

**Evidence paper for the Equality and Social Justice Committee on the follow-up to their inquiry into childcare and parental employment**  
[Minding the future: The childcare barrier facing working parents \(senedd.wales\)](#)

**1 Importance of childcare and child development**

(taking account of: ***Committee question - What approaches exist to integrate delivery of childcare provision in Wales, and how can best practice be spread widely.***)

- 1.1 All babies and young children should have opportunities and experiences for enjoyment, fun, creativity and to socialise. Babies and young children live in the moment and should enjoy the many wonders and fun that brings. We want every baby and child to have a wonderful childhood. We want them to thrive through enriched opportunities and experiences which will enhance their wellbeing, happiness and enable them to develop and learn.
- 1.2 We want to ensure that all babies and young children, irrespective of their background, are supported to have the best start in life and an opportunity to reach their full potential as set out in our [Children and Young People's Plan](#). Childhood experiences play a significant part in shaping individuals futures and are critical to the chances of leading a healthy, prosperous, and fulfilling life. Providing support during their earliest years is crucial.
- 1.3 Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) is the term we use to describe the nurturing, learning and development of babies and young children in childcare, playwork and nursery education settings, in the period before statutory school age. ECPLC is based on a child centred approach with the child and child development at its heart. It focuses on the holistic development of children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs to support wellbeing and lifelong learning.
- 1.4 Our ECPLC approach for Wales means developing and delivering a consistent approach to nurturing, learning and development, through the provision of high-quality play-based childcare and education opportunities, for all babies and young children aged 0-5 years old. ECPLC supports our wider early years policies and ambitions in Wales and is primarily concerned with promoting partnerships and join up between schools and settings as well as parents/carers, for the benefit of the child and their families. By improving partnership working across education, childcare and playwork we are aiming to ensure the same ambition of consistent high quality and seamless transitions between childcare and playwork settings, and those settings and schools. We know that access to ECPLC is important as it can help to support early identification of need, early intervention and positive transition and progression to education.
- 1.5 We recognise that high quality, accessible and inclusive childcare can be transformational for children, brings opportunities for parents particularly mothers and is key to our efforts to tackle child poverty and reduce inequalities. Childcare is critical to tackling poverty, high quality nursery

education and early help services ameliorate the effects of poverty on children and families by supporting children's development and improving educational outcomes. Flexible, affordable childcare provision is central to supporting parents to improve their income through work or by accessing education and training.

- 1.6 Objective 2 of the [Child Poverty Strategy](#) sets out the ways in which we are working to give children in poverty the best start in life. This includes a commitment to focus work across government to find affordable solutions to childcare costs to remove barriers to work and make work pay. This must be achieved without compromising the need to ensure that all childcare is of a quality that meets the needs of children.
- 1.7 In terms of spreading best practice the Care Inspectorate Wales' (CIW) childcare and play improvement project has tested the use of improvement meetings with settings between routine inspections. The meetings are an opportunity for providers to discuss progress and challenges since the last inspection and outline their plans for further improvement before the next inspection. They are a structured conversation designed to help providers give children the best possible experience. Following a positive evaluation of the pilot, CIW will be introducing improvement meetings more widely for childcare and play services in the next 12 months. CIW will also be improving the way in which it promotes and publicises best practice and introducing an annual improvement conference for providers in Wales. In this way the inspectorate aims to promote improvement in the sector while continuing to deliver its responsibility to assure the quality and safety of individual settings.

