

## Inquiry into Childcare and Parental Employment

November 2021

### 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.

### Childcare and Parental Employment

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,

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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, wrap-around 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.

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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.

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**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, low-paid 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.**

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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

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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 to 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 time-consuming, 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

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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.

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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

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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**

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***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 high-quality 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.

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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.

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**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 residentials.

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).

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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.

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**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 high-quality 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.

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**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.

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*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.*

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