

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) for the inquiry: [Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare?](#)

AEC 57

Ymateb gan: Oxfam Cymru

Response from: Oxfam Cymru

Oxfam Cymru's response to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee's](#) inquiry into [disabled children and young people's access to childcare and education](#) and the extent to which childcare providers, schools and local authorities meet their duties under the Equality Act 2010.



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RESPONSE FROM OXFAM CYMRU

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1. Why does Oxfam Cymru work on care?
 - 1.1. In the ongoing pursuit of challenging the prevalent global inequalities that perpetuate poverty, Oxfam has embraced a fundamental strategy: valuing women's work. Across the world, women's labour, whether paid or unpaid, has for far too long been habitually and grossly undervalued. The consequences of this undervaluation are far-reaching, compromising the lives of billions of women and children who continue to endure the harsh burden of poverty. Recognizing the critical role that women play in their families, communities, and economies, Oxfam stands committed to reshaping the narrative and addressing the systemic disparities that persist, by working with partners and communities across the world.
 - 1.2. Across the UK, many people who provide paid and unpaid care – including parents and guardians of children, social care and childcare workers, and unpaid carers supporting disabled, ill and elderly people – experience deep financial hardship and poverty and are under great physical and emotional pressure. This is because the care they provide remains largely taken for granted and is not properly supported by governments and wider society. Widespread public and institutional narratives currently dismiss care as an activity of very little or no social and economic value, something that happens privately in our homes, and as low-skilled work.
 - 1.3. In its commitment to address and tackle inequalities and poverty within Wales, Oxfam Cymru collaborates closely with a network of dedicated partners and local communities. Alongside being an active member of the [Make Care Fair Coalition](#), Oxfam Cymru works and contributes to the collaborative efforts of various care and equality organizations.

- 1.4. Recently, on behalf of the coalition, Oxfam Cymru conducted a research into access to childcare in Wales, with a particular focus on parents and guardians of children under the age of nine.¹ In our response to the inquiry conducted by the Children, Young People, and Education Committee of Senedd, we incorporate some of the key findings derived from this research, with a focus on the responses of parents of disabled and neurodivergent children.
- 1.5. Before presenting the research findings, however, we believe, it is imperative to underline access to childcare in Wales, and key aspects of the relationship between childcare and poverty, particularly from a gender perspective.

2. Access to Childcare

2.1. The cost of childcare

- 2.1.1. Childcare is a critical social infrastructure for our society and economy, with an impact on multiple dimensions. It serves as the cornerstone of early childhood development, providing a safe and nurturing environment where young minds can flourish. Beyond its role in shaping the future generation, childcare also plays a pivotal role in workforce participation, enabling parents, especially mothers, to maintain or re-enter the workforce, contributing significantly to economic productivity and financial independence. Moreover, childcare fosters social inclusion by offering support to families of diverse backgrounds and income levels, helping to bridge socio-economic gaps. Recognizing childcare's multifaceted importance is crucial as it not only empowers children but also empowers communities and economies, ultimately shaping the trajectory of our society for generations to come.
- 2.1.2. However, childcare is not accessible for many people due to high costs. The UK has one of the most expensive childcare systems in the whole of world. According to 2022 OECD figures, the UK has the third most expensive childcare, with only the Czech Republic and New Zealand more expensive in net childcare costs.² Furthermore, current childcare schemes are not fit for purpose.
- 2.1.3. [Coram's Childcare Survey 2023](#) shows the stark increase in childcare costs across Great Britain. The report found that prices of 25 hours nursery for children aged under five increased 2.8% in Wales compared to last year, with £135. Prices of 50 hours a week childcare for children under three at nurseries are £250 a week on average.
- 2.1.4. Childcare remains one of the main reasons for women to be economically inactive. More women are economically inactive in Wales, 25.5% of economically inactive women are out of work due to "looking after family/home", compared to only 6.8% of men.³ Yet, childcare support and offers remain insufficient to overcome this inequality.

¹ The research will be published in November 2023 and forwarded upon release.

² OECD (2022), [Net Childcare Costs](#)

³ Annual Population Survey, April 2022-March 2023 release, retrieved via NOMIS, September 2023.