***Committee question - What lessons can be learnt from other parts of the UK and international best practice to improve childcare policy in Wales.***

- 1.8 We recently published our [ECPLC Plan](#) which builds on our [approach to ECPLC](#) launched in 2019. The Plan specifically focus' on the themes of quality of provision, access to provision and supporting and developing the workforce. Underpinning our approach to ECPLC is the importance of high quality provision to support child development. Our [ECPLC Quality Framework for Wales](#) draws together the various requirements for delivering the type of high-quality provision needed in Wales. The Quality Framework draws on national and international research and practice in the field of effective ECPLC provision and its contribution to children's holistic development. Using the Quality Framework should ensure we offer well-evidenced, well-informed and successful approaches to ECPLC and help us to actively reflect on and continuously improve practice to better support all babies and young children. We know that the early years of a child's life are characterised by rapid growth and brain development. Development is influenced by the enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments each child encounters. High-quality ECPLC provision should support babies and young children to thrive during this important period of development.

## **2 Progress on the recommendations from the 2022 report**

***Committee question - What progress has been made in implementing the recommendations in the Committee's report from early 2022 - [Minding the future – the childcare barrier facing working parents.](#)***

***The section below provides an update on the recommendations from the 2022 report along with responses to some of the more specific areas the Committee have asked questions on which have been included in bold and italicised for ease of reference.***

### **Information for parents**

- 2.1 It is paramount parents can access the wealth of information already available with regards to being able to make informed choices about childcare. The Family Information Service (FIS) is pivotal in providing and signposting parents, carers and guardians to key information. Local Authorities are best placed to know and understand the needs of the local communities they serve, and we encourage through our regular liaison with FIS to ensure it is inclusive and provides accessible information to everyone in the community. The "[Choosing Childcare](#)" online booklet sets out the benefits and different types of childcare available, where to find childcare and what financial support is available to help you with childcare costs. This booklet is updated twice yearly and promoted to parents and carers on social media by Cwlwm, local authorities and Social Care Wales.
- 2.2 In 2017 Public Health Wales published [Every Child/ Pob Plentyn](#) series which replaced Bump, Baby and Beyond/Naw Mis a Mwy, as the primary health information resource provided to first-time parents by the NHS in Wales. There will be four new resources in the series designed to support families through pregnancy and the early years of their child's life. The resources have been developed with input from parents, professionals, and topic experts and cover the essential and important information families in Wales need to help their child to have the best start in life, including, information on bonding, parent-infant relationships and parental mental health and well-being.
- 2.3 In 2023, Every Child 'Your Pregnancy and Birth', was published and in January this year the second in the series, Every Child 'Newborn to age 2' and its Welsh equivalent, Pob Plentyn 'Newydd-anedig hyd at 2 oed', was published. The remaining two resources in the series are in development. Booklet 3 will cover children from age 2 to starting school, and booklet 4 will cover children aged 4 to 7 years of age.

### **Funding for childcare**

***Committee question - The extent to which childcare provision in Wales provides high-quality provision which supports child development, tackles child poverty and supports parental employment. What changes might be needed to deliver these outcomes.***

***Committee question - What progress is being made towards achieving the Co-Operation Agreement commitment to expand 12.5 hours free***

***childcare per week to all two-year-olds, with an emphasis on strengthening Welsh-medium provision.***

***Committee question - To what extent there is sufficient childcare available to meet the varying needs of families across Wales, and how inequalities in access to childcare faced by particular demographic groups and across different parts of Wales can be addressed.***

