

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a
Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol
Gofal plant a chyflogaeth rhieni: y
pandemig a thu hwnt
CPE(04)
Ymateb gan WEN Cymru

Welsh Parliament
Equality and Social Justice Committee

Childcare and parental employment:
the pandemic and beyond
CPE(04)
Evidence from WEN Wales

About the Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales:

Our vision is of a Wales free from gender discrimination where all women and men have equal authority and opportunity to shape society and their own lives. We work with our vibrant coalition of organisational and individual members to transform society. Our work sits under three pillars. We will connect, campaign and champion women so our vision is realised.

1. 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.

While the current Childcare Offer in Wales offers some support for parents, particularly mothers, to enter, remain and progress in employment, we believe that this objective is seriously hampered by the lack of provisions for under-3-year-olds, limited availability and flexibility, inconsistency across Wales, and a lack of accessible and transparent information.

This feeling was reflected in a survey that we circulated to our member networks to gather their perspectives and lived experience in preparation for this consultation response. 81% of participants did not agree that current childcare provisions in Wales sufficiently support parents, particularly mothers, to enter, remain and progress in employment. 53% do not think that the Childcare Offer has helped in achieving the Welsh Government's objective of "helping parents, particularly mothers, to return to work or increase the hours they work", while only 19% believe that is has.

Lack of provision for children younger than 3 years

The UK shared parental leave policy allows parents to share 50 weeks of leave (of which 37 are paid) between a child's birth and first birthday, in addition to two weeks leave directly after the birth of a child, which are compulsory for women and optional for men. The Welsh Government's policy provides 30 hours free early education and childcare per week for 48 weeks a year for working parents of children over the age of 3. **This leads to an evident lack of provisions between ages 1-3 which is not covered by either policy.** This gap is even longer when, for example

shared parental leave is taken by both parents for the first 6 months or one or both parents return to work before their child's first birthday. Under the Flying Start scheme, 12.5 hours childcare a week for 39 weeks are provided for a year for 2 and 3 year olds in Wales. However as this provision is obviously limited both geographically and in terms of available hours, it is insufficient to effectively support mothers to enter, remain or progress in employment.

While free childcare for 3 and 4 years olds is an important step in the right direction, we are concerned that for many women this support comes too late to effectively support them to enter, remain or progress in work. The Childcare Offer only becomes available once key decisions about whether to return to work, whether to work part-time or to change jobs have already been made. Support would be better targeted if it was available to parents of younger children, following the end of parental leave.

This position was clearly shared by the participants in our survey. When asked what changes are needed to improve the effectiveness of childcare provisions in Wales in supporting parental employment, 91% of respondents said that the Childcare Offer needs to be extended to children under 3 years. This is also reflected in participants' responses to an open question asking them to comment on their answers, where most comments highlighted problems with the current age threshold of 3 years and recommended that it needs to be available sooner. Participants commented that *"women need support with childcare when their maternity leave ends"*, and that it *"should be available sooner, from at least when a child is 1 year old and possibly before, e.g. 6 months if the mother or father want and/or need to return to work sooner."* Other participants stated that current provisions leave a gap of over 2 years *"where childcare is unaffordable and this does not encourage back to work"* and that they are *"having to scrape by just to work."* Another contribution highlighted that the lack of affordable childcare during this period younger children leads to *"a talent drain and many women forced to leave the workforce."*

Limited availability and flexibility

To successfully support women in employment, childcare provisions not only need to be available from a younger age. They also need to be flexible and available at times and locations that are compatible with parents' different work circumstances, including atypical hours, wraparound care and school holiday provisions. The common model of 'core hour' provisions between 8am and 5pm and only during term time are not sufficient to accommodate the working lives of many women in Wales.

Recent data from the [Family and Childcare Trust survey](#) paints a concerning picture, according to which both flexible and 'core hour' provisions are sufficiently lacking in Wales. **Less than half (47%) of local authorities reported having enough childcare under the Childcare Offer in all parts of their local authority.** While this is a

significant increase from 23% in 2020, it still shows a crucial shortage in available provisions. 47% of local authorities in Wales report having enough availability in some parts. This data suggests that, for many mothers in Wales, the childcare provisions that they are currently entitled to under the Childcare Offer may not be available in the areas where they live.

Availability is less for parents working full time, with 41% of local authorities having sufficient childcare across all areas. For parents working atypical hours and families living in rural areas, availability has decreased dramatically between 2020 and 2021. Only 6% of LAs reported having sufficient childcare for parents working atypical hours in all areas in 2021, compared to 21% in 2020. 41% of LAs report a lack of childcare provisions for parents working atypical hours across all areas. **The percentage of LAs who have sufficient provisions for families living in rural areas in all areas has reduced from 18% in 2020 to 8% in 2021.** 15% of LAs lack sufficient provision for families in rural areas across the local authority.

The impact of these figures was clearly felt in the lives of our survey respondents. **67% of participants said that the Childcare Offer needs to cover more than 30 hours per week and 64% agreed that Childcare Offer provisions need to be delivered consistently across Wales.**

Participants said that *“nursery hours in many settings don’t support the working day including travel”*, that *“the childcare providers do not offer enough flexibility”* and that it is *“still hard for single mothers to do both drop off & pick up at school/nursery [as] 30 hours does not cover a full time working week.”* Other respondents highlighted that *“there needs to be consistent childcare during the school holidays”* and that provisions need to *“apply year round not just term time.”* One participant highlighted that the lack of childcare provisions outside normal working hours particularly affects health and social care workers who are primarily women.

Another participant described their struggle with inconsistent provisions, saying that *“the childcare offer could only be taken up if you had a nursery that accepted this form of payment. With a school place this was only practical if you could find a nursery that would accept it and if they happened to have wrap around care to take them or pick them up from their school.”* Due to the component nature of the Childcare Offer, some respondents reported that they were struggling to access the 30 hours in a single location.

Provisions for disabled children have also decreased significantly from 31% in 2020 to 19% in 2021. 38% of LAs report not having enough childcare for disabled children anywhere in their local authority. The lack of provision was echoed by our survey respondents, 44% of whom said that we need more affordable and accessible childcare for disabled children and children with additional learning needs.

Lack of accessible and transparent information

Awareness and uptake of childcare entitlements can be hindered by a lack of accessible and transparent information, especially in light of inconsistent availability across different areas in Wales. **67% of respondents stated that we need more accessible and transparent information on available childcare provisions.** One respondent described the system as *“too confusing and complicated.”* Another respondent reported confusion around what is and is not covered by childcare entitlements, saying that *“it makes it very difficult for working parents how the money is divided between the time in school and nursery, i.e wrap around fees paid out of pocket, not inclusive of meals.”*

Recommendation 1: The Childcare Offer should be available from an earlier age, ideally from 6 months.

Recommendation 2: Welsh Government should invest in nursery and early education provisions to ensure that parents in all areas of Wales are able to access the provisions that they are entitled to.

Recommendation 3: The Childcare Offer and available provisions in Wales should be enhanced to accommodate the varied working lives of parents, including full-time provisions, school holiday provisions and provision for atypical working hours and wrap-around care.

Recommendation 4: The Welsh Government should invest in provisions for disabled children and children with additional learning needs.

2. 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”.

As discussed in Section 1 and Section 3, the Childcare Offer has only had a limited impact in achieving the Welsh Government’s objective of *“helping parents, particularly mothers, to return to work or increase the hours they work”*. **This view is shared by our survey respondents, 53% of whom do not think that the Childcare Offer has helped in achieving the Welsh Government’s objective, while only 19% believe that it has.** Section 3 details how the fact that women still bear the brunt of unpaid caring responsibilities continues to be a key driver key driver of women’s higher levels of economic ‘inactivity’, their higher presence in part-time, lowpaid jobs and the gender pay gap. Section 3 details the reasons as to why the Childcare Offer has only had a limited impact on parental employment, including the lack of provisions for under-3-year-olds, limited availability and flexibility, inconsistency across Wales, and a lack of accessible and transparent information.

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

The limited availability of affordable and accessible childcare in Wales has a wide-ranging impact on productivity levels. Lack of affordable and accessible childcare, combined with societal stereotypes, means that women bear the brunt of unpaid childcare responsibilities, to the detriment of their careers and often their economic independence. Women's role in unpaid childcare is a key driver of their higher levels of economic 'inactivity', their higher presence in part-time, low-paid jobs and the gender pay gap. (Regrettably unpaid care and domestic work are not commonly considered economic activities, despite [ONS figures for 2014](#) estimating that total unpaid work in the UK had a value of £1.01tn, equivalent to approximately 56% of GDP.)

Women remain the primary carers for children with [87% of UK child benefit claims paid to women](#). In Wales, [86% of single parents are mothers](#) and [63% of mothers in two parent households](#) say they are solely or mainly responsible for childcare (compared with just 17% of fathers). The heavy reliance on women's unpaid work in this regard has a huge impact on women's careers, ambitions and aspirations. With austerity measures putting statutory services under greater strain, increased pressure on unpaid childcare givers in Wales inevitably has detrimental effects on the Welsh economy.

Lack of childcare is one of the most frequently cited barriers to women's employment, resulting in lower economic participation and curtailing women's career options. A lack of accessible, affordable and flexible childcare leads many women to decide to either not return to work, or to choose lower paid, lower skilled part-time work.

Between July 2019 and June 2020, [26.6% of women were economically inactive](#) compared to 19.5% of men. When asked about the reasons for economic inactivity, [26% of women](#) reported this was due to looking after the family or home, compared to 6.5% of men.

Women are overrepresented in low-paid, part-time jobs, often because these are seen as more flexible in accommodating caring responsibilities. In 2020, [40.1% of women worked part-time](#), compared to 11.8% of men. The [average hourly pay for women](#) in Wales is £11.74 compared to £13.28 for men. For part-time workers, [average pay is even lower](#) at £9.36 per hour, compared with £14.31 for full-time workers.

