

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a
Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol
Gofal plant a chyflogaeth rhieni: y
pandemig a thu hwnt
CPE(06)
Ymateb gan Plant yng Nghymru

Welsh Parliament
Equality and Social Justice Committee
Childcare and parental employment:
the pandemic and beyond
CPE(06)
Evidence from Children in Wales

Children in Wales is the national umbrella body for organisations and individuals who work with children, young people and their families in Wales. We are a membership body and our members are drawn from the voluntary, statutory and professional sectors. We work with and for our members to promote their interests and meet their needs.

Together we:

- Contribute to making implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child a reality in Wales
- Fight for sustainable quality services and fair shares for all children and young people
- Ensure special attention and treatment for children in need and those who are marginalised
- Ensure children and young people have a voice

Children in Wales is collectively responding to this consultation, however, we want to make it clear that the strongest voice that needs to be heard in response to this is from parents themselves, and our response provides various direct quotes from parents. By listening to the views of parents and identifying their requirements, services are more likely to be designed to meet the particular needs of individual families. The focus groups that the Senedd's Citizen Engagement Team are running with parents will allow this parental voice to be heard, and it must be given due weight.

Article 3 and 5 of the UNCRC support the primary role of parents/guardians in raising children, a principle that is reflected throughout the UNCRC. More specifically, the role of the family is emphasised in the Preamble to UNCRC:

'...that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding'.¹ Provisions make clear that children's rights are first and foremost protected within families, and that governments should provide families with the support they need and childcare is a huge part of this support.

When considering any options/decisions in regards childcare, we need to ask the question: Who is the childcare for? In accordance with Article 3 of UNCRC, the best interest of the child needs to be at the heart of all decision making. Childcare is twofold, offering quality provision to support a child's development and offering a service to allow parents to work. The balance of both needs to be a key driver in any developments.

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.

The Childcare Offer evaluations and the Childcare Sufficiency assessments offer a good overview of the childcare provision and demand in Wales.

Children in Wales undertook an Annual Child and Family Poverty survey in 2021ⁱⁱ and it sought to gain an insight into the experiences and observations of those working with (directly or indirectly) children, young people and their families. Childcare costs/availability ranked highly as a key poverty-related issue and has increased in prevalence over the last three years. It is also recognised that many issues are intertwined and have a direct impact on each other, for example, low paid employment and transport costs can affect the ability to access childcare that may be available.

Geographical availability and opening hours were cited as barriers to effective childcare to allow mothers (especially single mothers) to remain/progress in employment. For many, especially those in low income employment, parents do not typically work a 9am to 5pm day, but rather start or finish beyond these times and are more likely to work weekends. The availability of childcare during these hours was extremely limited and could cost more, if available at all.

The research which Children in Wales supported, entitled Childcare during Covid-19 in England and Wales (conducted by the University of Leeds between December 2020 and October 2021), cited cost as a barrier to the use of childcare and 39% (or 13 parents) said that the cost of childcare (in Wales) was too high.

Quotes from Welsh parent participating in research:

"Before xxx started school, I had them both in nursery. So at that time I worked three days a week and paid £1200 a month for childcare and only earned a £100 a month...It was like paying three mortgages at one point"

"By the time I've paid two lots of childcare I'm actually not much better off than being on benefits"

The Childcare system is not fulfilling its full potential, with barriers prevailing in relation to sufficiency, accessibility, quality and cost.

Children in Wales, in partnership with the Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group, undertook a programme of work with our members and partners to capture the progress being made by the Welsh Government to deliver on its commitments to implement the UNCRC. We published the ‘State of Children’s Rights in Wales’ⁱⁱⁱ and with contributions from 90 organisations, called upon the Welsh Government to:

- Ensure that all children have access to high quality childcare, as part of a coherent and integrated system?
- Widen the eligibility criteria for the Childcare Offer and Flying Start childcare to ensure that all children in poverty can access free childcare?

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

The Childcare Offer evaluations offer a clear overview of impact. Although we would strongly advise, alongside Recommendation 4, that further consultation needs to be done with parents to find out more about benefits and barriers; as these can be specific and individually based. Only 1762 parents responded to the consultation and the Offer is accessed by 16,377 children, assuming it is one child per family that covers only 11% of parents. A stronger parental voice and involvement is needed to support the Welsh Government’s objectives.