- 2.4 Childcare is a key priority for the Welsh Government. In December 2023, there were 11,800 children taking up the Childcare Offer which represents a take-up rate of 53% of estimated eligible children. Further, since the start of the academic year 2022-23, we estimate that around 1,140 additional individual parents have been supported because of the expansion of the Offer to include eligible parents in education/training. We continue to invest in our strategic communications plan to promote our Childcare Offer through a variety of channels to ensure that eligible parents are encouraged to take up the Offer.
- 2.5 We know it is important for parents to be able to access childcare that meets their family needs. The eligibility of the Childcare Offer has always included those parents working atypical hours including term-time working and zero hours contracts, however term-time only workers were only eligible for term-time support. This was amended in September 2022, at the same time as the eligibility criteria was extended to parents in education and training, and so term-time workers may receive the full Childcare Offer. Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure there is sufficient childcare available to help parents to work or train including, parents working atypical hours and improving the availability of Welsh medium provision. Childcare Sufficiency Assessments (CSAs) are the means by which they assess the supply and demand for childcare in their area.
- 2.6 CSAs must look at the barriers parents face when accessing childcare including the specific barriers faced by particular groups of parents for example, lone parent families, low-income families and families from ethnic minority backgrounds. The CSAs are carried out every 5 years with the most recent being carried out in 2022. Local authorities produce action plans to address any gaps in provision which have been highlighted within their CSA.
- 2.7 An independent report [Overview of key themes in the 2022 to 2027 Childcare Sufficiency Assessments](#) commissioned by the Welsh Government was published in December 2023. The report indicated that the availability of childcare, varies by local authority but that across Wales there are unmet needs and barriers faced by parents/carers in accessing the provision available. The Welsh Government provides funding to local authorities through the Childcare and Play element of the Children and Communities Grant to help address gaps in provision. In using this funding local authorities are asked to give special consideration and support to the childcare and play needs of low income families; families with children with additional needs; and families wishing to access provision through the medium of Welsh.

- 2.8 In our [Programme for Government](#) and in the [Co-operation Agreement](#) with Plaid Cymru, we committed to continue to support our Flying Start programme, along with delivering a phased expansion of early years provision for all 2 year olds, with a focus on Welsh medium provision. We are successfully delivering our plans for a phased expansion of our universal provision to all two-year-olds in Wales. The roll out of phase one of the expansion of Flying Start commenced in September 2022 and concluded in March 2023. Phase 1 included all Flying Start services being offered to around 2,500 additional children under four. Phase 1 took place between September 2022 and March 2023 and so delivery of Phase 1 has already been completed. By end of March 2023, 127%, or 3,178 children of the target number of 2,500 additional beneficiaries had been reached across Wales.
- 2.9 Phase 2 of the expansion of Flying Start focuses on delivering the high-quality childcare element in Flying Start settings to even more two-year-olds during 2023-24 and 2024-25. We expect to support more than 9,500 additional two-year-olds across Wales to access quality Flying Start childcare during Phase 2, and we are well on track to deliver that. The Welsh Government has achieved its latest target for Phase 2 of the expansion of the programme with an extra 4,500 childcare places offered during 2023-24.
- 2.10 To deliver on progress towards Cymraeg 2050, it is essential that the importance of Welsh medium childcare provision is maximised as far as possible. There is clear evidence that children who attend cylchoedd meithrin are more likely to go on to attend Welsh medium education. The national average progressing from a cylch Meithrin to a Welsh medium school is 86% and this increases to 94% if the cylch and school are co-located. This is a clear message coming through our monitoring of local authority Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs). We will continue to work with local authorities to encourage more co-location on existing school sites as well as when planning new build Welsh-medium schools.
- 2.11 The £70m Childcare and Early Years Capital Programme was implemented in October 2022 and is available over three financial years, 2022 to 2025. The programme includes support for Small Grant Funding to local authorities to allow all registered childcare and play providers to submit applications for minor capital projects. The purpose of this capital funding is to maintain and improve new and existing childcare (including Flying Start) infrastructure, to help grow Welsh medium provision and enable co-location of services.

### **Additional Learning Needs**

- 2.12 Early identification, intervention and prevention is a key aim of our ALN reforms. ALN implementation is being monitored through a national ALN reform steering group, a comprehensive [evaluation](#), and through a series of Estyn thematic reviews. We continue to work closely with providers, parents, children and young people and other stakeholders to support our work to monitor implementation of the new system and help realise its aims. In November 2023 the former Minister for Education and Welsh Language made

an [Oral Statement](#) to update on implementation of ALN reforms. In September 2023 Estyn published the first stage of its [review of ALN implementation](#), the second Estyn review is expected to publish in autumn 2024 and work on the second stage has begun. In December 2023, the [evaluation of the Additional Learning Needs system scoping report](#) was published. The report presents a theory of change for the reforms, summarises findings from a synthesis of existing evidence on Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system implementation, and articulates the plans and priorities for the next phases of the evaluation.