Women's prominence in low paid part-time work and their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work are key contributors to the Gender Pay Gap include. The [Gender Pay Gap in Wales](#) was 11.6% in 2020, a drop of 2.9% from the 2019 figure of 14.5% but still a significant discrepancy.

A [2021 UK study by the Centre for Progressive Politics](#) confirms the devastating impact of childcare responsibilities on women's employment. Almost half of all mothers (47%) report that they struggled to find suitable childcare. Of these, 46% were prevented from taking on more hours at work, 34% were prevented from taking a potential job, 30% had to reduce the hours that they worked and 15% had to quit their job.

While these figures are depressing, they also reveal that accessible, flexible childcare for those who are most in need of support can be a key lever in unlocking women's professional skills and potential and increasing their (paid) contribution to the Welsh economy. **A 2018 study by Chwarae Teg estimates that increasing women's participation in the labour market through higher employment rates and number of hours worked could add between £1.2 and £4.4 billion to Wales's economy by 2028.** If Wales achieved full gender equality in terms of employment rates, hours worked and participation in high productivity sectors, the increase in annual GVA could be as high as £13.6 billion in 2028. **The 2021 study by the Centre for Progressive Politics estimated that investing in childcare would boost the annual income of working mothers in the UK by as much as £10bn, which would generate an additional 3% in their economic output.**

To unlock this potential, Wales' childcare provisions need to be effectively targeted at those for whom affording childcare is the primary barrier to getting back to or progressing in work. As discussed in Section 1, we believe that significant improvements are needed if the Childcare Offer is to achieve this. In addition, we are concerned that the current eligibility criteria are not the most conducive to supporting those mothers who need the support the most.

Income threshold

The current upper income threshold for the Childcare Offer requires that each parent must earn less than £100,000 per year. **While the Childcare Offer should be subject to an income cap, it is not clear what financial and economic considerations have informed this threshold level and it does appear somewhat high.** This is aggravated by the fact that the threshold does not take account of household income, meaning a two-parent household with a combined income of £199,999 would be eligible for free childcare under the Childcare Offer. By comparison, based on the [average costs for nursery provisions](#) for three and four year olds in Wales in 2021, the costs for a full-time nursery place for 50 hours per week and 48 weeks per year would come to £10,704 annually. This raises questions as to whether the current threshold represents the most effective targeting of affordable childcare, in particular if any potential savings from adjusting the threshold would enable the offer to be widened to parents with younger children, or could be used to facilitate investments in nurseries that would ensure flexible childcare was more consistently available across different local authorities. We suggest that Welsh Government should undertake financial

modelling to ensure the Childcare Offer effectively targets those who need it the most in order to enter, remain and progress in employment.

The income threshold was also highlighted by survey respondents, who commented that *“it’s crazy that a couple earning £99k a year each are eligible but a couple where one earns £100k means the other partner isn’t entitled to any support”* and that this *“is skewed and actually helps higher earnings families more than it helps low-income families or single parents.”* The fact that the latter comment was made on the mistaken assumption that the threshold was £50k rather than £100k provides anecdotal evidence to how far these sums are removed from the reality of many in Wales, and **supports the idea that a review of current threshold levels may enable Welsh Government to better support those who struggle most with finding affordable childcare.**

Support for non-working parents

We welcome that the Programme for Government includes a commitment to extend childcare provisions to parents who are in education or training, which will be an important step towards supporting more mothers to enter, remain or progress in employment.

However, we are concerned that there seem to be no plans to extend the offer to parents who are unemployed. The current Childcare Offer only applies to parents who are employed or self-employed and, in the case of two parent families, both partners need to be working. Similar restrictions apply under [Universal Credit](#). A parent is only able to receive childcare support if they are in paid work. If a parent is claiming with a partner, both partners normally need to be in work to receive childcare support under Universal Credit.

This means that single parents who are not in work, or households where one parent is unemployed, are not eligible for childcare support under either policy. The restrictions evidently lead to lack of childcare provisions for those who arguably need them the most in order to enter employment. Based on the data discussed in previous sections, we know that it is predominately women who will find themselves in this situation, as they are more likely to be economically inactive due to childcare responsibilities.

For many women, seeking employment may not be easily compatible with full-time caring responsibilities for a young child. Searching and preparing a job application or interview is timeconsuming, arguably more so for people who are in the disadvantaged position of already being out of work, especially if they have limited access to IT and cannot depend on family members to provide informal childcare support. This can leave mothers in a catch-22. Women, as discussed above, are often forced to leave employment due to a lack of affordable childcare. Once children reach the age of 3 years, and affordable childcare would normally become available, non-eligibility of unemployed mothers means they may be

unable to re-enter employment as childcare responsibilities do not allow them to search and apply for work.

In addition, the exclusion of non-working parents from free childcare provisions also reiterates the idea that unpaid childcare is not work but rather something that women naturally can be expected to provide for free. This sentiment was shared by many of our survey respondents, one of which commented that *“childcare is work. The system relies on women's unpaid labour. If you are looking after your child, you don't have any time for doing any other work. Governments need to either extend the childcare offers [...] or pay to parents who are looking after their children and recognise the value of their labour.”*

To honour the Welsh Government's commitment to being a feminist government, we believe that unpaid, disproportionately women-driven childcare responsibilities should be appropriately valued through extending the Childcare Offer to non-working parents.

Childcare investments as part of a green and caring-focussed recovery

As discussed above, poorer employment, financial and mental health outcomes for women are directly linked to their role in unpaid and low paid care work.

Women make up around 80% [of the workforce in education, childcare, health and social care](#), and are overrepresented in the lowest paying roles in these sectors, especially women from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. Unpaid caring responsibilities often push women into poverty. They increase the likelihood of women reducing their working hours or becoming unemployed, in turn reducing women's life-time earnings and affecting their ability to save for a pension.

This is why women in Wales need a childcare provision that offers affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare for all children from six months, regardless of the employment status of parents. We believe that such investments should be delivered as part of a wider caring-focused recovery from the pandemic to address the underlying driving factors behind the inequalities and poverty that have come to the fore so sharply over the past eighteen months.

If the Welsh Government wants to tackle poverty and inequality at the same time as addressing climate change, investing in a [caring economy](#) is a unique opportunity to deliver that. It not only improves people's wellbeing, promotes the fair work agenda and reduces inequalities and poverty, **but is also [three times less polluting](#) than investments into alternative sectors such as construction.** We believe that 'green jobs' should refer to [all roles that further the wellbeing of people and the planet](#). Caring roles – both paid and unpaid – clearly fit that description. Caring jobs are green jobs and a well-funded care infrastructure forms the basis of a green and thriving economy.

Investments into the caring economy are already a key element of other countries' recovery plans, such as Canada's [Building Back Better](#) initiative and the [American Jobs Plan](#). They also have wide public support in Wales. **According to WEN Wales data collected earlier this year, 7 out of 10 young voters across the political spectrum in Wales want to see greater investments in childcare and social care. 72% of 18–30-year-olds in Wales say there should be greater investment in early education to create more affordable childcare. 69% agree that social care for older people and people with additional needs should be free.** Support is even higher among female voters, with 80% of young women favouring investment in early education and 75% young women agreeing that social care should be free.

Recommendation 5: Welsh Government needs to ensure that free childcare provisions are effectively targeted at those for whom affording childcare is the primary barrier to getting back to or progressing in work.

Recommendation 6: Welsh Government should undertake financial modelling to ensure income thresholds for the Childcare Offer are set in a way that effectively targets those who need it the most in order to enter, remain and progress in employment. Any potential savings from adjusting the threshold should be used to extend the Offer to parents with younger children, or to facilitate investments in nurseries to ensure sufficient childcare availability across all of Wales.

Recommendation 7: Welsh Government should extend the Childcare Offer to non-working parents to support them in seeking employment and ensure that unpaid, disproportionately women-driven childcare responsibilities are appropriately valued.

Recommendation 8: Welsh Government investments in childcare should be part of a wider investment into the care infrastructure as part of a green and care-focussed recovery from the pandemic.

4. 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.

While the lives and work of everyone have been affected by COVID-19, the jobs and livelihoods of mothers, in particular mothers on low-income, mothers from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and disabled mothers, have been particularly adversely affected. The closure of nurseries and schools, combined with the lack of affordable childcare during the pandemic, had a devastating impact on their financial situation and mental health. Many lost their job due to childcare responsibilities. For mothers who were able to work from home, the double strain of work and childcare took a serious toll on their ability to perform their job and their mental health.

[WEN Wales polling research from 2020](#) shows that **women were more likely than men to have lost their job due to a business closing down. When asked for reasons that contributed to this loss of employment or working hours, 22% of respondents from lower-income households (£0-20k per year) said this was due to their caring responsibilities.** By comparison, among respondents from higher income households (£40k per year or more), only 2% attributed job loss or reduced working hours to caring responsibilities. Our polling also found that disabled people and people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to have lost working hours. 31% of disabled people reported having lost working hours, compared to 23% of non-disabled people. People from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds (48%) were more than twice as likely as white people (23%) to have experienced a loss of working hours.

Research has shown consistently [that women are more likely than men](#) to struggle financially and experience poor mental health as a result of the pandemic. Both statistical evidence and the lived experience of our survey respondents point directly to women's role in unpaid childcare as a driver of these financial and mental health disparities.

