

Title: Petition P-04-346 Free Childcare for 3-4 Year-Olds in Wales – Update on the Foundation Phase Flexibility Pilot

Introduction

1. This paper provides information and updates the Committee regarding the pilots to improve flexibility in the Foundation Phase for the purpose of the Petition P-04-346: Free Childcare for 3–4 Year-Olds in Wales.

Background

2. In November 2011 the Committee received a petition asking the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to ensure that free childcare for 3–4 year olds is delivered more flexibly across Wales allowing parents, and in particular working parents, to choose when and where they access the free childcare.
3. At a meeting in May 2012 the Committee considered correspondence, in relation to this issue, from the Minister for Education and Skills, the Welsh Local Government Association and the Children's Commissioner for Wales. The Committee raised further key issues around:
 - a. Variability and flexibility in how local authorities provide the early education offer (Foundation Phase) for 3–4 year-olds and how some children might be disadvantaged if they cannot access the free provision before they reach statutory school age
 - b. The provision of wrap-around childcare to enable children to remain in the same setting for however long the parent needs them to be in care
 - c. Transition from Flying Start provision directly into the Foundation Phase early education entitlement without delay or gaps in provision

Response

4. This paper provides an update on the Foundation Phase Flexibility Pilot which is due to finish at the end of the summer term 2015, with the evaluation report due in January 2016.

Context

Local authority provision of the early education offer (Foundation Phase)

5. All local authorities have a statutory duty in Part 5 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to ensure there is sufficient nursery education in their area. Nursery education is defined as such education as is suitable for those children who have not yet reached compulsory school age. A local authority is also under a duty to review annually the sufficiency of childcare provision in their area. What is

sufficient is not set out in legislation; although local authorities have to have regard to guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers.

6. Local authorities in Wales meet these duties by making a free part-time Foundation Phase early education place available for all children from the term following their third birthday. Local authorities provide a minimum of 10 hours a week for the same number of weeks as a normal school year (about 38 week). Some local authorities including the Vale of Glamorgan and Newport offer more (12.5 hours).
7. In most local authorities early education is provided in schools or in funded nurseries (non-maintained settings). A place can only be provided where the non-maintained setting is approved by the local authority as an early education provider and is registered with CSSIW as a childcare provider.
8. The Foundation Phase statutory guidance for local authorities allows for provision to be organised flexibly based on their assessment of local need. In most local authorities the hours are offered in equal amounts over 4 or 5 days. Our statistics tell us that in Wales, 88% of 3 year-olds and 98% of 4 year-olds are registered in schools for the early education entitlement. There are currently about 660 Foundation Phase funded non-maintained settings approved to offer the early education entitlement and, based on population census figures, there are potentially up to 5,000 places for 3 and 4 year-olds in these settings.

Update

A. Foundation Phase Flexibility Pilot

9. We are currently undertaking a flexibility pilot with four participating local authorities - Carmarthenshire, Denbighshire, Neath Port Talbot and Newport - which is:
 - testing flexibility options across the Foundation Phase
 - identifying issues that may surface for local authorities and settings as a result of greater flexibility
 - considering how those issues can be addressed
 - gaining a better understanding of whether increased flexibility makes a difference to a parents ability to access the Foundation Phase for their child and
 - considering the impact of flexibility on the child

The local authorities will complete the pilots by August 2015 and an evaluation (by WISERD) of the flexibility pilot will report in January 2016. Once this final report has been submitted we will then be able to consider its findings in conjunction with other key reviews, reports and policy areas going forward.

10. At the time of the interim review (January 2015), each of the four participating local authorities have approached piloting the flexibility of the Foundation Phase early education entitlement very differently reflecting their local circumstances, and have provided a mix of provision across rural and urban locations and areas of high deprivation.

11. Flexibility being tested includes:

schools and settings offering sessions either in the morning or afternoon, or combination of both, or across blocks of whole days

one school has set up wrap-around childcare on site which previously did not exist

one rural school has set up a mixed age (nursery and reception) class which previously did not exist

offering the Foundation Phase early education entitlement across:

- i. unsociable hours to accommodate shift working
- ii. a number of settings
- iii. 50 weeks of the year

employing “family link workers” assigned to clusters of schools to encourage (through a range of targeted support) the more hard to reach families in some of Wales’ most deprived areas to take up their Foundation Phase early education entitlement in some of Wales’ most deprived areas, employing advisory teachers to work with non-maintained settings funded to deliver the Foundation Phase early education entitlement – those teachers work with individual children to prepare those children developmentally for their transition into schools. Additionally the advisory teachers provide direct and targeted support, guidance and development for the setting practitioners each week

12. The Foundation Phase Flexibility Pilot will be evaluated to test the effect increased flexibility has on families. The findings, along with those from other reviews and reports, will inform the work of the Foundation Phase Expert Group currently working with Welsh Government to develop a strategic action plan, over the short, medium and longer term. The Group has already recognised that reducing inequalities and improving accessibility have to be key areas of their work.

B. The provision of wrap-around childcare to enable children to remain in the same setting for however long the parent needs them to be in care

13. All Welsh local authorities must secure, as far as is reasonably practicable, childcare for parents who are working or undertaking training. They carry out a Childcare Sufficiency Assessment each year to understand the need for, and supply of, childcare within their area. The assessment helps local authorities to identify where there are gaps

in the market and, in consultation with parents, communities and employers, plan how to support the market to address them.

14. The Family Information Service (FIS) in each local authority provides advice and information on childcare and free early education places in their area. The FIS also provides a range of information, including support that might be available to help parents who are eligible to reduce the costs of childcare, for example through financial assistance and/or child tax credits.
15. We recognise the importance of the issue of wrap-around care in a school or non-maintained setting and are working to address this through the flexibility pilots. For example, in Carmarthenshire, they have set up a fee-paying wrap-around childcare on a schools site. This, from early feedback, is working well and more details will be provided through the evaluation of the flexibility pilots being conducted by WISERD.

C. Flying Start

16. Flying Start was launched in 2006-07. The programme is targeted in some of our most disadvantaged communities and aims to make a decisive difference to the life chances of children under the age of 4 in the areas in which it runs. The core elements are:
 - free, quality, part-time childcare for 2-3 year olds;
 - an enhanced health visiting service (where the health visitor caseload is capped at 110 children);
 - access to parenting support programmes; and
 - support for early language development
17. The childcare element is offered to parents of all eligible 2-3 year olds for 2 ½ hours a day, 5 days a week for 39 weeks. In addition, there is an expectation that local authorities should deliver at least 15 sessions of provision for a Flying Start family during the school holidays. It is available from the term following the child's 2nd birthday, until the term following their 3rd birthday.
18. By the end of Flying Start expansion programme, approximately 25 per cent (or 9,000 children) of the 2 year-old age cohort in Wales will benefit annually from Flying Start childcare. The Strategic Guidance for Flying Start includes an expectation that "the childcare offer should be linked to Foundation Phase entry into schools to ensure a seamless transition between the two offers with no gaps in provision". Flying Start and Foundation Phase officers in local authorities are working together to ensure that this happens.