- 2.1.5. The upcoming research conducted by Oxfam Cymru on behalf of Make Care Fair Coalition⁴ shows families are struggling with the cost of childcare:
- a. A staggering 91.7% (306/334) of parents either agree or strongly agree that childcare costs are too high compared to their income.
 - b. 53% (178/334) of parents said that after paying for childcare, it doesn't make financial sense for them to go to work.
 - c. 66% (221/334) of the parents said due to childcare costs, they did not have any disposal income/savings.
 - d. 74% (247/334) of the parents agreed that lack of funded childcare has had a negative impact on their work or career.
 - e. 39% (130/333) of the participants agree or strongly agree that they haven't been able to pay other essential costs after paying for childcare.
 - f. Despite the fact that 62% of survey respondents who told us their household income report annual household incomes exceeding £50,271, the weight of childcare expenses is palpable within these households. This burden becomes even more pronounced and distressing for low-income families, and families with disabled and/or neurodivergent children.
- 2.1.6. The evidence shows that childcare remains out of reach for a significant number of families, with far-reaching consequences. This inaccessibility has led to a concerning trend of parents, particularly mothers, being forced to exit the labour market. The impact of the high costs of childcare extends beyond individual families, affecting children's and families' welfare and wellbeing, perpetuating gender disparities in employment and income, and overall affecting the broader economic structure.

2.2. Transport

- 2.2.1. Transport constitutes a multifaceted and pivotal component that demands careful consideration in the context of access to childcare and educational facilities for disabled and neurodivergent children. The ability to reach these vital services reliably and safely is a fundamental factor in ensuring equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their abilities.
- 2.2.2. The cost of transport should also be considered in the evaluation of accessibility. Transport is a significant and costly problem for many families. [Child Poverty Survey 2022](#) by Children in Wales brought up that they came across examples of children being unable to attend hospital appointments as families cannot afford the cost of transport. This situation would be much worse in low-income families with disabled and neurodivergent children. In understanding the impact of transport in accessing childcare and education settings, it is important to examine the evidence provided by

⁴ The survey was conducted in July-August 2023 and is currently being analysed. There might be slight differences in the results in the final report. The final report of the survey will be published in November 2023 and forwarded upon release.

expert organizations on the challenges faced by families with disabled and neurodivergent children.

- 2.2.3. As Oxfam Cymru, we believe that making public transport free for children and young people while simultaneously reducing the cost of transport for lower-income families is a progressive and compassionate approach to addressing poverty and fostering social equity.

3. Disabled and Neurodivergent Children's Access to Childcare

- 3.1. A recent research by Action for Children reported that, in the UK, there are 492,000 children living in poverty in work-constrained families with a disabled child; 170,000 of those are in very deep poverty.⁵ The report underlines that if a parent is caring for a long-term sick or disabled child, or another close relative, it is likely to significantly restrict their ability to work.

- 3.2. Oxfam Cymru's research findings on disabled and neurodivergent children's access to childcare

In Oxfam Cymru's research, 37 respondents identified themselves as primary caregivers of disabled and neurodivergent children. While our survey did not include specific inquiries about the children's disabilities and needs, we did inquire about all parents' and guardians' experiences with childcare in Wales. It is important to note that the sample size is not representative and cannot provide a comprehensive overview of the experiences faced by parents of disabled and neurodivergent children in accessing childcare. Nevertheless, within this limited dataset, there are noteworthy findings that warrant discussion.

- 3.2.1. Quality of childcare: Parents hold differing opinions regarding the quality of childcare they can access and afford. While 32% (12/37) of parents are content with the quality of childcare they receive, 38% (14/37) express dissatisfaction and 30% (11/37) neither express happiness nor unhappiness.
- 3.2.2. Access to funded childcare:
 - a. Among the 37 parents surveyed, 19 reported having access to formal childcare provided by the Welsh Government, while 16 indicated that they did not, and two were uncertain. Of those who had accessed funded childcare within the last five years, only one mentioned utilising the Flying Start program, 18 indicated using the 30-hour funded childcare for 3-4-year-olds, and one was unsure about the offer they had accessed.
 - b. Among those who did not have access to funded childcare, three of them had children under 2 years old, making them ineligible for the available offers. Out of the remaining 13 with children aged over two, who potentially could have been eligible for available childcare support, seven stated that they did not qualify for any funded childcare support. Among these seven parents, three indicated that they were not within the

⁵ Action for Children (February 2023), [All Worked Out: The limits of work as a route out of poverty and hardship](#).

Flying Start area, while two were uncertain about their eligibility for funded childcare support. One of the parents also mentioned that she looked after her children.