The survey revealed that 49% of women were struggling to make ends meet, compared to 38% of men. This sentiment was felt more strongly by single parents compared to married parents. 52% of single parents felt they were somewhat or completely struggling to make ends meet compared to 38% of married parents and 44% of cohabiting parents. The survey clearly shows that women and single parents have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and if steps are not taken urgently, many more will fall into poverty. These issues will have fallen disproportionately on women from minority ethnic backgrounds, especially Black women and those from Mixed or Multiple Ethnic backgrounds. According to [2011 census data for England and Wales](#), single parents make up almost a quarter (24.3%) of households in the Black population and 19.1% in Mixed or Multiple Ethnic groups, compared to 10.2% of white households. At the same time, Black, Asian and minority ethnic families are among those who have been [worst hit financially by the pandemic](#).

When asked what their employer was likely to do if they were forced to take on extra childcare responsibilities; 23% of women and 11% of men said the most likely response would be that their employer would give them time off without any pay. This is an especially concerning response considering that during the pandemic, women continued to undertake much higher levels of childcare than men. **Before the pandemic, in March 2020, 63% of women stated that they did most of the childcare, compared with 14% of men. In December 2020, women were still doing more of the childcare; 63% of women compared to 17% of men.** The same is true for supervising children. Before March 2020, 60% of women and 17% of men did most of the child supervision while they were doing something else (for

example playing, watching TV). In December 2020, figures remained similar at 58% of women and 24% of men.

Our [survey data on young people in Wales](#) shows that this impact was felt especially strongly by young women. Over a third are not confident that they will have enough money for the next 12 months and over two thirds report that their mental health has got worse during the pandemic.

The financial and mental health strain of juggling work and childcare was also evident in the lived experience of our survey respondents. Those who were able to pay for childcare as nurseries closed (certainly a minority) reported that this was an enormous financial commitment costing *“twice my mortgage”*. Others had to *“leave work, reduce hours or put themselves under extraordinary stress to enable them to work”*, were *“unable to do my job properly due to juggling childcare and work”* and that *“have had to pick up the slack to the detriment of their careers, their well-being, and often their health.”* Overall, the closure of nurseries was described as *“devastating”, “catastrophic”* and *“an absolute nightmare.”*

Respondents reported that they *“had to use all my annual leave and some unpaid leave in order to look after my children”,* that their *“work hours often extended later and later into the evenings and I felt as though I never had a break”* and that *“the burden has fallen hard on people already pushed to the limit.”* One respondent summarised succinctly that *“there has been an expectation on mothers to continue working whilst also looking after their children. This is an impossible task!”*

The evidence of the severe impact of the pandemic on women’s employment, financial situation and mental health demonstrates that urgent changes are needed to provide better support during any future lockdowns or increased restrictions. **We recommend that Welsh Government prioritises nurseries and schools in any future lockdown to ensure these settings remain open as long as possible. If a renewed lockdown of schools should become unavoidable, we believe high-quality online learning services are indispensable and Welsh Government should ensure that schools are prepared to ensure a consistent provision across Wales.** As care and early education for young children cannot be delivered remotely, the UK Government should extend furlough payments to parents with childcare responsibilities for nursery-aged children in case of nursery closures.

Recommendation 9: Welsh Government should prioritise nurseries and schools in any future lockdown to ensure these settings remain open as long as possible

Recommendation 10: If a renewed lockdown of schools should become unavoidable, Welsh Government should ensure that all schools in Wales are

prepared to consistently deliver highquality online learning during school hours.

Recommendation 11: The UK Government should extend furlough payments to working parents with childcare responsibilities for nursery-aged children in the event of any future closures or increased restrictions for nursery settings.

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

As discussed in Section 1, the flexibility of current Welsh Government-funded childcare provisions to support employment of particularly mothers in different demographic groups and experiencing different circumstances has serious limitations. Limited availability of childcare in many areas in Wales means that parents are not always able to access the support that they are entitled to under the Childcare Offer. **This especially affects parents with atypical working hours, parents of disabled children and those who live in rural areas.** In addition, the 30 hour limit and shortage of affordable wrap-around and holiday care means that current provisions do not meet the needs of parents who work full-time, which contributes to the prevalence of women in low-paid part-time jobs.

This position also became evident in our member network survey. **67% of respondents disagree with the statement that Welsh Government-funded childcare is flexible enough to support employment of parents, particularly mothers, in different demographic groups and experiencing different circumstances.** Only 8% agreed, and these only agreed somewhat.

Respondents made various suggestions on how provisions can be improved to better support parents from different demographic groups and tackle inequalities. Reiterating our recommendation made around extending childcare provisions to unemployed parents, one participant suggests that we should *“give poorer families the option to go to work and support them in looking for flexible jobs whilst not penalizing them if they have received welfare benefits.”*

Other respondents recommended that *“childcare provision needs to be culturally appropriate and meet the needs of parents with larger families”* and that *“multi-lingual diversity (NOT solely Welsh/English)”* should be *“welcomed and embraced as the norm.”*

Several comments highlighting the importance of comprehensive affordable full-time childcare provisions, including out-of-office hours provisions, breakfast, after school and holiday clubs. One responded suggested that this was especially important to *“people who are experiencing in work financial difficulties”* as they *“may need to use public transport to get to work”* and may need to be more flexible *“to be able to work the jobs and hours that they need.”*

In order to improve the equalities and socioeconomic impact of future childcare provisions, respondents found it crucial to listen to the perspectives of women from different backgrounds and ensure they have a voice at the decision-making table. One respondent stated that *“there needs to be a much better dialogue with women from different demographic groups. A one size fits all approach simply doesn't work for many mothers.”* Another participant emphasised that we need to *“increase the diversity of the very top decision makers. This will influence the experiences of the end users. It's the quickest, and really only, way to achieve a meaningful improvement.”* Another respondent highlighted that *“good investment in early years care has dramatic positive benefits for the economy, for life chances, for long-term educational achievements, for addressing health inequalities, for inclusiveness and diversity, and for positive social cohesion.”*

These responses provide some insight into the lived experiences of parents from different demographic groups and with different protected characteristics, and make important suggestions for improvement. However, due to the small sample size, our survey cannot claim to be fully representative of the experience and impact of Welsh Government-funded childcare provisions on women from different demographic groups. We are not aware of any studies that systematically evaluate this. **Collection of diversity data as part of the evaluation and monitoring of the Childcare Offer would be of crucial importance to better understand how well current provisions support parents with different protected characteristics equalities and from different demographic backgrounds.**

Recommendation 12: Welsh Government should collect robust equality data as part of the evaluation and monitoring of the Childcare Offer to ensure equality of access and eligibility.

Recommendation 13: Any Welsh Government plans to improve the Childcare Offer and enhance childcare provisions across Wales should be informed by a co-production approach that considers the perspectives of parents from different demographic groups.

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

This aspect is covered in Section 5.

7. 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.

There are a range of countries whose childcare models can provide valuable insights on how to best support parental employments. A useful overview of a range of countries, including several Nordic countries which have been leading the way on childcare internationally, can be found in Chwarae Teg's 2019 briefing **Early Childhood Education and Care - International Practice**, which has been attached. We want to add to this by providing a brief overview of Scotland, which has committed to extending its Childcare Offer to 1 and 2 year olds, as well as Canada and the US, which have made commitments to investments in childcare as part of their recovery plans from the pandemic.

Scotland

Scotland's Programme for Government made several commitments on childcare as part of its plan to "Create A Land Of Opportunity: supporting young people and promoting a fairer and more equal society", including:

- Expanding free early learning and childcare to 1 and 2 year olds – starting through a pilot with children from low-income households.
- A new system of wraparound childcare for school age children, delivered through a 5-year delivery plan, an evaluation of pilot projects to inform full implementation, and establishment of a public panel, including parents, carers, children and young people.
- The recruitment of 3,500 additional teachers and 500 classroom assistants, in addition to the 1,400 extra teachers recruited during the pandemic.
- Action to reduce the costs of the school day such as providing every child with a device and a connection to get online and ensure every primary and secondary pupil can go on curriculum related trips and residential.

The [expansion of free early learning and childcare \(ELC\)](#) was originally scheduled for August 2020 but was postponed for 12 months due to the pandemic. As of August 2021, parents of all three and four year olds are eligible for 1,140 hours ELC a year (30 hours a week if taken term time).

Prior to 2014, all parents of three- and four-year-olds (not just working parents) were entitled to 475 hours per year of free pre-school education. In 2014, this was extended to 600 hours for all three- and four-year-olds, as well as for two-year-olds who were looked after or whose parents were in receipt of out of work benefits. Eligibility of two year-olds was further extended in 2015 to those whose families meet the eligibility criteria for free school meals. Scottish

Government also commissioned research on the [barriers and drivers to uptake amongst two year olds](#), which was published in 2017.

Canada

Canada's response so far to the pandemic is the one that stands out and shows it is a country serious about tackling inequality and living up to their promise of being a feminist government. As well as an extra payment of \$300 (£171) per child under 6 for families on low to medium incomes, up to a total of \$1,200 (£685) (equating to a 20% increase in their child benefit), their focus has been on [rebuilding the economy with care, inclusivity, and women at its heart](#).

As well as an Action Plan for Women in the Economy being a major plank of its recovery, Canada has committed \$420m (£239m) in grants and bursaries to help train and retain qualified early-childhood educators and an extra \$90m investment (£51m) over 5 years in the childcare sector. This is to ensure that women do not need to leave the workforce because of childcare gaps. Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland thinks that spending the money makes "*sound business sense*," and it has the backing of many business leaders. U.S.

As part of [the American Jobs Plan](#), a recovery plan from the pandemic, President Biden called on Congress to provide \$25 billion to help upgrade childcare facilities and increase the supply of childcare in areas that need it most. The Plan recognises that "*lack of access to childcare makes it harder for parents, especially mothers, to fully participate in the workforce*." The commitment is informed by evidence demonstrating that women's labour force participation is about 3% less in with the greatest shortage of childcare compared to areas with high capacity. President Biden also called for an expanded tax credit to encourage businesses to build childcare facilities at places of work. The Plan outlines that employers will receive 50 percent of the first \$1 million of construction costs.

