we were to increase overall levels of provision. We would also need to look at the location of that provision, making sure it was more equitably spread across Wales. We have invested £81m capital funding in childcare settings in the period 2019-2023, with currently over £39m supporting Welsh medium provision, and need to build on this. Our 21st Century Schools and Colleges programme also actively supports the colocation of services as a means of achieving greater value for money from investments and improved opportunities and enhanced experiences for service users. Alongside investing in places we also need to grow and support the workforce.

¹⁴ [Analysis of Flying Start outcomes using linked data: childcare and Foundation Phase baseline assessments | GOV.WALES](#)

24. The childcare, playwork and early years workforce employs around 17-18,000 people. Figures from 2015-16 suggest the sector contributes up to £1.2bn to the economy of Wales. More funded places would necessitate more staff. We have invested just £9.2m in training and upskilling from 2016-2023 under the ESF funded Progress for Success programme. Going forwards we need to maintain support for the existing workforce to maintain and improve their skills, working across all our training and education programmes, and attract more people in to the workforce. Social Care Wales will be starting a recruitment campaign shortly, and we will continue to drive forward the work set out in our childcare, playwork and early years workforce plan, published in 2017.

Parents, Childcare and Employment (PaCE)

25. Parents, Childcare and Employment (PaCE) is one of the programmes which contributes towards helping more parents into work, providing bespoke support, including financial help towards the costs of childcare, to parents (including single parents) that wish to access education, employment or training opportunities but have childcare as their main barrier preventing them from doing this.

26. Since the recommendations from the Equality, Local Government and Housing Committee's report "Work it out: parenting and employment in Wales in 2016", efforts have been made to raise the profile of PaCE nationally. PaCE now has a designated page on the Welsh Government website and we have improved our promotional literature to make it easier for parents to understand what PaCE offers. PaCE is also promoted on the social media channels of relevant third parties such as Dewis Cymru and the Childcare Offer. PaCE Advisers also have an improved relationship with Childcare Offer staff in each area and continuous efforts are made to align PaCE with the wider family support architecture across Wales in order to provide parents with an integrated and seamless service.

27. Since its inception in 2015, PaCE has supported 6,541 participants (6,189 Female, 352 Male), with 2,881 (44 per cent) (2,722 Female, 163 Male) of those entering employment of more than 16 hours a week. This is substantially more than the intended 20 per cent target. PaCE continued delivery during the pandemic, recognising that many parents chose to undertake key worker roles and required assistance to source and/or fund childcare. Since the start of the pandemic PaCE has supported 1318 participants.

28. The latest [evaluation](#) of the PaCE Programme, published in March 2020 focussed on the experiences and outputs of participants who have been supported by the PaCE Programme. This evaluation recognised that, for example:

- The overwhelming majority of PaCE participants have been female;
- A third of all participants (mainly women) have progressed into employment.

29. There is a final evaluation under way that will focus on the value for money of the PaCE programme and this is due to be published in the New Year. PaCE is funded by the European Social Fund and is currently funded to deliver until June 2022. However there is an "in principle" agreement from WEFO to extend

delivery to June 2023 with programme closure in October 2023. Conversations with other Welsh Government colleagues are ongoing about what childcare provision could be available to support any WG employability offer when European funds come to an end.

Next Steps

30. To help our understanding of what more might be needed, several pieces of work are in train spanning demand, take-up and targeted sector support:

- 90 per cent of registered settings recently completed the Care Inspectorate Wales Self-Assessment of Service Survey. Analysis of that data, which provides a comprehensive snapshot of the sector, is underway;
- Local authorities are undertaking their Childcare Sufficiency Assessments (due to be published in 2022) and we worked with local authorities on a national survey of parents to inform them;
- We will shortly be undertaking an evaluation of two support schemes run by Business Wales, providing wage subsidies to support settings looking to expand, and start-up costs for new childminders.

31. This information, taken together with other sources including the Social Care Wales' National Conversations¹⁵ research, and surveys undertaken by Care Inspectorate Wales and Cwlwm partners will be used to frame policies and programmes aimed at supporting the childcare sector to expand and thrive. These will be framed in the context of our current Programme for Government which includes two specific commitments in this area:

- a. Fund childcare for more families where parents are in education and training; and
- b. Continue to support our flagship Flying Start programmes.

