

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a
Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol
Gofal plant a chyflogaeth rhieni: y
pandemig a thu hwnt
CPE(02)
Ymateb gan Cygnor Sir y Fflint

Welsh Parliament
Equality and Social Justice Committee

Childcare and parental employment:
the pandemic and beyond
CPE(02)
Evidence from Flintshire County
Council

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee into how the pandemic has impacted childcare and parental employment, focussing on the barriers that childcare provision can present for parents, particularly women, entering and progressing in the labour market. We would like to make the following observations:

The extent to which current childcare provision in Wales sufficiently supports parents, particularly mothers, to enter, remain and progress in employment, and what changes might be needed to improve the effectiveness of childcare provision in doing this.

Flintshire currently has excellent childcare provision which does appear to sufficiently support parents, particularly mothers. However, during discussions with parents and providers it is difficult to confirm whether childcare is supporting mothers to enter, remain and progress in employment as there is limited data as to what other childcare parents are using, for example friends, neighbours and family, which may well be unregistered provision, and the reason why, for example cost, flexibility and opening hours.

The current Welsh Government programmes which offer childcare are administered through the Early Years and Family Support Service.

The Early Years Support team deliver the Childcare Offer, as well as early education (Early Entitlement), the Childcare and Play element of the Children and Communities Grant and Childcare Development, which includes the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment, training, set-up and sustainability of childcare provision.

The data collected for the Childcare Offer follows the Welsh Government monitoring guidance, and does not include gathering data on the family structure e.g. two parents or single parents or their gender.

We would recommend better alignment of childcare provision with early education schemes. There is disparity between the dates that the Childcare Offer, Flying Start and Early Entitlement start their funding. These differences result in a lot of confusion for parents and leads to some parents inadvertently missing out on applying for their full entitlement, or in some cases applying too soon, and their applications being declined.

Not all Early Years programmes allow funding to be utilised 'cross border'; this can be a barrier especially for parents living in authorities which neighbour England, where they may want to access childcare close to their place of employment for logistical purposes.

Limitations of / differences in funding streams impacts on the ability of parents to plan childcare long term (from 2 years to school age), for example Flying Start will permit the amalgamation of childcare sessions for working parents, but Early Entitlement will not. Not all providers offer Flying Start, Early Entitlement and

Childcare Offer funded places, sometimes due to lack of capacity within Local Authority to provide advisory support. Children funded by Flying Start are not always guaranteed an Early Entitlement funded place with the provider they are attending, impacting on parental choice, and ability to plan childcare.

Having considered childcare as part of the systems thinking review for the Integration and Transformation Early Years pathfinder, it is clear that there are barriers to childcare that could be easily removed, and this was seen through the Covid-19 response when the C-CAS offer was made for key workers and vulnerable children.

The foundations of the early years for children lays down their future. This can be in the home environment and through a quality childcare provider. Parents do not always see the value of the 'investment' in their children's future, and it is felt that the debate around quality and pedagogy should be considered.

What impact the Childcare Offer in particular has had in achieving the Welsh Government's objective of "helping parents, particularly mothers, to return to work or increase the hours they work".

The data to answer this question is unavailable, and would require linking to other systems e.g. Council Tax, Benefits, PaCE and Communities for Work+.

The Childcare Offer Team do not gather data on parents to identify the family structure i.e. two parents or single parents or their gender. Likewise there is no requirement upon Childcare Offer teams to gather data on how many parents return to work or increase their hours of work however, anecdotally we can confirm that this does occur. Parents have informed the team on numerous occasions how they have been able to work more hours both in employment and self-employed, and others have been able to return to work or accept a promotion.

The introduction of the Childcare Offer has been well received by working families living in Flying Start areas, who in some cases were spending a large proportion of their salary on childcare. However anecdotal feedback from some parents to the Flying Start support teams is that the offer of 20 hours of childcare in addition to the universal offer of 10 hours of Early Entitlement, is not a big enough incentive to seek employment, especially as no such offer is available for those with children under 3. Families feel that the offer should be extended to 2 year olds. Other parents have said they feel that the positive impact of childcare for their child at

age 3 has helped them to plan financially and to ride through maternity/paternity leave and the first year or two, knowing that the Offer is available, but they do remain very confused as to why the 30 hours is not always available in one setting, and is not flexible e.g. carry over of hours in a week or month if a parent is working shifts.

The impact of limited childcare availability on Wales' productivity levels.