8. 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.

Any financial and practical implications that we believe to be important in any future policy developments, and recommendations around how these can best be considered, have been covered in previous section and an overview of the resulting recommendations is provided below.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Childcare Offer should be available from an earlier age, ideally from 6 months.

Recommendation 2: Welsh Government should invest in nursery and early education provisions to ensure that parents in all areas of Wales are able to access the provisions that they are entitled to.

Recommendation 3: The Childcare Offer and available provisions in Wales should be enhanced to accommodate the varied working lives of parents, including full-time provisions, school holiday provisions and provision for atypical working hours and wrap-around care.

Recommendation 4: The Welsh Government should invest in provisions for disabled children and children with additional learning needs.

Recommendation 5: Welsh Government needs to ensure that free childcare provisions are effectively targeted at those for whom affording childcare is the primary barrier to getting back to or progressing in work.

Recommendation 6: Welsh Government should undertake financial modelling to ensure income thresholds for the Childcare Offer are set in a way that effectively targets those who need it the most in order to enter, remain and progress in employment. Any potential savings from adjusting the threshold should be used to extend the Offer to parents with younger children, or to facilitate investments in nurseries to ensure sufficient childcare availability across all of Wales.

Recommendation 7: Welsh Government should extend the Childcare Offer to non-working parents to support them in seeking employment and ensure that unpaid, disproportionately women-driven childcare responsibilities are appropriately valued.

Recommendation 8: Welsh Government investments in childcare should be part of a wider investment in the care infrastructure as part of a green and care-focussed recovery from the pandemic.

Recommendation 9: Welsh Government should prioritise nurseries and schools in any future lockdown to ensure these settings remain open as long as possible

Recommendation 10: If a renewed lockdown of schools should become unavoidable, Welsh Government should ensure that all schools in Wales are prepared to consistently deliver highquality online learning during school hours.

Recommendation 11: The UK Government should extend furlough payments to working parents with childcare responsibilities for nursery-aged children in the event of future closures or increased restrictions for nursery settings due to the pandemic.

Recommendation 12: Welsh Government should collect robust equality data as part of the evaluation and monitoring of the Childcare Offer to ensure equality of access and eligibility.

Recommendation 13: Any Welsh Government plans to improve the Childcare Offer and enhance childcare provisions across Wales should be informed by a co-production approach that considers the perspectives of parents from different demographic groups.

Notes on survey methodology

A survey based on the areas identified in the consultation letter was circulated to our members' networks via email and Twitter between 25 October and 10 November. 36 responses were received. Respondents were primarily women (97%) with childcare responsibilities. 86% of respondents indicated being the primary carer for a child or children under 18 years, with a further 9% stating that they share parenting responsibilities on an equal basis.

Diversity monitoring

Age: 25% of respondents are 25-34 years old, 50% are between 35 and 44 years old and 19% between 45 and 54 years old. 3% are 65 years or older and 3% preferred not to answer.

Sexual orientation: 88% of respondents identified as heterosexual or straight, 6% as bi and 6% preferred not to answer.

Disability: 8% of respondents declared that they considered themselves to be disabled, 86% identified as non-disabled and 3% preferred not to answer.

Ethnicity: 61% of respondents described their ethnicity as White Welsh/English/Scottish/Northern Irish/British, 17% as White European and 6% as White (other). 3% of respondents identified as Asian/Asian British/Welsh, 8% as Black/Black British/Welsh (African), and 3% as Other Mixed Race/Multiple ethnic background.

Location: 69% of respondents are based in South East Wales, 17% in South West Wales, 11% in North Wales and 3% in Mid Wales.

Welsh: 31% of respondents indicated that they are Welsh speakers.

WEN Wales would like to thank the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee for the opportunity to contribute to their inquiry into Childcare and Parental Employment.

If you have any further comments or queries, please get in touch.

Dr Jessica Laimann

Policy & Public Affairs Officer



Chwarae Teg

Early Childhood Education and Care

International Practice

April 2019

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1. Introduction

Childcare continues to act as a significant barrier to women who want to enter or progress in work, in Wales, the UK and around the globe. It is widely accepted that the “full labour market participation of women requires childcare to be available full-time and to meet the demand of work during the parents’ working hours and school holidays...childcare is really only an option if female workers can afford it and feel sufficiently assured of its high quality.”¹

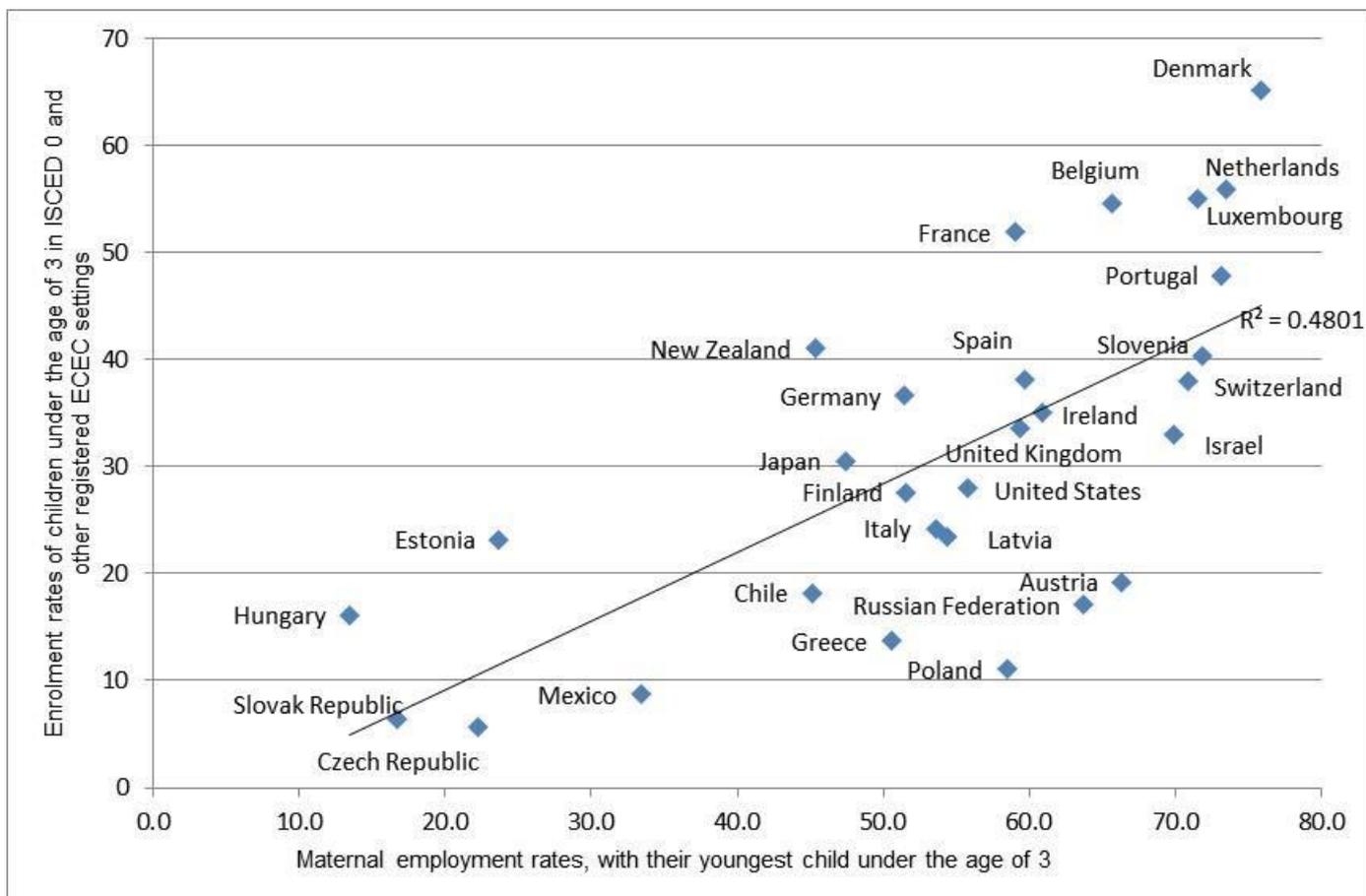


Fig 1.1 - Relationship between mother's labour market participation (with the youngest child under the age of 3

¹ [European Commission Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions “Barcelona objectives on the development of childcare facilities for young people with a view to increase female labour participation, strike a work-life balance for working parents and bring about sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe” 2018](#) ² [OECD \(2017\), Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care, OECD Publishing, Paris. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/starting-strong-2017_9789264276116-en#page32 \[ACCESSED 11 April 2019\]](#)

3) and enrolment rates of children under the age of 3 in formal childcare (2014)²

Childcare is a policy area that has great potential to not only deliver improvements in gender equality but also tackle issues of poverty and exclusion and ensure all children have the best possible start in life. It has rightly been a priority for many countries for a number of years. There are therefore potential lessons that could be learnt from the experiences and delivery approaches used in other nations. This paper provides a summary of early years and childcare policy and delivery in the following nations:

- Denmark
- Sweden
- Norway
- France
- The Netherlands
- Luxembourg
- Canada

In 2002 the Barcelona European Council set objectives regarding the availability of high quality and affordable childcare facilities for pre-school children. There are two targets²:

- 90% of children from age 3 to compulsory school age to be in formal care
- 33% of children under 3 to be in formal care

Many of the countries included in this paper have reached these targets. Denmark, Sweden,

Luxembourg, France and the Netherlands have all met, and in some cases surpassed, the

33% target for under threes.³ In Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Luxembourg over 50% of children under 3 have access to childcare; this compares to between 25% and 33% for children in the UK.⁴ Likewise, the target for over three's has been met in Sweden, Denmark, France and the Netherlands, with Luxembourg only falling slightly short at 85%. In the UK only 73% of children aged 3 to school age are in formal care.⁵

In addition to these nations, we have also included discussion of Norway, who are widely regarded as a world leader on issues of gender equality and childcare like

² [EU Commission Barcelona Objectives](#)

³ [Ibid](#)

⁴ [Ibid](#)

⁵ [Ibid](#)

many of their Nordic neighbours. We have also included Canada, as a nation that has traditionally taken a very different approach to delivering childcare but has recently re-prioritised the issue along with wider issues of gender equality.