- c. Parents who utilised the Welsh Government's 30 hours-funded childcare support told the impact of it, particularly on their finances, is significant. 78% (14/18) of the parents/guardians said funded childcare had made a significant impact on their finances, and 71% (10/14) said that it helped them cope with the cost-of-living crisis.
 - d. Over half of the parents, or 54% (17/32), reported that obtaining access to funded childcare was a challenge. In contrast, only 34% (14/32) of parents found it easy to secure funded childcare. The majority of respondents, 82% (14/17), cited cost as a significant barrier, while 41% (7/17) of these individuals also noted a lack of available spots as an additional obstacle.
 - e. Yet, 78% (14/18) of the parents said that funded childcare made a substantial positive impact on their finances, and 71% (10/14) of the parents said that funded childcare has helped them keep up with the rising cost of living.
- 3.2.3. Juggling among different settings: Parents strongly voiced that they found it challenging to juggle among different childcare settings, with 81% (30/37). Furthermore, 70% (26/37) of them think that using different settings is not easy for their children. 89% (16/18) of the parents also said that the 2.5 hours funded childcare a day in one setting, offered within the 30 hours funded childcare offer of Welsh Government, has not been enough for them. 50% (9/18) of the parents also mentioned that they couldn't access the wraparound support that they needed between different settings.
- 3.2.4. One of the participants living in a rural area articulated the difficulty that she experienced with childcare as such: *"Childminder could not fit youngest child in due to being at her numbers of under 5s. So had to use another childminder in another village. This childminder decided to reduce hours, older child's childminder still full so had to travel to another village to a childminder that was more expensive."*
- 3.2.5. Childcare provision in urban areas also a problem for parents of children with special needs. A parent complained about the lack of childcare provision around her: *"There is only childcare for my disabled child available for 6 days to cover 6 weeks of summer holidays. Provision for disabled children is next to non-existent"*. Another parent also indicated that her child has *"a non-verbal autism and there is nothing that is appropriate or suitable for them"*.
- 3.2.6. Impact of childcare on parents participation in labour market:
- a. The availability of childcare has a significant impact on the participation of parents in the workforce, particularly for mothers. Among parents of disabled children, 81% (29/36) reported that the absence of funded childcare has negatively affected their work and career, all of whom are women. Similarly, 88% (30/34) of parents stated that their need for childcare has made it difficult to accept new job opportunities or work additional hours.
 - b. Additionally, 72% (13/18) of parents noted that more funded childcare would have enabled them to resume work or increase their working hours more quickly.

- 3.2.7. Wellbeing and childcare: In terms of their mental health and overall well-being, 69% (25/36) of parents have acknowledged that concerns regarding childcare have had a negative impact on them. However, among those who have accessed funded childcare, 44% (8/18) have reported that it has provided them with more personal time and improved their mental health, while 33% (6/18) said that funded childcare did not make an impact on having more time and improvement of mental health.
- 3.2.8. Priorities of parents in terms of childcare: The top priorities for parents are affordable childcare, with 76% (28/37), and access to more hours of funded childcare, with 57% (21/37). Following closely are demands for wraparound care, at 49% (18/37), and childcare that aligns with children's specific needs, at 32% (12/37). It's worth noting that the demand for childcare tailored to children's needs is only 3% (10/296) among parents of non-disabled and non-neurodivergent children.
- 3.2.9. Asks from Welsh Government: The asks from Welsh Government align closely with parents' childcare needs for their disabled and neurodivergent children:
- a. 84% (31/37) asking for "affordable childcare".
 - b. 65% (24/37) seeking an increase in the availability of funded childcare hours.
 - c. Additionally, 41% (15/37) of parents have urged the Welsh Government to invest in childcare providers and childcare settings.
 - d. 30% (11/37) of parents also ask for the ability to use the 30-hour funded childcare offer in a single childcare setting.
 - e. 24% (9/37) ask for support with the cost of childcare when maternity/parental pay ends.
 - f. 19% (7/37) ask for investment in more settings and/or child places.
- 3.2.10. Comments from the parents of disabled and neurodivergent children would give a better understanding of experiences of accessing childcare:
- "I have children of varying ages with different needs, so a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work for families of multiple children. Also, the cost of childcare has rendered it impossible for me to return to work."*
- "The ... Council has woeful support for parents or children with autism and it has massively affected our mental health and ability to work."*
- "My child has ASD and finding childcare settings to accommodate him has been so difficult. Feel that we're a lost voice that is forgotten about & it really hampers parents' work."*
- "Extra funding needs to be provided for children with additional needs. There aren't many places available for parents to place their kids."*

"1. The 30 free hours model is not very helpful for spring and summer babies. 2. Our youngest's nursery is an amazing Welsh speaking setting. We were lucky to get a space as we registered her as soon as she was born. The staff deserve to be paid more for the work that they do. 3. Afterschool club. My child with ALN was attending after-school club but we found it was too much for him. We therefore rely on informal childcare."