32. It will also be important to look at the distribution of childcare in the context of our ambitions for a stronger, fairer, greener Wales. Parents working from or closer to home are likely to want more childcare in local communities. Potential reform to the pattern of the school day and the school year may also drive changes within the childcare and play sector, and driving forward our policy on Community Schools creates more opportunities for multi-use facilities open to local people throughout the year.

¹⁵ National Conversations with the Childcare, Play and Early Years Sector in Wales. Social Care Wales. 2021

Annex

Funding support for the childcare and play sector April 2020 – November 2021:

Welsh Government support for the childcare sector in light of the pandemic

Childcare Offer and the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme

Despite having to temporarily suspend the Childcare Offer to new entrants from 1 April to 30 June 2020, the Welsh Government continued to fund Childcare Offer places already booked for three months in order to help sustain childcare providers at a cost of £11m.

As part of the Welsh Government's immediate response to the pandemic, funding for the Offer was reprioritised to fund childcare for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children from 1 April 2020 until 31 August 2020. £16.7m was made available through the [Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme](#), supporting critical workers and vulnerable children. Over the period it was available, C-CAS provided care for over 900 vulnerable children and 9,600 critical workers' children (based on the latest estimates from local authorities).

We secured an additional £20m so that we were able to [reopen the Childcare Offer](#) for applications during the summer of 2020, ensuring that as few parents as possible were missing out on Government-funded childcare. Throughout subsequent periods of restrictions and high Covid-19 infection rates, we enabled providers to continue to claim Offer funding to cover short and longer term periods of disruption arising from staff and child absences as a result of Covid-19, supporting the sustainability of the sector.

Childcare Provider Grant

The [Childcare Provider Grant](#) (CPG) was introduced as a dedicated package of support to provide a financial lifeline to childcare providers who were not able to access other government support packages and help ensure that formal childcare places remained available to parents. Of the estimated 1,000 settings that were eligible for the CPG, successful applications were received from 162 settings with a total spend of £0.5m (average £3,000 per setting) out of a budget of £4.5m. From the outset we worked with stakeholders to raise awareness of the Grant, and used a range of communication channels to advertise and provide information on the CPG. There were a number of issues with the application process and grant conditions which many childcare providers found difficult to overcome:

- The complexity of application process was disproportionate to the potential funding award, and therefore deemed not worth it;
- Difficulty of providing sufficient proof of profits/loss during the period 1 April to 30 June 2020;
- Evidence suggesting the losses were not large in that period due to the Offer still being paid and the other support packages were helpful to many;
- The risk of the funding awarded having to be repaid if settings were forced to close due to circumstances beyond their control;

- Preclusion due to having claimed support from the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), even though the SEISS payment was to supplement personal income, not to support the childcare business;
- Unwillingness to become incorporated; and
- Some settings were unable to re-open on their CIW registered site, and had to move temporarily to an unregistered site (or have been advised to de-register), making them ineligible.

Sustainability funding through local authorities

In the financial year 2020-21, local authorities were allocated an additional £5.3m (in addition to the annual funding of £2.3m) through the Childcare and Play element of CCG to help support childcare services in their areas, enabling them to support settings and providers who were facing additional costs or loss of income as a result of the pandemic. A further £3.5m has been made available in the financial year 2021-2022 to support further small scale sustainability grants for the sector.

Capital Funding

In 2020-21, £5m capital funding was provided (£3m for Play and £2m through the Offer small capital grant scheme) to assist childcare settings in making their premises safer during the pandemic. In October 2021, a further £11.6m in capital funding was announced to increase capacity in Offer childcare and Flying Start settings in Wales and £5m capital funding to help local authorities respond to the priorities in their play sufficiency action plans.

Business Rates Relief

In September 2018, the Welsh Government's permanent Small Business Rates Relief (SBRR) scheme was enhanced to provide all registered childcare properties with **100 per cent rates relief** for a three year period from April 2019. This was agreed in recognition of the sector's key economic enabler role in supporting parents and carers to access and remain in employment.

