

17th May 2024

Senedd Equality & Social Justice Committee follow up inquiry into childcare and parental employment.

Dear Jenny Rathbone MS, Chair of Equality & Social Justice Committee,

We are writing to introduce ourselves to your Committee as a newly formed expert advisory group on childcare in Wales. We recently held our first meeting and wish to work together to ensure that childcare provision has the child at its heart, supports the workforce, its development, and promotes the sustainability and high quality of childcare settings in Wales. We also want to work to ensure that families Wales-wide are supported.

We were established following a recommendation made in an Oxfam Cymru report called *'Little Steps, Big Struggles: Childcare in Wales'* of 2023, which called for the creation of this group, as well as work carried out by the Bevan Foundation and JRF in their report of 2024, *'Tackling disadvantage through childcare in Wales'*. We are writing to you as a committee, in acknowledgment of the work that you are carrying out as part of the Childcare follow up inquiry and wish to offer to cooperate with you on your work. We would be happy to meet with members of the committee to discuss our ideas further.

We have written to the new First Minister, inviting the Welsh Government to be a key player in the development of the expert advisory group on childcare in Wales, formally inviting the Welsh Government to sit alongside other key organisations as part of this group. We wish to engage in proposing short term ideas to the new Minister with responsibility for Mental Health and Early Years, specifically on how to improve the current childcare offer, especially in light of the work underway to complete the aims and objectives within the collaboration agreement with Plaid Cymru, which we are aware draws to an end in the next few months.

We wish to be involved in the planning and structure of the roll out of the scheme for all 2-year-olds in Wales, given that we have on the ground experience of delivering the initial Flying Start offer, and can inform the Welsh Government as to how the plan should work ongoing.

We welcome the principles of the agreement in relation to childcare, and note that Phase 2 has been completed, and that Phase 3 is now underway to expand free childcare to all 2-year-olds in Wales. We would like to be a key player in shaping the phase 3 delivery programme.

Below, we outline some comments and concerns that we have about the childcare provision:

- Delivering a funded childcare opportunity to more children in Wales has widespread support, however, the Flying Start model has some structural challenges that risk interrupting the full aspiration of the expansion. Currently, the Flying Start roll-out restricts families in a 'postcode lottery', and there is a genuine interest in gaining knowledge of the date that the roll-out becomes universal. It is also a concern that the current offer of 2.5 hours a day in a designated setting falls short of providing comprehensive childcare assistance for families in need. There is also disparity across local authorities where some have established Flying Start settings and offer families 2.5 hours per day, and others are able to condense the 12.5 weekly hours in a setting they already use. Extending the Flying Start in its current form without

addressing the issues faced by families, children, and providers would not be an effective use of already limited resources.

At present, there are insufficient suitably qualified active staff across Wales to meet a universal offer. Flying Start requires leaders and managers to have a level 5 qualification, and all other practitioners to be qualified at level 3. Non-Flying Start providers of childcare can include staff qualified at level 2 in childcare ratios and level 3 and above in managerial/ leadership roles. This is further exposed when the much-needed Welsh language skills is included (part of the expansion plan is to create additional capacity for childcare places through the medium of Welsh), or the challenge of rurality and workforce availability is factored into staffing the setting.

We want assurances from the Welsh Government that they are confident that phase 3 can be completed, given that qualified staff in Wales are insufficient in numbers, especially in the realm of Welsh language provision. We are interested in understanding if they would consider varying the flexibility of qualifications, if rolling out the programme to more children would become a possibility.

- We are also concerned about the weak integration of two vital childcare support programmes, the Flying Start and the 30 Hours Funded Childcare Offer. These programmes target different groups of families, making it difficult for them to benefit from both. Specifically, the eligibility criteria of the Offer only target working parents, which leaves out many parents who are economically inactive, unemployed, or in training outside of further or higher education. We are advocating for a more integrated and less complex childcare support system that can benefit all children and families.

- Another significant gap in the childcare system in Wales that hasn't seen progress is the lack of childcare support after parental leave ends. In Wales, childcare support starts too late and too little. This gap causes considerable pressure on families, especially on mothers, both personally and economically. We are keen to explore ways to extend childcare support to younger ages.

- We are deeply concerned that childcare funding underspend has been transferred and utilised by other Welsh Government departments. While we recognise funding pressures are a live issue across all departments, we would urge the committee to ask the new Cabinet Minister with responsibility for this area to ring fence this budget for childcare in the future, with a commitment to launching a review as to why such an underspend existed in the first instance.

For example, some of our organisations have received evidence stating that many parents could not access the childcare offer in certain areas, that the system was too complex, or that it simply was not available for some groups of children, such as children with disabilities. Often, parents could not afford to access the offer. I am sure you would agree with us that this flies in the face of the original intention of this policy initiative. We therefore wrote to the Welsh Government asking that an in-depth analysis of the situation is carried out, and that funds intended for childcare remain in the childcare budget.

- We are concerned about the effect that Welsh Governments' target for 30% of the population to work from home, is having on both the children of Wales and the Out of School Childcare sector.

With parents juggling their childcare and work responsibilities around the school day, working from home allows them to collect their children from school. This enables families to save upon their childcare expenses, however, this often has a negative impact upon children having access to vital opportunities to play, and social engagements. Afterschool Clubs and Childminders provide these opportunities at the end of the school day whilst their parents continue to work. This is also having a detrimental impact on the Out of School Childcare clubs who are struggling to remain sustainable with parents taking this option, meaning that their viability to deliver high quality childcare after school and in the holidays, for parents who cannot work from home is at risk. These parents are often key workers or those earning a lower income.

We appreciate the hard work and dedication of practitioners in this field and wish to support and aid their development. That is why it is fundamental that we get the system right, and that we work together to improve the lives of the children of Wales and their families.

We look forward to working with you on this most important agenda.

Kind Regards,

Leanne Marsh, Pennaeth Adran Datblygu Gwasanaethau Mudiad Meithrin

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