"If you have a disabled child, it is impossible to work full-time. Childcare for disabled children is next to non-existent. School holidays are impossible. They don't even get the same amount of time in school as non-disabled children. Her school day is 30 minutes shorter every day; she has 2.5 hours less schooling per week than her non-disabled sibling! We have to use hours meant to be for respite to cover the gap between school finishing (early because she doesn't get a full school day - why??) and work finishing. Disability discrimination at its finest."

4. Final comments and recommendations

- 4.1. Under the UN Children's Rights Convention, Welsh Government is responsible for supporting parents by creating support services for children and giving parents the help they need to raise their children ([UNCRC Article 18](#)). Regrettably, the current state of childcare services in Wales has left numerous children and families without access. The childcare support offered by the Welsh Government is either based on postcode eligibility, as seen in the case of the Flying Start program, or tied to the employment status of parents, as is the case with the 30-hour funded childcare offer. These criteria have resulted in disparities and inequalities in eligibility for many families and children, directly contravening the principles outlined in the UN Convention.
- 4.2. We ask Welsh Government to provide affordable, accessible, universal childcare. We echo our recommendation in the [Feminist Scorecard 2022](#) to Welsh Government about childcare:
 - 4.2.1. Make the Childcare Offer affordable and accessible for parents of all children from six months.
 - 4.2.2. Invest in nursery and early education provisions to ensure they are accessible to all parents who are eligible, when and where they need them. This should particularly address the lack of provision during atypical working hours, provisions for disabled children and those with additional learning needs as well as provision in rural areas.
 - 4.2.3. Expand childcare provisions to unemployed parents to support them in seeking employment and to asylum seekers to allow them to take ESOL classes and prepare for getting refugee status.
 - 4.2.4. Collect robust equality data as part of the evaluation and monitoring of the Childcare Offer to ensure equality of access and eligibility.
 - 4.2.5. In addition, we also suggest that the Welsh Government should consider supporting parents taking up training of any kind and also encourage

businesses and training organisations to provide childcare during the course of training.

- 4.3. A more robust intersectional approach is essential, particularly in the provision of childcare and access to early education for children from different ethnic backgrounds and disabled children. Recognizing and addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by these children is vital to ensuring that early childhood education and care are truly inclusive and equitable.
- 4.4. Policies and initiatives should consider cultural sensitivity and responsiveness, language accessibility, and the specific educational and developmental requirements of children from diverse backgrounds.⁶ Moreover, childcare facilities and early education programs should be designed to accommodate the needs of disabled children, with accessibility features, specialized staff training, and adaptive resources.⁷ Access to childcare during school holidays for disabled and neurodivergent children should be also improved.
- 4.5. The government should also take action to unify public service delivery among local authorities. Disparities in access to services like varied childcare settings or support mechanisms for disabled and neurodivergent children can result from different policies and practices across local authorities, creating a patchwork of services that may cause inequality among different local authority residents and not adequately meet the needs of all residents. A unified approach can help standardize service delivery, reducing inequalities and ensuring that individuals receive consistent and fair access to services, regardless of where they live.
- 4.6. We also recommend that Welsh Government supports and explores different ways of childcare provision and involve parents and communities more to access more families.
 - 4.6.1. Campaigns like [Parent-led Childcare](#) organised by the New Economics Foundation, aiming to turn passive recipients of services into active participants by combining the skill of professional workers with the lived experience of families, could be looked up.
 - 4.6.2. Framing the provision of childcare as a public service and shifting the role of children and parents from customers to co-producers could be a starting point for alternative childcare provisions.⁸

⁶ Welsh Parliament Equality and Social Justice Committee (2022), [Minding the future: The childcare barrier facing working parents](#) p.33-38

⁷ Ibid. p. 38-42

⁸ Lucie Stephens (2023), [Early years education and childcare is a public good – its operating model should be too](#). JRF Blog.