From Flintshire's latest full Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2017 – 2021 it was summarised that *'This assessment finds that providers, parents and stakeholders believe that the quality of childcare provision in Flintshire is considered good and there is sufficient provision to meet the needs of most families.'*

From this position of providing sufficient childcare we can only comment on limited childcare in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. During the pandemic a significant number of childcare providers temporarily closed (at the height of the pandemic over 55% of Flintshire childcare providers were temporarily closed) and this will have impacted on productivity levels. However, at the same time a significant number of employers furloughed their staff and conversely the requirement for formal childcare was reduced.

The introduction of the Childcare Offer has placed significant pressure on places in some areas. Since the introduction of the Childcare Offer this has been closely monitored, as to which childcare providers are offering which programmes including Flying Start, Childcare Offer and Early Entitlement and which are offering one, multiple or none and the rates provided. This is matched to the capacity.

Having opened two new childcare settings this year with the support of Welsh Government capital both childcare provisions are full. This means that we have targeted the right location, based upon our collective knowledge, however, what we are seeing post Covid and due the change in the minimum national wage or living wage is that staff who previously worked in childcare or were thinking of entering childcare have moved out or are choosing a different work pathway as the workdays in childcare tend to be long, and the myth around skills, training and qualifications for childcare workers needs to be closely examined, with a new language of the importance of the sector.

How childcare arrangements have affected parental employment during the coronavirus pandemic, particularly in relation to mothers. What lessons might be applied to provide better support during any future lockdowns or increased restrictions.

It is paramount that any eligibility guidance, provided by Welsh Government at the start of any new lockdown / new restrictions, be clear and concise. Also, guidance should emphasise the importance of continuity of interpretation as during the C-CAS funding neighbouring Local Authorities produced different eligibility criteria based upon their understanding of the guidance.

Welsh Government should ensure that any guidance includes clear definitions for all terminology to avoid confusion around approval of applications for funding, as for example during C-CAS funding with the term 'Key Worker'.

The impact of different COVID restrictions between England and Wales on working families, needs to be considered, especially in areas where parents may be employed 'across border'. After changes to restrictions, some parents were being asked to return to work in England, but being told that under Welsh Government regulations their role was not classified as 'key worker' / essential and as such these parents were denied access to school hubs and childcare. There is a need to join up childcare and education policies.

Whether Welsh Government-funded childcare provision is flexible enough to support employment of parents, particularly mothers, in different demographic groups and experiencing different circumstances.

Flintshire's Childcare Offer team and Childcare Development team do not gather any monitoring data for parents accessing childcare provision in relation to their demographic groups (apart from parental income) or those experiencing different circumstances

We do, however, believe that childcare provision in Flintshire is flexible enough to support the needs of all parents without discrimination. The Childcare Development team, Flying Start and Early Entitlement follow guidelines to ensure that all applications are processed equitably. They focus on the child as opposed to the funding stream, and work out how best to use the funding, within current eligibility criteria to meet the needs of a child. This requires strong collaboration and shared intelligence across Services, and could benefit from shared infrastructure, as well as more funding around childcare grants e.g. whilst the Childcare Offer Admin is one grant, this should not be separated from Childcare and Play grant and childcare development as this is critical to ensuring quality and sustainable childcare provision.

Within the eligibility criteria for the Childcare Offer we stipulate that funding is just for parents with parental responsibility. There have been a couple of instances where the wider criteria has proven inflexible because there is no supporting documentation immediately available, and they are:

1. Short term provision for a parent who has to finish working in order to care for a parent / child who requires end of life care
2. If a parent is suddenly detained due to mental health issues.

Some funding models do not support placements at more than one childcare setting, where children may live across more than one household due to separation or divorce, or where single parents may rely on shared care with grandparents.

The ability of the sector to support shift workers; many Day Nurseries, Playgroups and Cylchoedd do not operate outside of 'core hours' (7.30 am to 6.00 pm), or at weekends. Childminders are able to offer more flexibility, including transport.

However not all grant funded programmes utilise childminders. This has been reported by the Adult Social Care domiciliary sector as a barrier to employment.

We do think there could be some testing of childcare provision with market segments e.g. childcare availability for domiciliary workers to better understand the barriers and how these could be overcome, whilst being age sensitive to the child e.g. night shifts, late working.

The impact of high-quality formal childcare provision on reducing the attainment gap, and the potential benefits of extending childcare provision to tackle inequalities.

Post relaxation of some COVID restrictions uptake of childcare for the Flying Start programme has been exceptionally high, with parents reporting concerns on the impact of isolation on their children, who have been unable to mix with family, friends and peers for months on end. Reduction in face to face delivery of many services has increased isolation for families with children who have ALN and/or disability.