In July 2021, Ministers agreed that due to the impact of the pandemic the 100 per cent rates relief should be extended for a further 3 years. The extension of the rates relief, until 31 March 2025, will provide £9.7m of additional support for registered childcare premises. This will help those who are facing financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic and secure the level of provision that children and parents need and rely on.

Business Wales Grants

In September 2019, two business support grants were launched. These were delivered by Business Wales and aimed at supporting new start-ups and existing childcare providers to expand. Due to the pandemic the deadline for claiming the funding was extended to 30 September 2021 to enable those in receipt of grant funding time to submit the necessary evidence to receive the funds.

An evaluation of both these grants has been commissioned. This should help us understand the impact of these two grants and determine if this approach is the best way to support the sector.

Supporting recovery through a Summer of Fun & Winter of Well-being

A £5m **Summer of Fun** was launched in June 2021 to provide children and young people aged 0-25 with the opportunity to play and participate in leisure, recreational, sporting and cultural activities to help rebuild their social and emotional skills in both Welsh and English. We worked with Local Authority Play Leads to support a wide range of activities and opportunities from 1 July until 30 September, tailored to the needs of the people and communities in their area. Many reported activities being over-subscribed, and demand for access across all ages.

In October 2021, a further £20m was announced for a **Winter of Well-being** which will support children and young people by:

- providing the space and time for play, supporting their fun and the opportunity to express themselves through play;
- community based interactive, creative and play-based initiatives for all ages;
- providing opportunities to develop and build their social skills by providing opportunities to engage with friends and peers;
- creating space and opportunity for free play and physical activity.

CWLWM (consortium of umbrella bodies representing childcare providers in Wales)

Since the start of the pandemic, the CWLWM consortium have received an additional £2.2m to undertake work to support providers across a broad range of issues arising as a result of Covid-19 and to help services adapt in response to the impact which the pandemic has had on the sector.

Play Opportunities

Since the start of the pandemic, Play Wales, the independent charity funded by the Welsh Government, has received a further £400,000 to undertake specific work to support providers across a broad range of issues arising as a result of Covid-19 and promote the importance and value of play to parents and stakeholders to support the wellbeing of their children following Covid-19 restrictions.

In July 2020, £1.6m was awarded to Local Authorities via the Local Authority Emergency Hardship Fund to provide better play opportunities for children in vulnerable communities and to realise the benefits this brings in terms of child development and activity levels, together with a further £500k in October 2020 to support play opportunities for children, helping local authorities meet their Play Sufficiency Duty.

Social Care Wales funding

Social Care Wales (SCW) is the Sector Skills Council for the early years and childcare sector in Wales, responsible for maintaining and overseeing the sector's training, qualifications and development requirements. As Welsh Government's strategic partner they have played a key role in supporting the sector during the pandemic.

SCW's *WeCare* Wales campaign rolled out in 2020-21 to support recruitment and retention in the childcare sector as well as to support morale and acknowledge the

vital role played by the workforce. A key ongoing role of SCW is the provision of sector specific resources and guidance, many in response to the issues being raised by the sector and the challenges faced through Covid-19.

SCW also ensured that work continued to support those undertaking qualifications during the pandemic including through the development of apprenticeship frameworks to support new qualifications and the development of flexible approaches in relation to the achievement of qualifications at a time when the ability to secure placements was impacted.

Progress for Success

Progress for Success (Pfs) is a European Social Fund (ESF) programme, which launched in August 2016. The programme funds existing early years, childcare and play practitioners (including self-employed registered childminders), to undertake recognised childcare and play qualifications.

With a total ESF and Welsh Government investment of £9.2 million from 2016-2023, Pfs aims to upskill and support approx. 4,000 practitioners. Strand 1 which ended in 2018 supported 979 practitioners to upskill while Strand 2 which runs from 2018-2023 aims to support a further 3,000 practitioners to broaden their skill levels and in turn support the strengthening of high quality childcare provision in Wales.

As well as funding support, the Welsh Government has provided [guidance](#) for childcare and play providers on how to keep staff and children safe throughout the pandemic.