- 2.13 The Childcare Offer for Wales Additional Support Grant (ASG) is a demand-led grant and while £2m was initially allocated to local authorities in 2023-24, there is no upper cap and any child identified as requiring support to attend Childcare Offer funded provision may be supported. We have seen increased demand for the Childcare Offers Additional Support Grant in 2023-24 and so the profiling of the initial budget for the grant has increased from £2m to £2.5m in 2024-25 to accommodate for this – but this can be reviewed if demand increases further. An independent evaluation of the ASG is currently underway and expected to report in Spring 2024. The evaluation has explored issues of awareness and communication of this support, the effectiveness of the interventions it funds and how the grant aligns with wider ALN reforms.

### **Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme**

- 2.14 The Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme is a wide-reaching capital investment programme to invest in our educational estate, which supports key Programme for Government commitments. A key deliverable is ensuring that learners have a supportive learning experience especially during their early years in education. Where appropriate our stakeholders are expected to consider wraparound facilities and early years support, especially in any primary school proposals they bring forward. Education colleagues work closely with our Childcare colleagues to ensure these proposals are robustly reviewed on this basis. The Welsh Government's Programme for Government also includes a commitment to "invest in the learning environment of community schools, co-locating key services and securing stronger engagement with parents and carers outside of traditional hours". Making effective use of educational facilities for children and the local community has always been a key aim underpinning education investment through the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme. All investment proposals must demonstrate how their facilities can be used to support their local community to make them accessible and shared resources across Wales' communities, both during and outside school hours; including the opportunity to innovatively co-locate services for their area. In building community facilities, stakeholders need to comply with the Education Act 2002 and Control of School Premises 2008 which, outline specific responsibilities with regards to community facilities. These are also conditions of grant under the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme. As we move towards our Sustainable Communities for Learning Rolling Programme, our new 9-year wave of investment from March 2024, continues to embed the importance of making our schools more community focused so that facilities

can be accessible for all; with community use and engagement a principle requirement in our stakeholders Strategic Outline Programme (SOP) for investment.

- 2.15 As part of the 2022/23 budget settlement, £20m was allocated within the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme to drive forward community focused schools priorities including the co-location of support services/facilities. This funding was assigned to local authorities for spend within the financial year on smaller scale works that would support schools to open their facilities outside traditional hours, e.g. security measures, floodlighting, storage, changing facilities. Implementation proved successful, so £40m was approved as 100% Community Focused Schools Capital Grant to support delivery of more projects over financial years 2023-24 and 2024-25. This 2-year funding regime, where projects were a mix of small, medium, and large-scale works, means investment, specifically for the provision of community focused facilities within our schools, can be more strategic, targeted and sustainable.
- 2.16 In April 2023, £28.2m was approved for projects of <£0.5m individual spend, with funding support for larger scale projects (>£0.5m spend) subject to the successful completion of the Programmes business case approvals system. We are currently working with local authorities to ensure full spend of this funding programme by end of financial year 2024-25.
- 2.17 By financial year 2025-26, we will have invested £60m in community focused capital funding available throughout Wales, to enhance the infrastructure of our schools to not only benefit our learners but the community around them.
- 2.18 Our ambition is for all schools in Wales to be Community Focused Schools - responding to the needs of their community, building a strong partnership with families and collaborating effectively with other services. School buildings provide an excellent venue for out-of-school childcare clubs. Hosting this provision on site ensures continuity of care and extended and enriched play and learning opportunities for children. We have published guidance to support schools to develop their community engagement which includes information on out of school childcare clubs.
- 2.19 This financial year we are investing £6.5m in increasing the number of family engagement officers employed by schools. We are also continuing to fund a trial of community focused schools managers, who will work on developing better engagement between schools and their communities.