Multiagency services such as Flying Start are at the forefront in early identification of children with a developmental delay, ensuring timely referral to core services such as Speech and Language therapists and that appropriate support is in place at the earliest possible opportunity. The nature of referrals received for Outreach Childcare support demonstrates the level of need in the wider community.

Schools in the area which have on-site Flying Start provision, have reported a difference in baseline on entry between children who have accessed childcare, and those who have not. There has also been recent feedback from a Childcare Offer Large Capital Scheme linked to a school that the 17 children who had attended the childcare were much more school ready and able to settle for learning more quickly than the 3 children who did not. Schools were already observing the benefits, and had also developed relationships with parents early on in the child's life resulting in triangulation and strong pathways for children, whilst parents are working. Parents said they felt more comfortable with this closer siting of childcare and education.

'High Quality' childcare is only achieved through on-going support for the sector, which is currently experiencing significant challenges in both recruitment and retention. The willingness of staff across the childcare sector to remain in work during the COVID pandemic has, in turn, enabled parents to continue to work. What is now being seen is fatigued, and in some instances demotivated staff.

There are many stories from during the Pandemic that can be told, about children who went to childcare carefully selected to meet their needs, in discussion with parents. Children who went in non-verbal and at the end of the scheme were

able to communicate with some spoken word; developmental gain; speech and language enhancement and many more.

We have recently undertaken an exercise to look at the training needs of the workforce, and it is felt that whilst this should not fall fully on the local authority there is a need to invest in the sector in core programmes such as early year's brain development, speech, language and communication and child development baseline expectations. This is available upon request.

High quality childcare is essential and is what makes the difference. It does require a committed plan to workforce development and pay. All settings should share a common intention to work together that with the local authority develop good practice, address underperformance and provide support for those which are experiencing challenging circumstances. The settings should take shared responsibility for improving the outcomes of all children in their care. And the quality of provision and practice will enable all young children to have the best possible start in early years, ensuring they are ready for school and able to achieve to their full potential at all key stages.

What Wales can learn from other models of childcare provision operating in the rest of the UK and internationally and emerging practice in terms of supporting parental employment, and the extent to which these models might be transferrable to the Welsh context.

The England Early Years Foundation Stage works on a model whereby the parent can access their FPN1 and FPN2 in a school or a Private day-care facility. This model gives more flexibility and would be advantageous for working parents if no wraparound care is available at their preferred school. This could be transferable to Flintshire as long as the accompanying funding package enabled private day care providers to deliver the education element sustainably.

In order to be sustainable many childcare providers make a fixed offer to parents, for example a morning of 8am to 1pm with no reduction in cost for those wanting a later start. In some areas of Italy day care providers operate a staggered start to a day, allowing parent's flexibility at a reduced cost. This model would need investment in the sector, to offset loss of income.

How financial and practical implications such as availability of childcare would need to be considered by the Welsh Government in any future policy developments to extend childcare provision.

To encourage the expansion of childcare provision we would recommend that the £4.50 Childcare Offer and Early Entitlement rate be reviewed on a regular basis. We are currently aware of settings who still struggle with the £4.50 rate to ensure sustainability. As a result in some settings they have decided to not include food within their daily fee and to charge parents separately. Settings are requesting a fair rate.

The introduction of the Childcare Offer placed significant pressure on childcare places in some areas, with children from low income households, who were wanting shorter sessions, unable to be accommodated. When looking at 'closing the gap' this needs to be considered.

The ratio for 2 year old (Flying Start funded) children of 1 adult: 4 children means that any higher rate paid for Flying Start childcare is offset by a higher staffing cost. Childcare owners, managers and leaders, as well as CWLWM partner representatives, report that Flying Start has become a less attractive offer for childcare providers, given the rate paid, expectations of high quality and higher numbers of children needing universal targeted support.

However, if we believe that early years foundations really matter, and that quality childcare is an important factor in making a difference it does require a Policy and Plan that is effective, followed through and provides for our future generations.

Every child deserves the best possible start in life and the support that enables them to fulfil their potential. Our aim is to provide evidence to support the development and sustainability of high quality childcare and early education. We need to gather evidence and intelligence on performance and quality to inform effective resource deployment; to encourage collaboration and co-construction by promoting success and sharing highly effective practice in order to develop improved systems and strategies for setting to setting improvement; to monitor the performance of all providers delivering early years and childcare settings with a focus on outcomes for children and challenge and intervene where poor quality standards and underperformance is identified.

If you require any further information please do contact me.

Yours sincerely



Gail Bennett

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