The challenges associated with delivering childcare are similar in many of the countries highlighted in this paper. Cited issues often cover affordability, accessibility, flexibility and quality. In fact, the EU Commission in 2018 presented a comprehensive quality framework for early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems based on five principles⁶:

- Access and affordability for all families
- Qualification and CPD of the workforce
- Development of the curriculum with holistic teaching in a participatory way with children and parents
- Monitoring and evaluation of the ECEC services and facilities
- Governance and funding

Across many of the countries included in this paper and others, cost emerges as a key concern. Different countries have taken different approaches to tackle the cost of childcare, including⁷:

- Minimum levels of childcare for different age groups (e.g. Germany and UK)
- Subsidies for new parents (e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands)
- Tax breaks for families
- Means-tested childcare and capped fees (e.g. Sweden)
- Universal Access (e.g. Finland and Denmark)
- Fiscal incentives for companies (e.g. Austria allows a deduction from taxable income for companies that provide childcare services internally or give benefits to employees in the form of childcare services.

Our recent report ***A Review of Childcare Policies in Wales*** demonstrates that the affordability of childcare is also the primary concern for many parents in Wales and that this can exert a “significant influence on decisions about work”⁸

There are ongoing changes to the provision of childcare and early year’s education in Wales, including the roll out of the new 30 hours Childcare Offer. While this has been cautiously welcomed, many stakeholders have expressed concern that in its current form, this new Offer might not have as significant an impact on parental employment as it could. Key concerns relate to the eligibility criteria focusing on

⁶ [EU Commission Barcelona Objectives](#)

⁷ [Ibid](#)

⁸ [Chwarae Teg A Review of Childcare Policies in Wales 2019](#)

children aged 3 and above, the capacity of the sector to deliver on increased demand, the flexibility of the Offer and confusion about what the Offer includes and how it interacts with existing provision.

To ensure that women are able to participate fully in work there needs to be a closely monitored and adaptable childcare system, with further investment into the sector. It is particularly important to ensure that parents of children under the age of three have access to good quality, affordable childcare and those with school-age children are able to access wrap-around childcare.

The examples discussed below could provide useful insight into effective early years and childcare provision. While it may not be possible to directly replicate these approaches in Wales, particularly under the current devolution settlement with key levers reserved to the UK Government, these examples could provide useful insight to inform future development of childcare provision in Wales and the UK.

It should be noted, that for the purposes of this paper we have not looked in detail at the wider context within each of these countries, therefore discussions of how other policies such as social security, tax and parental leave support the country specific approaches have not been included. This may be the focus of further research into the topic.

2. The Nordic Model

The Nordic nations are often looked to for examples of best practice in relation to gender equality. Countries such as Sweden, Iceland and Denmark often top global indexes for gender equality and are generally regarded as having the most generous childcare and parental leave systems in the world, which enables a greater number of women to return to work following the birth of a child.

The so-called “Nordic model” is characterised by a political ambition to reduce inequalities and cooperation between social partners.⁹ The Nordic policy agenda regards rights and productivity as two-sides of the same coin and it’s against this broader context that high quality, subsidised childcare for all, shared parental leave and flexible working arrangements have been developed, leading to higher rates of labour market participation among women.¹⁰

Generally speaking, across Nordic nations childcare is universal and seen as a skilled sector in which to work and childcare is based on a rights approach, i.e. it is a legal right that families be able to afford childcare.¹² Parents tend to be offered full-time childcare rather than part-time and over 95% of all children aged 3-5 in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland are enrolled in some form of childcare services.

Childcare is not without it’s challenges in the Nordic nations. NIKK outline three main challenges, which align with those seen in many other countries¹¹:

- Staffing levels and quality; difficult to recruit enough workers to meet the needs of the sector
- Sex-segregation in care workforce
- Availability and access – meeting needs at end of parental leave and around irregular working hours

2.1. Denmark

“Available, affordable and good-quality childcare supports parents to reconcile work and family life. This is probably the single most important reason for the comparatively low poverty and social exclusion figures.”

⁹ [NIKK subsidised childcare for all – The Nordic Effect at Work 2018](#)

¹⁰ [Ibid](#) ¹² [Ibid](#)

¹¹ [Ibid](#)

Investment in the education system in Denmark is one of the highest in the EU, a large part of which is spent on early childhood education and care.¹³ Denmark spends five times more than the average for the EU-28 on children and stands apart by spending more on services than cash benefits.¹⁴ State supported childcare was expanded rapidly in Denmark in the 1960s in response to a rise in women joining the labour market.¹⁵ Danish family policy now prioritises the principle of a “dual earner” family.¹⁶ Current figures show that 77% of children aged 0-3 and 97% of children aged 3-5 are enrolled in early years education and care in Denmark.¹⁷

Parents in Denmark are guaranteed childcare from the age of 26 weeks to school age. Childcare is predominantly delivered through municipalities, accounting for around 70% of all daycare services. The remainder is provided by private institutions. Options for childcare include day nurseries (birth to 3 years), kindergartens (3-6 years) and preschool/ afterschool centres (6-10 years).¹⁸ Typical Danish day-care units are open 06.30-17.00 Monday to Thursday and until 16.30 on Fridays.¹⁹

Where local authorities are unable to fulfil the childcare guarantee, parents are entitled to²⁰:

- Expenditure on a day-case place in another local authority area covered or,

¹² [European Social Policy Network \(ESPN\) ESPN Thematic Report on Progress in the implementation of the 2013 EU Recommendation on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage” Denmark 2017](https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18188&langId=en)

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18188&langId=en>

¹³ [European Commission Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Country Profiles – Denmark: Policies and progress towards investing in children \(Last updated Feb 2018\)](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1248&langId=en&intPageId=3638)

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1248&langId=en&intPageId=3638> Accessed 15.4.19

¹⁴ [European Social Policy Network \(ESPN\) ESPN Thematic Report on Progress in the implementation of the 2013 EU Recommendation on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage” Denmark 2017](https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18188&langId=en)

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18188&langId=en>

¹⁵ [BBC, 2016 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-38254474](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-38254474) Accessed 15.4.19

¹⁶ [European Commission Country Profiles – Denmark](https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18188&langId=en)

[European Commission Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Country Profiles – Denmark](https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18188&langId=en)

¹⁷ [Work in Denmark https://www.workindenmark.dk/Moving-to-DK/Bring-your-family/Childcare-in-Denmark](https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18188&langId=en) Accessed 15.4.19

¹⁸ [EIGE Good Practice “Round the Clock Childcare suits Flexible Workers” 2014](https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18188&langId=en)

<https://eige.europa.eu/gendermainstreaming/good-practices/denmark/round-clock-childcare-suits-flexible-workers>

Accessed 15.4.19

²⁰ [European Commission Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Denmark – Child care https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1107&langId=en&intPageId=4486](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1107&langId=en&intPageId=4486) Accessed 15.4.19

- Expenditure on a place in a privately-run child care facility covered or,
 - A grant paid to you to mind your own child

A key focus on the Danish model is to limit the cost-burden on parents therefore costs are capped for all parents. The maximum contribution for parents of children below school age is 25% of the running costs and for parents of children above school age at 30% of running costs.²¹ The remainder of the running costs are covered by the local authority.²²

Compulsory education begins at 7, with Kindergarten beginning up to one year before or after the sixth birthday of the child, local authorities must provide this class. Almost all Danish families send their children to kindergarten, where children are cared for by professional trained staff with a focus on stimulating social, linguistic and democratic skills, primarily through play.²³ While part of the workforce is made up of temporary workers with no specific pedagogical education, Danish childcare staff have usually undergone either a shorter or longer course of education.²⁴

ECEC in Denmark is not without its challenges. Partly due to the “Flexicurity” model of working, which promotes flexible working, there are increasing challenges ensuring that care is available for those who work irregular hours. Project *Børnepasning* (The Childcare Project) a community of interest between trade unions, employers and businesses, was set up to persuade municipalities in Denmark to consider providing childcare outside of normal working hours as many parents who were working flexibly were feeling under pressure to change jobs due to a lack of childcare.²⁵ The project has undertaken surveys and found that just 11 out of 2048 nurseries across 59 municipalities open after 18.00 and only five provide care for those who work at night.²⁶

To address this issue and meet the needs of nurses and doctors Aalborg Hospital and the municipality of Aalborg in 1994 opened one of the first 24-hour childcare facilities in Denmark, and since 1998 it has been open at weekends.²⁷ This institution, which was established before the liberalisation of opening hours, is a good example of meeting the childcare needs of parents working flexible hours. Children can bring their older siblings (up to the age of 10) in the evening and night, and parents can put their own children to bed – or wake them if it fits in

²¹ [Ibid](#)

²² [Ibid](#)

²³ [Work in Denmark](#)

²⁴ [European Social Policy Network Thematic Report Denmark 2017](#)

²⁵ [EIGE Good Practice Round the clock childcare](#)

²⁶ [Ibid](#)

²⁷ [Ibid](#)

their working schedule. This childcare arrangement is used by nurses and doctors, among others.³⁰

A further challenge for Denmark has been in relation to staffing levels. In 2011, funding was made available to increase the number of staff in day-care institutions, but evaluation found this money had primarily been used to up-skill existing staff.²⁸ In 2014 a new arrangement was made to provide funding to increase the number of day-care staff for children aged 0-5 with new conditions attached to ensure it is spent how intended.²⁹

2.2. Sweden

“The comparatively low child poverty rates in Sweden, compared with high rates of female labour force participation, suggest that this integrated approach of cash benefits and care services is comparatively successful in promoting adequate living standards among families with children.”