The Childcare during Covid-19 study consulted directly with parents and a few direct comments were made in relation to the lack of flexibility of the offer, and its ability to fit with work patterns. Parents felt they were subsidising costs to allow them to remain in work and, ultimately, parents are having to fit work around childcare instead of childcare around work.

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

The limiting nature of childcare leads many mothers, in particular, to leave jobs or reduce hours to allow them to provide adequate care for their children.^{iv} In our ever changing society the traditional hours of working no longer exist, many jobs require flexibility including evenings, nights and weekends. Parents are left to resort to informal childcare to support their ability to work.

In accordance with Article 18 of UNCRC, Government should be providing services to support parents in raising their children; childcare is a large element of this support both in the interests of the child (quality provision) and for the parents in regards ability to work and contribute to society. Therefore, the limited childcare currently available is having both a direct and indirect impact of productivity levels in Wales.

It is also worth considering the issues around under-employment, which is a driving factor of in-work poverty and limited productivity levels. It involves workers

not being able to work as many hours as they would like to, and this is often due to childcare issues.^v

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.

The recent Child and Family Poverty Survey highlighted that many parents had to give up work due to childcare issues during the pandemic. The two main categories for this:

- No longer able to use informal, free childcare either as a whole or part of their childcare
- Childcare not available during COVID and low income jobs are less likely to be able to work from home

The Childcare during Covid-19 in England and Wales^{vi} research provides some useful findings, which can help us learn from the pandemic and build back better. 16% of parents in Wales said childcare impacted their ability to work as usual. Access to childcare has affected parents' work and returns to work, with greater effects on women's work and workforce participation; 40% of parents in paid work reported their ability to work as usual was impacted by their access to childcare during Covid-19. Parents with inadequate childcare had to take extended leave (33%), reduce paid hours (17%), and 5% considered resignation. Almost one in five (18%) said that disruptions to childcare will impact on career progression and 10% were excluded from the labour market. Women (44%) were more likely than men (37%) to report that access to childcare affected their ability to work. Over half (54%) of the parents who took maternity or shared parental leave between March and December 2020, said that childcare influenced their decision or ability to return to work, with 9.6% unable to return to paid work and 8.7% choosing not to return. Of those who said childcare influenced their decision, 64% of mothers said childcare impacted their decision compared to 31% of fathers.

Quotes from Welsh parents:

"Because one of the main things that I would struggle with is if either of the children had to isolate because they had a case in the nursery, I then wouldn't get paid for those two weeks. Because I wouldn't be able to work from home with the two kids here."

"Challenging to see that not everyone had that flexibility within employment."

The research also highlighted that even where closure is not an imminent threat to settings, the quality of provision is undermined in a large proportion of settings, due to providers taking measures such as permanently cutting staff and stretching child:staff ratios, which will have an adverse effect on care quality and

child outcomes. These effects are most concentrated in areas of deprivation where quality provision is most needed for 'levelling up' and reducing inequalities^{vii}.

Many settings in the sector remain in an increasingly financially vulnerable position, some of the measures providers are making to mitigate financial losses, and which mean they will remain open, will have an adverse effect on care quality and child outcomes, including permanently cutting staff and stretching child:staff ratios. Changes in parental demand have resulted in lower occupancy, lower income and consequently impacted on early years settings' sustainability, but these fluctuations in demand may be short term. Capacity in the early years sector is likely to be slow to build back when work patterns resume and demand increases, and may face significant barriers linked to longstanding problems with recruitment and retention in the sector. There is a high risk of market failure leading to insufficient provision.

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

The Bevan Foundation put forward a four-step action plan to reduce child poverty and narrow educational inequalities. One element is Universal Childcare based on a seamless provision for children of all ages.^{viii}

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

Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on 'Expanding childcare in Wales could loosen poverty's grip on families'^{ix} provides a good overview on a range of the points within this consultation.

Almost three in 10 children in Wales live in poverty, these children miss out on things others take for granted, so do less well at school and earn lower incomes when they grow up. High-quality early years education and care (ECEC) can be part of the solution. Access to ECEC unlocks work opportunities for parents and can play a vital role in children's social and academic development – two things that can help break the cycle of child poverty. However, in Wales, many disadvantaged families are currently locked out of funded childcare because of gaps in provision. The costs and benefits of expanding free ECEC to cover all children in Wales show, not only do the benefits often outweigh the cost, but the largest benefits go to the most disadvantaged families. Expanding childcare in Wales could loosen poverty's grip on families.