## **Workforce**

- 2.20 Building and maintaining a thriving and sustainable workforce is key to delivering our childcare commitments which is why supporting and developing the workforce is one of the three themes in the ECPLC Plan. The review and refresh of the 10 Year Childcare, Play and Early Years workforce plan will be published in 2024 and reflects on progress to date as well as reaffirms our commitment to the childcare and playwork workforce, both English and Welsh

medium going forward. Our work with partners is key to our ongoing support of the workforce and providing support for both English and Welsh medium settings to grow and staff to flourish.

- 2.21 The UK Government has made commitments to expand their Childcare Offer in England for eligible working parents from April this year. In recent weeks there has been media coverage reporting that the UK Government are experiencing significant challenges around meeting these commitments as issues relating to the workforce capacity and infrastructure have not been sufficiently addressed. Here in Wales, we know we need to address these issues to achieve our ambitions for childcare. We are committed to maintaining and developing a highly regarded and high skilled workforce, valued and recognised for the vital role they play in the lives of children. We are not going to compromise on our staffing ratios, reduce qualification requirements or otherwise risk the quality of the experience we provide for children and their families. To support recruitment and retention in the sector we are working with our strategic partner, Social Care Wales, who run the WeCare Wales recruitment campaigns and jobs portal, to attract people with the right skills and behaviours into the sector. Previous campaigns have included TV and radio adverts to reach wide and diverse populations.
- 2.22 Apprenticeship week 2024 also saw a focus on childcare with childcare apprenticeship case studies published. SCW are also funded to deliver their free introduction to childcare course offering participants an insight into working in the sector. Careers Wales attend each course providing guidance and employability support. The course has been delivered to a wide variety of cohorts, including Swansea's African Community Centre and employability programme students at Coleg Llandrillo. As of March 2024, 222 individuals have completed the course. Of these 18% are now working in childcare or studying a childcare qualification. An additional 25% of course attendees remain engaged with SCW and are seeking support to enter childcare. A young person's strand began in January 2024, working with schools to promote a career in childcare to young people.
- 2.23 We also established a Childminding Review Recommendations Group Overview Panel and Working Groups in 2023 to consider the recommendations of the [Independent Review of Childminding](#). The Review's aim was to understand the reasons for the decline in the number of childminders in Wales, and to make recommendations aimed at attracting more childminders and to encourage childminders to stay in the sector. We are working with sector stakeholders to take forward the recommendations.
- 2.24 We want childcare, play work and early education to be careers of choice and we have been working with stakeholders to explore registration of the childcare and playwork workforce to raise its status and make clear that working in childcare is a recognised profession. A consultation on professional registration closed on 7 March – a summary report will be published in summer 2024.



- 2.25 The childcare and playwork workforce is currently supported by the Welsh Government's Training and Support Programme to upskill. The Programme supports access to key qualifications and fundamental training, such as paediatric first aid and safeguarding training. While savings have been made from the T&S Programme budget in 2023-24 and 2024-25 as part of a wider Welsh Government budget exercise, this has not affected the Programme's ability to support access to mandatory, best practice and childminder training, as well as to ensure access to a range of playwork qualifications.
- 2.26 We are keen to increase the diversity of the workforce in Wales. We are working towards the childcare objectives set out in the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, in partnership with sector stakeholders and [DARPL](#). Early Years diversity resources have been developed and are now available for the sector. A best practice toolkit to support providers is also being developed.
- 2.27 To grow the size of our Welsh medium workforce, we have provided specific funding for learners to study childcare qualifications through the medium of Welsh and funded the National Centre for Learning Welsh to develop an intermediate Welsh language course specifically for childcare workers to build their confidence in using the language in settings. This includes provision of £528,000 in 2024-25 and £1,108,800 in 2025 -26 to Mudiad Meithrin to support the continuation of Welsh medium childcare courses for qualifications for 100 Level 3 and 50 Level 5 learners via the Cam wrth Gam programme