Bäckamn and Ferrarini, 2010³⁰

Female and maternal employment rates in Sweden are among the highest in the EU and child poverty among the lowest.³⁴ Family policy is aimed at supporting a “dual earner” model ensuring that women and men have the same family and work rights and obligations.³¹ A combination of cash benefits and high coverage of subsidised childcare seeks to support parents in dual earner households and single parents to access the labour market.^{32,33} 64% of children aged 1-3 and 96% of children above 3 are enrolled in formal early childhood education.³⁴

The early years education and childcare system in Sweden is made up of a number of parts:

²⁸ [Europarl The Policy on Gender Equality in Denmark In-depth Analysis for the FEMM Committee 2015](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/510026/IPOL_IDA(2015)510026_EN.pdf)
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/510026/IPOL_IDA\(2015\)510026_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/510026/IPOL_IDA(2015)510026_EN.pdf) Accessed 15.4.19

²⁹ [Ibid](#)

³⁰ [Bäckamn and Ferrarini, 2010 cited in European Social Policy Network \(ESPN\) ESPN Thematic Report on Progress in the implementation of the 2013 EU Recommendation on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage” Sweden 2017](https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18213&langId=en)
<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18213&langId=en> ³⁴ [European Commission Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Country Profiles – Sweden: Policies and progress towards investing in children \(Last updated Feb 2018\)](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1248&langId=en&intPageId=3658)
<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1248&langId=en&intPageId=3658> Accessed 23.4.19

³¹ [Ibid](#)

³² [European Social Policy Network \(ESPN\) ESPN Thematic Report on Progress in the implementation of the](https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18213&langId=en)

³³ [EU Recommendation on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage” Sweden 2017](https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18213&langId=en)

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18213&langId=en>

³⁴ [EU Commission Country Profiles - Sweden](#)

- Preschool for children aged 1-5
- Preschool class for children aged 6 (transition class to compulsory education)
- Leisure-time centre for children aged 6-12

The goals and guidelines for all of these parts is outlined in the Education Act and Curricula agreed by the Swedish Parliament and Government. There is a single agency – the Swedish National Agency for Education – with responsibility for the administration of publicly organised preschools and school age children.

A place in a public preschool is guaranteed to all 1-5 year olds in Sweden and for the most part, operates on a whole-day basis opening from 6.30-18.30.³⁵ Preschool is free for children aged 3-5 for up to 15 hours per week.

Costs for preschool are linked to family incomes and are capped to minimise the cost burden on families. For the first child, fees can be up to 3% of a families monthly income but cannot exceed €135 per month.³⁶ The upper cap on fees reduces with additional children. The average Swedish family with small children spend 4.4% of their net income on childcare, compared to 34% in the UK.³⁷ On average, parental fees cover 7% of the real cost of a preschool place, with the remainder subsidised by the public purse.³⁸

Preschool class, aimed at 6 year olds, acts as a transition year for children before they move into compulsory education. The curriculum for this is included with leisure-time centres and compulsory schooling and all children are entitled to a minimum of 525 hours per year.³⁹

The final element, leisure-time centres, aim to provide additional educational activities for children aged 6-12 outside of school hours when parents are still in work or study. These are generally integrated into schools and offer an opportunity to practice democracy, influence and responsibility as well as engage in play and creative activities.⁴³ Municipalities may charge for a place in leisure-time centres,

³⁵ [European Commission Country Profiles - Sweden](#)

³⁶ [EU Commission Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Country Profiles –Sweden: Policies and progress towards investing in children \(Last updated Feb 2018\)](#)
<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1248&langId=en&intPageId=3658> Accessed 23.4.19

³⁷ [EU Commission Barcelona Commission](#)

³⁸ [Ibid](#)

³⁹ [Eurydice Sweden: Early Childhood Education and Care 2018](#)
https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/nationalpolicies/eurydice/content/early-childhood-education-and-care-80_en
 Accessed 23.4.19 ⁴³ [Ibid](#)

and while upper-capped limits are used it is up to the municipality to determine how much a space will cost.⁴⁴

There have also been actions in the past decade to embed gender-responsive education into early years and childcare in Sweden, with significant investment in 2002 to roll-out gender equality training for all childcare workers.⁴⁰

2.3. Norway

“The Norwegian government have been successful in using regulation to influence the childcare market, whilst allowing municipalities to retain some influence over childcare in their region.”

Family and Daycare Trust, 2017

Like it's Nordic neighbours, Norway is also one of the highest spenders on early childhood education and care. Investment in the early 2000s was aimed at increasing provision and as a result the workforce participation of mothers has increased and the gender pay gap is low by international standards.⁴¹

All children up to the age of 5 have a legal entitlement to attend a kindergarten and since 2004, there has been a maximum fee cap in place to limit the cost burden on parents.⁴² In addition, since 2015, low-income families can be charged no more than 6% of their income, limited by the upper national cap.⁴³ It's estimated that parental fees make up around 15% of running costs.⁴⁴

ECEC is managed by municipalities, who make up the shortfall of ECEC running costs from their block grant.⁴⁵ Half of Norway's kindergartens are owned by municipalities and private kindergartens are overseen by the municipality and must meet nationally set standards and criteria.⁴⁶ Providers in receipt of subsidies

⁴⁰ [NIKK Subsidised childcare for all](#)

⁴¹ [OECD Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Review: Norway 2015](http://www.oecd.org/norway/EarlyChildhood-Education-and-Care-Policy-Review-Norway.pdf) <http://www.oecd.org/norway/EarlyChildhood-Education-and-Care-Policy-Review-Norway.pdf>

⁴² [Ibid](#)

⁴³ [Ibid](#)

⁴⁴ [Ibid](#)

⁴⁵ [Ibid](#)

⁴⁶ [Ibid](#)

must operate at no more than a reasonable profit and wages must be paid at the same or higher rates than municipal-run settings.⁴⁷

Children can attend kindergartens or family day care for half or full day care all year round. There are also open kindergartens that offer part-time, drop-in services and a cash-for-care benefit is available for parents of 1 year olds not using kindergartens.⁴⁸

The delivery of ECEC through kindergartens is shaped by a national framework that sets out core values, roles and responsibilities for staff, objectives and curriculum content and working methods.⁴⁹ There are also nationally set expectations in relation to teacher-child ratios and national guidelines for inspection and monitoring.⁵⁰

Childcare in Norway is not without its challenges. There continue to be issues around ensuring an even supply of places across the country at all times and concerns about the proportion of staff working in the sector that do not hold pedagogical qualifications.⁵¹ However, Norway has had some success in tackling the under-representation of men working in the sector as a result of continued political efforts nationally, regionally and locally.⁵² Action plans were put together to recruit more men and regional conference run on gender equality and men in childcare. As a result, there was a five-fold increase in the number of men working in the sector between 1990 and 2009.⁵⁸

⁴⁷ [Family and Daycare Trust *International childcare comparisons 2017*](https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Resource%20Library/Family%20and%20Childcare%20Trust%20-%20International%20Childcare%20Comparisons%2C%20Jan%202017.pdf)

<https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Resource%20Library/Family%20and%20Childcare%20Trust%20-%20International%20Childcare%20Comparisons%2C%20Jan%202017.pdf>

⁴⁸ [OECD *Early Education and Care Policy Review: Norway*](#)

⁴⁹ [Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training *Framework Plan for Kindergartens: contents and tasks 2017*](#)

⁵⁰ [OECD *Early Education and Care Policy Review: Norway*](#)

⁵¹ [Ibid](#)

⁵² [NIKK *Subsidised childcare for all*](#)

3. France

There are a wide range of subsidised care services for children under 6 years old in France. The main objective of these services is to support parents to choose a suitable childcare option and find a better balance between work and family life.⁵³ Childcare places are available through the following schemes⁵⁴:

- Home-based professional childminder
- Collective facilities including public nurseries, occasional daycare facilities, companies' organised daycare facilities, parents' organised daycare facilities
- Children beginning school earlier than 3 years old
- Privately hired nannies

In recent years there has also been an increase in so-called "mini crèches", which are collective structures able to take up to 10 children under 6 with 3 or 4 qualified employees.⁵⁵

Assitantes Maternelles (nannies) are a common feature of the French childcare system. They often receive an agreement with the state to care for between 1 and 4 children at their home, having undergone two sets of 60 hour training over the course of 2 years.⁵⁶

Most crèches are run by local government with fees set centrally according to parental earnings.⁵⁷ Most municipality-run crèches are located in *multi-accueil* centres, now more commonly known as établissements d'accueil du jeune enfant (centres for young children's care), where full-time crèches are col-located with sessional or part-time care and also childminding support centres.⁵⁸ The centres are open for at least ten hours a day during the week and in some cases offer longer hours or weekend provision.⁵⁹

While a key purpose of the centres is to provide non-routine care to support parents, in practice this has proven difficult. In part, due to the strict staff:child ratios it can be costly to hold a space open for a child and as French parents pay

⁵³ [European Commission Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Country Profiles – France: Policies and progress towards investing in children \(Last updated Nov 2017\)](#)

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1248&langId=en&intPageId=3641> Accessed 15.4.19

⁵⁴ [The Policy on Gender Equality in France In Depth analysis for the FEMM Committee 2015](#)

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/510024/IPOL_IDA\(2015\)510024_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/510024/IPOL_IDA(2015)510024_EN.pdf) Accessed 15.4.19

⁵⁵ [European Commission Country Profiles – France](#)

⁵⁶ [Ibid](#)

⁵⁷ [Family and Daycare Trust International childcare comparisons](#)