The study models a number of expansion scenarios and found that expanding provision for three- to four-year-olds is likely to deliver benefits that exceed the costs. For two-year-olds, while expanding provision to is likely to deliver benefits,

these are not expected to exceed the associated costs. Crucially, the long-term economic benefit of expanding ECEC is far greater than the cost of delivery today.

ECEC is far from the only intervention required to break the cycle of child poverty - children need a nurturing family life, good nutrition and much more. The findings within this study do demonstrate that a modest expansion of ECEC in Wales deserves serious consideration.

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.

The main practical issues highlighted through current research and surveys are:

- Lack of flexibility and extending opening hours
- Geographical accessibility - public transport and location of childcare and work
- Managing siblings at different settings

Parents want more recognition of the struggle they face (especially single parents) in balancing work and childcare. Some parents want to see universal free childcare for all working parents.

In Wales many families benefit from access to high quality Flying Start childcare provision. However the same barriers are highlighted through a number of enquiries and evaluation of this provision.^x Geographically barriers and edibility criteria mean that many families are unable to access this vital provision. Research from Save the Children^{xi} highlighted that around 44% of children from income deprived backgrounds are in –eligible as they live outside of the pre-defined geographical area. Although the outreach element of Flying Start has gone a long way to support this, there is still a lot more than needs to be done to make the provision accessible and to support the need for widely accessible childcare.

For low-income families, one factor in being unable to escape in-work poverty is the need to balance paid work with caring for children. Two in five local authorities in Wales report that there is not enough childcare for those working atypical hours. The supply and affordability of childcare, for children of all ages, is important if women are to be able to fully enter the labour force and move out of poverty.^{xii}

It is clear that both cost and availability are a strong thread in all these issues and need to be a key focus. We need to offer childcare that wraps around the needs of families and communities; enabling parents to take a lead in designing better systems which benefits all involved.

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

The pandemic has had a profound impact on jobs and financial security, with workers on a low wage or in poverty most affected. Setting out the pre-coronavirus picture on poverty and work in Wales is essential, as certain factors that impact a person's ability to escape in-work poverty were exacerbated during the pandemic.

Low-income families, especially women, are less likely to meet the requirements of the current childcare offer and cannot afford to pay for provision outside the scheme. BAME families are also less likely to meet the requirements because of their lower employment rates, while provision for disabled children is also difficult to find.^{xiii}

Welsh local authorities report whether they have enough childcare in their area for all types of families. Forty-three percent of the local authorities report that there is not enough childcare available for parents who work atypical hours.

ⁱ *UNCRC preamble* <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>

ⁱⁱ [Children in Wales | Children in Wales Annual Child and Family Poverty Survey Report Launched](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Children in Wales/Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group \(2020\) State of Children's Rights in Wales](#)

^{iv} [Project Overview - Childcare During COVID-19 \(childcare-during-covid.org\)](#)

^v Poverty in Wales 2020, JFT [Poverty in Wales 2020 | JRF](#)

^{vi} CDC19 team: Dr Kate Hardy (PI), Prof Jenny Tomlinson, Dr Helen Norman, Dr Katie Cruz (Co-I's), Dr Xanthe Whittaker (Impact Lead) and Dr Nathan Archer (Research Fellow). <https://childcare-during-covid.org/>

^{vii} *Sustainability of Early Childhood Education and Care in England: Evidence through COVID-19*

^{viii} The Bevan Foundation (2020) A Welsh Benefits System, how it can help solve poverty. Bevan Foundation Available at: <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Welsh-Benefits-System-FinalReport-1.pdf>

^{ix} [Expanding childcare in Wales could loosen poverty's grip on families | JRF](#)

^x CYPE committee, Flying Start Outreach, Feb 2018, <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld11425/cr-ld11425-e.pdf%20->

^{xi} Little Pieces. Big Picture, Harnessing Early Childhood Education and Care to make sure no child in Wales is left behind. Save the Children, 2018

^{xii} Poverty in Wales 2020, JFT [Poverty in Wales 2020 | JRF](#)

^{xiii} The Bevan Foundation (2020) A Welsh Benefits System, how it can help solve poverty

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