

Consultation response: Priorities for the Early Years, Children, Young People and Education Committee

Introduction

The Welsh Government's planned childcare expansion presents a major opportunity to shape future early years and childcare policy and tackle child poverty. To realise its full potential, it is essential that the expansion effectively supports families in the round, provides equitable access for low-income families and proactively addresses unintended consequences seen elsewhere. This briefing sets out key challenges that we believe should be at the forefront of the Committee's scrutiny of the planned childcare expansion. It outlines the existing childcare system in Wales, the new Welsh Government's progress to date and key challenges for the work ahead.

The current childcare system in Wales

At present, childcare in Wales consist of three separate schemes with different objectives, criteria and provisions:

- **Nursery Education**
 - For all three- and four-year-olds
 - Provides at least 10 hours per week, 39 weeks per year
- **Childcare Offer**
 - For three- and four-year-olds of parents in work, education or training
 - Provides a maximum of 20 hours on top of Nursery Education, with both together totalling 30 hours per week
- **Flying Start**
 - For two-year-olds in deprived areas, currently expanded to all two-year-olds
 - Provides 12.5 hours per week, 39 weeks per year, usually delivered at 2.5 hours per day

During the Sixth Senedd, this model came under pressure due to the substantial expansion of childcare in England and a Senedd inquiry finding it [overly complicated, disjointed, and lacking a clear vision](#).

Welsh Government progress to date

The Welsh Government committed to expand childcare to 20 hours per week for all children aged nine month to four years by the end of the current Senedd term. The first phase of this expansion is to complete the roll-out of Flying Start to all two-year-olds, which commenced under the previous administration.

In June, the Welsh Government [committed £55 million](#) to accelerate this expansion. At a meeting of the [Finance Committee](#), the Cabinet Minister for Finance explained that this consists of:

- £25 million to absorb pressures from the previous Welsh Government's scheme
- £20 million to accelerate the Flying Start roll-out
- £10 million capital funding to expand and enhance childcare settings

The Welsh Government also established an [Expansion of Childcare Expert Steering Group](#) to advise on the phased expansion, focussing on workforce planning, digital applications and improving access for all families. The Group consists of bodies representing childcare providers, the workforce, social care, local authorities and an economist.

Key challenges for childcare expansion in Wales

In 2025, we undertook research with over 780 families and expert stakeholders in Wales and a substantive literature review on the expansion in England. Based on our report [Transforming Early Childhood Education and Care in Wales](#), we identified five key challenges for childcare expansion in Wales:

1) Will there be enough qualified staff?

The childcare and early years workforce, which is predominantly female, is central to expanding childcare provision. Capacity constraints meant that the expansion of Flying Start to all two-year-olds could not be completed during the Sixth Senedd. Our research found that improving staff pay, working conditions and career progression opportunities goes hand in hand with ensuring high-quality, sustainable provision. However, according to a recent survey by Social Care Wales, [almost a third \(31.5%\)](#) are thinking of leaving the sector due to low pay, poor working conditions and limited opportunities for progression.

2) Will provision be sufficiently generous and flexible to enable parents to work?

Funded childcare needs to be sufficiently generous and sufficiently flexible to support families in the round, including their varied working lives. Our research shows that this has not been the experience of many families who access Flying Start, which they found logistically difficult and impossible to reconcile with work commitments. While some families can pay for additional hours or rely on wider family support to fill in the gaps around inflexible part-time entitlements, others do not have these options.

Several parents told us that being able to condense part-time entitlements, for instance into two or three days, would make a major difference to their ability to work. Research on the provision of part-time childcare in England confirms this. It found an [increase in mothers' labour force participation](#) once the original 2.5 hours per day policy was changed to a more flexible 15-hours policy that could be used over a minimum of three days per week.

This problem has long been recognised. As early as 2013, a Welsh Government [Early Years and Childcare Plan](#) committed to exploring more flexible delivery models for Nursery Education and Flying Start childcare. The Welsh Government awarded four local authorities with up to £100,000 each to undertake flexibility pilot schemes for Nursery Education. The [findings](#) were published in 2016. While the evaluators caution that more flexible delivery models could potentially increase pressure on school staff and negatively impact on children, they found that the pilots generally worked well and helped parents' work-life balance, without obstructing curriculum delivery or observing negative impacts on participating children. The evaluation makes several recommendations, but it is unclear if and how these learnings have been taken forward. In practice, lack of flexibility remains a major barrier for many families in Wales today.

With the Welsh Government's first phase of childcare expansion happening through Flying Start, generally delivered at 2.5 hours per day, this problem remains acute. Looking ahead, an expanded offer of 20 hours may suffer from similar limitations unless delivered flexibly.

Given mounting pressure on the early years sector, settings may require support to deliver flexible models sustainably. The work of organisations like [Flexible Childcare Choices Scotland](#) could provide valuable insights into how this can be done.

3) Will there be enough spaces in rural and disadvantaged areas?

According to experts from Victoria University in Melbourne, large parts of the UK are '[childcare deserts](#)', defined as areas where there are more than three children for every available childcare place. The study found this to be the case for 45% of England, 27% of Wales and 10% of Scotland.

A report by Ofsted, the regulator and inspector of early years in England, found that childcare deserts are more prominent in [deprived and rural areas](#), with some having as few as 17 places for every 100 children. Childcare deserts are driven by low financial viability and staff shortages. These tend to be more acute in rural and deprived areas, where providers may struggle to benefit from economies of scale or to 'cross-subsidise' underfunded government entitlements by charging families who pay privately higher fees.

There is limited research on childcare deserts in Wales, but given its many rural and deprived areas, it is imperative that expansion plans consider and proactively address this issue.

4) Will families be able to access 20 hours on the same terms as those entitled to 30 hours?

The Welsh Government's commitment to honour the existing 30-hours entitlement for three- and four-year-olds of working parent alongside its expansion plans. This could lead to unintended consequences. Research on England, where a 30-hours entitlement for working families sits alongside a 15-hours entitlement for non-working families, suggests that the funding system can [disincentivise providers](#) to offer the 15-hours entitlement, contributing to children from the most disadvantaged families missing out.

5) Will families be able to access their entitlement in a single setting?

The current 30-hour entitlement consists of two elements, funded childcare and nursery education, which often cannot be delivered by the same provider. This means families have to arrange transport to different settings, sometimes within the same day. This can be logistically challenging for parents, unsettling for children and can hinder families from being able to use their full entitlements.

WEN Wales will continue to closely follow the expansion plans in Wales, keep abreast emerging findings and would be delighted to assist the Committee with further evidence. The [full report](#) and [executive summary](#) of our research on transforming early childhood education and care can be found on our website.

About the Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales: Our vision is of a Wales free from gender discrimination where all 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.

For further information, please contact:

Dr Jessica Laimann

Policy and Public Affairs Manager

jessica@wenwales.org.uk