⁵⁸ [Ibid](#)

⁵⁹ [Ibid](#)

hourly for care it can be difficult to recoup costs.⁶⁰ Despite these challenges, the co-location of services in a single centre is seen as providing significant benefit to working parents as they have a single point of access for their childcare needs.⁶¹

Challenges with the French system focus around participation of children from low-income households. This is partly due to cost ratios remaining unequal and the much higher cost of home-based childcare. If a low-income family miss out on a place at a collective childcare centre, they are often priced out of the alternatives and end up relying on informal care instead.⁶² This can be further exacerbated by a parental leave system tending to send women who are badly positioned in the labour market into inactivity.⁶³

⁶⁰ [Ibid](#)

⁶¹ [Ibid](#)

⁶² [FEMM Committee, 2015](#)

⁶³ [ESPN Thematic Report on Progress in the implementation of the 2013 EU Recommendations on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage” France 2017](#)

4. The Netherlands

The Dutch childcare sector was completely reorganised by the Childcare Act in 2005. The Act states that parents, employers and the government must bear the costs of formal childcare.⁶⁴ The government do this through a childcare levy on all employers.⁶⁵

Childcare is provided in a number of ways⁶⁶:

- Daycare centres: usually open from 7.30 – 18.00 on weekdays and care for children from 3 months to 4 years. Pre and after school care is also available for primary school children
- Home daycares: run by a self-employed childminder with up to 4 children. The home daycare must be registered to enable parents to receive childcare allowance

To cover costs of childcare, parents are able to claim childcare allowance/ childcare benefit.

This payment is available to all parents using formal childcare if they have children aged 0-12 years old.⁶⁷ From 2017, additional funding was made available for childcare to allow all parents to receive a payment covering at least one third of the costs of childcare.⁶⁸ Access to and the amount available to parents depends on a range of factors including household income, using a registered childcare centre and whether parents are working or preparing to work.⁶⁹ Childcare benefit is available for a maximum of 230 hours per month per child.⁷⁰

There has been a strong focus in recent years on improving the quality of childcare, with new harmonised regulations for childcare centres and play groups, which offer opportunities for 2-4 year olds.⁷¹

⁶⁴ <https://www.government.nl/binaries/government/documents/leaflets/2011/10/13/fact-sheet-childcareand-childcare-allowance/fact-sheet-childcare-and-childcare-allowance.pdf> Accessed 24.4.19

⁶⁵ [Ibid](#)

⁶⁶ [Ibid](#)

⁶⁷ [Ibid](#)

⁶⁸ <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2016/05/27/more-childcare-benefit-better-quality-care> Accessed 24.4.19

⁶⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1122&langId=en&intPageId=4986> Accessed 24.4.19

⁷⁰ https://belastingdienst.nl/wps/wcm/connect/bldcontenten/belastingdienst/individuals/benefits/moving_to_the_netherlands/my_child_goes_to_a_childcare_centre/my_child_goes_to_a_childcare_centre Accessed 24.4.19

⁷¹ [European Commission Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Country Profiles – Netherlands: Policies and progress towards investing in children \(Last updated Nov 2017\)](#)

<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1248&langId=en&intPageId=3651> Accessed 15.4.19

Unlike the Nordic countries, the focus in the Netherlands is on investing in “social protection benefits” to parents rather than directly into services.

A notable feature of childcare and working patterns in the Netherlands is the high prevalence of part-time working among women. While employment rates among parents are among the highest, a significant amount of women work part-time at 74.6%.⁷² Likely linked to this, is the tendency for children to attend ECEC on a part-time basis as well. In the majority of EU Member States 52% of children aged 3-5 attend childcare or preschool for 30 hours or more a week, in the Netherlands (and the UK) this drops to 34%.⁷³ Use of informal care in the Netherlands also remains high.

Key challenges for the Netherlands to overcome include addressing the low use of childcare among low-income parents and uncertainty caused by a number of changes to childcare allowance in recent years.^{74,75}

⁷² [EU Commission Barcelona Objectives](#)

⁷³ [Ibid](#)

⁷⁴ [European Social Policy Network \(ESPN\) ESPN Thematic Report on Progress in the implementation of the](#)

⁷⁵ [EU Recommendation on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage Netherlands 2017 https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18204&langId=en Accessed 16.4.19](#)

5. Luxembourg

ECEC has become an increasing priority in Luxembourg in recent years focusing on improving quality, increasing the number of places available and offering financial assistance to families.

Childcare is delivered through a number of services⁷⁶:

- Crèches: for children aged 3 months to 4 years
- Mini crèches: decentralised structures caring for up to 11 children from 0-12 years olds with at least 2 staff members. This is particularly targeted at rural areas.
- Day nurseries: caring for children aged 2 months to 8 years for a maximum of 16 hours per week
- Day centres: caring for children between 4 and 12 years old outside of classroom hours and during holidays
- Maison relais: caring for children aged $\frac{3}{4}$ up to age 12 between 7.00 and 19.00. These offer greater flexibility than crèches or day nurseries
- Parental assistant: essentially a childminder, caring for children in own home.

Crèches and day nurseries can be run by the municipality, operated under an agreement with the state or be privately owned.⁷⁷

Support with childcare costs is available through *Cheques service accueil* (childcare service vouchers), which are available for all children aged 0-12 years. Through this scheme, part of the costs for childcare in nurseries, maison relais, daycare centres and parental assistants are covered.⁷⁸ This is in addition to the 20 hours of free care in approved childhood services for children aged 0-4.⁷⁹

Steps have been taken since 2012 to bring greater coordination and cohesion between the services outlined above and formal school education. Responsibility for all services have been brought together under the Ministry of Education and municipalities must now set up plans for Extracurricular Education that includes all forms of childcare and education.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ <http://luxembourg.public.lu/en/vivre/education/garder-enfant/index.html> Accessed 24.4.19

⁷⁷ [Ibid](#)

⁷⁸ <http://luxembourg.public.lu/en/vivre/education/cheques-service/index.html> Accessed 24.4.19

⁷⁹ [Ibid](#)

⁸⁰ [Eurydice Luxembourg Early Childhood Education and Care](#)

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/nationalpolicies/eurydice/content/early-childhood-education-and-care-46_en Accessed 24.4.19

Recent reforms, implemented in 2017 aim to achieve three goals:

- Multilingual education
- Quality of childcare: systematic monitoring of ECEC institutions and continuous staff training
- Access: every child attending formal ECE will receive 20 hours of care per week free of charge, alongside existing voucher system

6. Canada

The approach to delivering ECEC is quite unique in Canada. The federal government has a very limited role, with each of the 14 jurisdictions – 10 provinces, 3 territories and federal government – running different programmes for ECEC.⁸¹ The main role of the federal government has been related to providing some targeted funding for vulnerable groups and national tax and social security measures, which intersect with ECEC, such as maternity and paternity leave.⁸²

Recently, there has been a firmer stance taken at the federal government level aimed at supporting better collaboration between themselves and the provinces, focused around 5 principles for ECEC⁸³:

- High quality
- Accessibility
- Affordability
- Flexibility
- Inclusivity

There are some common themes across ECEC provision in Canada. Childcare is not treated as an entitlement or right, as in Nordic nations, and it is largely treated as a market commodity.⁸⁴ Therefore, the cost burden for childcare largely sits with parents.

Each province will usually have a variety of childcare options available including centrebased full-day childcare, regulated (home) childcare, school-aged childcare and nursery/ pre-school and most require staff working in regulated childcare services to meet relevant qualification levels.⁸⁵

Some provinces have opted to play a larger role in relation to childcare costs. Quebec,

Manitoba and Prince Edward Island have all had fee caps in place for a number of years.⁸⁶ Recently, due to additional financial support from the federal government, fee caps are also being put in place in British Columbia, Alberta and

⁸¹ [Childcare Resource and Research Unit \(CRRU\) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2016 M. Friendly et. al* <https://www.childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/ECEC-in-Canada-2016.pdf>](https://www.childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/ECEC-in-Canada-2016.pdf)

⁸² [Ibid](#)

⁸³ [Ibid](#)

⁸⁴ [Ibid](#)

⁸⁵ [Ibid](#)

⁸⁶ [Ibid](#)

Newfoundland and Labrador.⁸⁷ The impact of this approach is clear when looking at how varied childcare costs are across

Canada, with a low of \$183 per month in Quebec and a high of \$1758 in Toronto.⁹³

It's perhaps unsurprising that cost emerges as a key concern for childcare in Canada. One province looking to address this is Ontario. Ontario's Five Year Action Plan, *Towards Universally Accessible Childcare*, was published in 2017. The plan details how the province of Ontario is "committed to building a system with enough affordable child care spaces for all families who want them."⁹⁴ The plan details seven key areas of action which include the following:

- Increasing access to early years and child care programs and services
 - Funding of \$200 million for children **up to the age of four**
 - Expansion plan, prioritising Ontario's not-for-profit sector
 - Building capacity in school-based child care, community-based childcare, licensed home-based childcare and indigenous childcare
 - Innovation Fund to support growth in the not-for-profit sector and to fund different childcare models
- Ensuring a more affordable early years and childcare system
 - Investing more than \$200 million for new spaces and more affordable childcare
 - Affordability strategy to identify ways to make the childcare system "fairer and more affordable" in order to bring down costs.
- Developing an approach to promoting inclusion in early years and childcare settings
 - Special needs strategy – "to ensure that diversity, cultural sensitivity and support for children with special needs are built into everything we do in the early years and child care system"⁹⁵, aligning with other strategies such as mental health, special needs and indigenous children
- Creating an outcomes and measurement strategy
 - Five year strategy to measure quality, progress and to identify and respond to trends

⁸⁷ [Centre for Policy Alternatives *Developmental Milestones: Child care fees in Canada's big cities 2018 2019*](#)

- Will include outcome framework with targets and timelines, data management approach and a research plan, along with an annual data report from September 2017
- Increasing public awareness of Ontario’s early years and childcare system
 - Increase public awareness of programs and services available to families
 - One-stop online hub – a central location for information, services and tools
 - Visual identity as part of the integration of the four existing child and family programmes

Those who critique childcare provision in Canada have welcomed moves to address issues of high cost, but conclude that currently “child care fees remain unaffordable in most Canadian cities and continue to rise faster than the rate of inflation.”⁸⁸ Although, in those provinces where fee caps are in place and even those where such measures are in the early stages, a measureable effect on fees is being seen.⁹⁷

⁸⁸ [Centre for Policy Alternatives *Developmental Milestones*](https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2019/02/Developmental%20milestones.pdf) ⁹⁷ *Ibid*

<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2019/02/Developmental%20milestones.pdf>

⁹³ CRRU *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada*

⁹⁴ *Ontario’s Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework*

http://edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/eycc_action_plan_en.pdf [ACCESSED 11 April 2019]

⁹⁵ *Ibid*

7. Conclusion: Lessons for Wales

While Early Childhood Education and Childcare (ECEC) provision varies greatly across different countries, this paper demonstrates that many nations are seeking to address shared challenges. There is therefore great potential to learn from the successes and failures of others when looking to further develop and strengthen childcare and early years provision in Wales.