### **Support for the childcare sector**

***Committee question - How childcare providers and the workforce have been impacted by cost-of-living pressures, and what effects these have had on the sector.***

- 2.28 Despite the budget challenges facing the Welsh Government, compounded by the current cost of living crisis and the pandemic we are still taking steps to support the childcare sector where we can, in seeking to reduce overhead costs through the extension of 100% business rates relief for registered childcare premises. The extension of the rates relief, until 31 March 2025, will save registered childcare providers £9.7m in overhead costs.
- 2.29 The Childcare Offer, vital not only to families but to many childcare providers, had its rate increased to £5 per child per hour in April 2022, following a review and engagement with the sector. This represented an increase of 11%. The Welsh Government has also committed to reviewing this rate at least every 3 years. The next Childcare Offer rate review will be undertaken in 2024-25. The Welsh Government has already undertaken the preliminary step of engaging with key sector stakeholders to identify the key issues that need to be considered as part of the review and agree the most appropriate method of ensuring sector engagement throughout the process.

- 2.30 Both the business rates relief and increasing the rate of the Childcare Offer are aimed at supporting the sector to address the economic challenges they may be facing including increases in staff wages, pension and other operating costs.

### **Out of school provision**

- 2.31 In relation to out of school provision, the Welsh Government funds Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids Clubs as part of the annual grant to the Cwlwm consortium to support and advise the out of school sector in Wales, helping new clubs to be established and become registered with Care Inspectorate Wales. This includes the expansion of Welsh medium out of school provision. We have allocated additional funding for Cwlwm of £5,423,800 over a 4 year period to support the delivery of Programme for Government commitments as they relate to expansion of Welsh medium activities. This includes £100k per annum to support more play and after school clubs to train in playworks qualification to support expansion of registered services, in recognition of stakeholder feedback that almost 95% of Welsh medium after school clubs are not registered. Investment in supporting those settings to register would also support increases in Welsh medium capacity.
- 2.32 The more general offer of after school provision is for individual schools and there are a range of organisations that they can work with in delivering that offer. These include sporting, cultural, childcare, play and youth providers. Through our Community Focussed Schools provision, we are supporting schools through a range of guidance and funding to develop their approaches.
- 2.33 For 2022 – 2025 £1m per financial year is allocated to Local Authorities via the All Wales Play Opportunities grant for the continuation of the Playworks Holiday Project to support children’s access to play opportunities during school holiday periods with the availability of food/snacks in targeted areas. Further, as part of our assessment of capital grant applications we look to encourage projects which actively strengthen arrangements for wrap-around and out of school provision.
- 2.34 We are also progressing short, medium and long term actions following recommendations made within the Ministerial Review of Play Report [Written Statement: Ministerial Review of Play - Response to the Steering Group recommendations \(23 October 2023\) | GOV.WALES](#) to promote the importance of play opportunities for children and young people.

### **Exceptions Order**

- 2.35 We have also begun scoping a review to consider whether any changes to the Child Minding and Day Care Exceptions (Wales) Order 2010 are required. It will be reviewed through an ECPLC lens focussing on promoting child development, social opportunities, wellbeing and equality. The review will consider the 3 key themes of the ECPLC plan: supporting the workforce, striving for high quality services and promoting access. The key priority of this

review is to ensure children in Wales are able to access safe, quality childcare and activities that meets their needs and also the needs of their families.

### 3 **Conclusion**

***Committee question - How financial and practical barriers need to be considered in developing future childcare policy.***

- 3.1 Implementing our vision for ECPLC is a long term ambition. We are committed to giving children the best start in life as well as balancing this with helping parents be able to have accessible and affordable childcare. We are delivering on our commitments set out in the Programme for Government and once they are delivered, we will consider what the next phase will be depending on resources available.