This paper has summarised the experiences in seven different nations. Some are regarded as world leaders, while others are seen to perform well against international targets or have taken steps to prioritise ECEC in recent years. Based on these experiences we can determine a number of shared challenges, common themes in approach and potential lessons for Wales.

Shared Challenges

All nations face the challenge of balancing the need for high quality early years education with the needs of working parents. However, most have recognised that investment in ECEC is an economic issue as much as one of education.

It's perhaps unsurprising that cost emerges as one of the key concerns in most of the countries we have explored, but there are a variety of approaches taken to address this ranging from cash benefits paid directly to parents to heavily subsidised public childcare and fee caps.

Most nations recognise that the reconciliation of work and life hinges on more than just childcare, including parental leave and flexible working. However, moves to flexible working and irregular hours has created some challenges in ensuring childcare is available outside of traditional, core working hours.

While many of the countries included have high levels of participation in ECEC generally, many continue to face difficulties in improving participation among more vulnerable groups including minority groups and low-income families.

Common themes

A number of common themes emerge from the countries we explored:

1. ECEC is a priority area and is recognised as being able to help drive change across a range of issues including poverty, exclusion, inequality and educational outcomes.
2. ECEC is seen as a way of supporting parents, particularly women, to work and is therefore viewed as a gender equality issue.
3. Responsibility for ECEC is often devolved to municipalities/ local authorities within a nationally set framework

4. ECEC policy is contained within a single ministry/ agency
5. ECEC is an entitlement in most nations, with the Nordic countries operating a rightsbased approach
6. ECEC policy often covers children from a very young age, sometimes prior to the end of parental leave, up to 10-12 years, incorporating the childcare needs of working parents of school age children
7. Delivery is often through a variety of services – daycare centres, childminders and wraparound care – and variety of public, not-for-profit and for profit providers. There is a higher proportion of publicly run childcare in the Nordic nations.
8. There is a distinctive Nordic model that involves subsidised childcare, fee caps and generous supporting initiatives and policies such as flexible working and parental leave.
9. ECEC is not viewed as a low-skilled sector and investment is ongoing to ensure all staff working in the field have relevant educational qualifications to drive up quality
10. Additional financial support is often made available for vulnerable groups
11. Minimising the financial burden on parents is a key concern and often a mix of income-based (means tested) support and universal provision is in place.

Lessons for Wales

Wales shares many of the challenges outlined above, and with ongoing changes to the delivery of ECEC and a commitment to becoming a world leader for gender equality, it's a prime opportunity to look at what lessons can be learnt from international practice.

1. Successful ECEC provision requires ongoing political commitment and investment. There is no reason why ECEC can't deliver good outcomes for children while also effectively supporting parents to play a full and active role in the labour market.
2. While the scope of this report does not allow a detailed exploration of the supporting social security, tax and workplace measures in each nation, it is clear that ECEC policy cannot be considered in isolation. While a vital part of the solution to women's economic inequality, to support parents to effectively reconcile work and family life we must consider how ECEC provision interacts with issues such as parental leave and flexible working.
3. There are clear benefits to seeing ECEC as a single policy area and ensuring that responsibility for this sits within a single Government Ministry or agency. This supports a more coherent approach to design and delivery.

Looking longer term at ECEC and not particular age brackets can also support coherency and ensure that support is ongoing for parents of school age children.

4. The most successful nations have systems that support parents to work full-time. There may be pitfalls in the experience of the Netherlands that Wales should look to avoid.
5. The co-location of childcare services can ease the pressure on parents who are balancing work and home, particularly in centres that offer childcare from 7.00-19.00.
6. A one-stop-shop for information, as being implemented in Canada can help address the confusion among parents around different provision and entitlements.

Of all the countries explored, it does appear that the Nordic nations are most successful in delivering an ECEC system that delivers for children and parents. Therefore we must conclude that if one of the aims of ECEC policy is to support women to work, the best approach is one that involves significant public subsidies, caps on fees and provision that covers the whole working day (7.00-19.00). Delivering such a system is not currently in the gift of Welsh Government, given the significant implications such a move would have in relation to tax and benefits. However, there are still important lessons that we can learn, to inform ongoing evaluation of the new Childcare Offer and further development of a comprehensive ECEC system that meets the needs of parents, children and our economy.

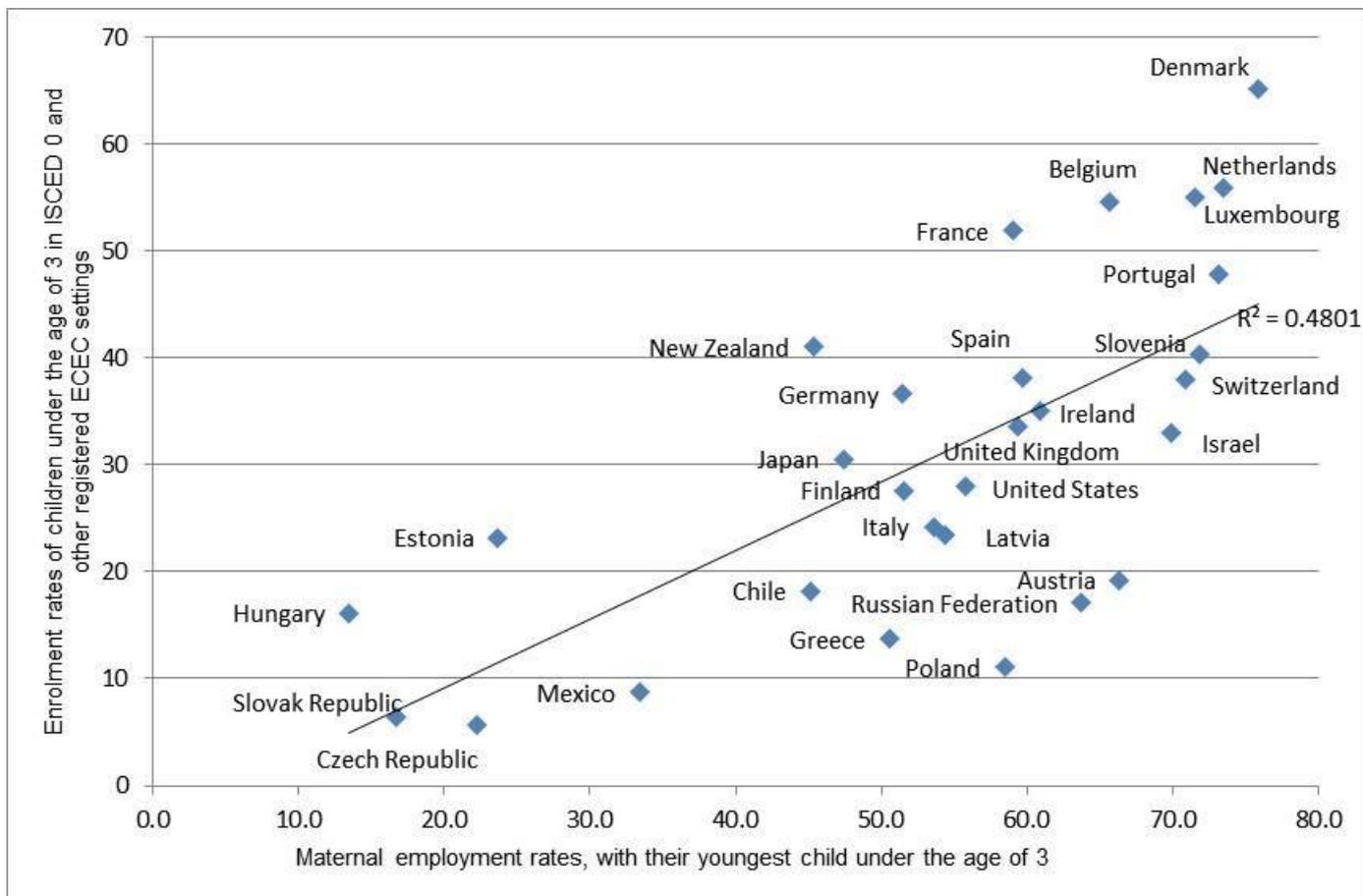


Fig 1.1 - Relationship between mother's labour market participation (with the youngest child under the age of 3) and enrolment rates of children under the age of 3 in formal childcare (2014)⁸⁹

⁸⁹ OECD (2017), *Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/starting-strong-2017_9789264276116-en#page32 [ACCESSED 11 April 2019]