

Childcare and parental employment: the pandemic and beyond

Summary of engagement

Monday, 29 November 2021

Background

As part of the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into '*Childcare and parental employment: the pandemic and beyond*', the Citizen Engagement Team proposed a qualitative approach to engagement, comprising a series of focus groups with parents from across Wales.

A series of ten focus groups and two one-to-one interviews took place between 1 November – 19 November 2021. One written contribution was received from a participant who had to withdraw from a focus group. In total, 59 participants across all Senedd regions, in both urban and rural areas, shared their views.

Participants

Whilst the majority of participants were parents, a small number contributed in a professional capacity as staff working in a childcare setting or with parents.

Participant composition varied and included, single parent households; parents in receipt of benefits; parents with health issues and/or children with additional needs; ethnic minority parents; parents from faith backgrounds; parents from migrant backgrounds and parents for whom English was not their first language.

The employment status of participants also varied with parents working in the public, private and third sectors; parents with different employment contracts including full-time, part-time and zero-hours contracts; parents who were self-



employed, parents who were unemployed; parents with more than one job, parents currently on maternity or paternity leave and parents working in childcare.

The nature of the childcare provision accessed by participants varied and included local authority childcare provision, private nursery, childminder, school-based provision and/ or friends and family.

Participants were sourced through a number of community groups and organisations including ACE (Action in Caerau and Ely), Bevan Foundation, Child Poverty Action Group, Chwarae Teg, CLPW Community Interest Company Portuguese Diaspora from Wales, Fair Treatment for the Women of Wales, Gingerbread, Inter-faith Council for Wales, Mudiad Meithrin, Parents for Welsh medium education, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years Cymru (PACEY Cymru), Single Parent Wellbeing, South Riverside Community Development Centre, Together Creating Communities, Tots Play, Voices from Care Cymru, Women Connect First and Women's Equality Network Wales.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement.

Format

Eight focus groups and two one-to-one interviews were held online on Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Two focus groups were held in-person.

The format of engagement was largely comparable between sessions, but varied slightly to meet the needs of participants and to accommodate late absences. The following themes were discussed (with some variation).

- 1.** Experience of returning from maternity/ paternity leave or period of unemployment.
 - 2.** Key considerations when choosing a childcare provider.
 - 3.** The availability of information and advice on childcare provision.
 - 4.** The extent to which childcare arrangements currently meets the needs of parents.
 - 5.** Views on current/previous childcare provision used and impact on family life/employment.
 - 6.** Affordability of childcare and access to financial support towards the cost of childcare.
 - 7.** Support from employers.
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8. Impact of the pandemic on childcare arrangements.
9. Concerns about future employment and childcare issues.
10. Solutions for supporting parents to enter, sustain or progress within employment and what role the Welsh Government can play in this.

The following themes emerged from the discussions. Notes of each session are available upon request.

Reliance on family members for childcare

"I remember being pregnant and it's awful to say . . . I said to my mother-in-law and my mum; if you don't take care of this baby two days a week, I can't do this, I can't have this baby . . . it's a very emotional time anyway, but you're thinking about childcare costs when you're 10 weeks pregnant."

Participant 2, focus group 5, Cardiff

The majority of participants discussed the role of family members and to a lesser degree, friends, in fulfilling, in whole or in part, childcare needs. The over-reliance on family was largely attributed to the significant costs and lack of flexibility associated with more formal childcare provision. Without familial support, many participants, particularly single parents, emphasised that managing childcare and employment would not be possible.

"My sister is just going back into work from maternity and she has two kids, but it wouldn't be worth her going to work if she had to put her boys into childcare. So I actually have her boys two days a week for her to go to work."

Participant 2, focus group 9, Caerphilly

A number of participants referenced feelings of guilt for having to depend upon family, and/or luck for being in a position where they were able to do so.

Conversely, some participants, particularly those from migrant backgrounds, although not exclusively so, explained that relying on family for childcare is not an option available to them.

". . . I had a career back in South Africa, but when I came here I basically had to give that up to be able to look after my kids because I had no family, no friends

and because of the childcare costs being so expensive, I would basically be working for childcare . . . “

Participant 2, focus group 10, Cardiff

“I was brought up in care. I don’t have a family . . . I don’t see my biological parents and my children are not permitted to see them through social services guidance.”

Participant 1, focus group 9, Rhondda Cynon Taf

Affordability

“I do part-time work three days a week, because childcare costs five days a week pretty much meant there was no point me going back.”

Participant 4, focus group 3, Vale of Glamorgan

The impact of childcare costs was a theme which influenced much of the discussion across the programme of engagement. Affordability was the factor most frequently referenced by participants when discussing their key considerations for choosing childcare provision.

There was broad consensus amongst participants from a variety of backgrounds that formal childcare is too expensive, with one participant describing the costs as “exorbitant”. Much of the discussion focused on the pervasive impact of childcare costs on matters including household budget and the accessibility of different types of childcare provider.

“ . . . I can’t, at the moment, get a mortgage because my childcare bill is taken into consideration with lenders. Even though I earn enough on paper and I know I can afford a mortgage . . . even though I get an amount towards it from tax credits, they don’t take tax credits into consideration. They purely look at my outgoings, so it’s limited me from that point of view, because I would like to be able to provide a stable home for my children . . . ”

Participant 2, focus group 6, Rhondda Cynon Taf

“ My old neighbours; they were first generation migrants. They didn’t have any other family here and they had two children that were both under five . . . in the end, with the cost to put them both through nursery . . . they sent one back to

India for the grandparents to look after her for eight months until the other child started school, just so they could afford to live.”

Participant 7, focus group 7, Cardiff

The affordability of childcare was considered a key determinant for many when making decisions related to employment - whether entering, sustaining or progressing within employment. This was perhaps most starkly illustrated by some participants who made the conscious decision not to return to work, because childcare costs meant that it was not financially viable for them to do so.

Some participants also mentioned the costs of childcare as a key motivator for re-training as childminders, which allowed them to meet their childcare needs whilst also earning an income.

“... once I had my third daughter I just wanted to be at home, so I went straight from maternity leave to being a childminder... and it was financial reasons like I said, just because of the cost of childcare...”

Participant 6, focus group 2, Denbighshire

Other key considerations when choosing a childcare provider

Whilst affordability was a leading factor for the majority of participants when discussing childcare provision, a number of other factors influenced their decision.

The location of childcare provision, particularly in relation to a place of employment and/or home, was considered of key importance, with many referring to the daily logistical challenges this posed.

“... I can't drop (my child) off at breakfast club (in Wenvoe) until 8:00am, and I work in Pontprennau and start at 8:30am. So every day, if any form of stress happens in the morning and he doesn't want to put his sock on, or he doesn't want to eat his breakfast, it's world war three... I've just had to adjust all my working hours around the childcare, because the nursery closes at 3:15pm on a Wednesday, 12:45pm on a Friday, and then it's childminders on different days.”

Participant 2, focus group 1, Cardiff

Many participants also considered the reputation of childcare providers when considering the suitability of childcare provision. Some relied on word of mouth from family or friends, whilst others reviewed Estyn inspection reports.

Language considerations were also referenced by a number of participants as being a key requirement when identifying suitable childcare provision. This was particularly the case for ethnic minority and Welsh speaking participants.

“When I was looking for childcare I wanted someone who was Welsh speaking. I don’t speak Welsh fluently myself but that was really important when I was looking for childcare, and actually I couldn’t find a childminder who spoke Welsh so that’s why she went to a nursery.”

Participant 6, focus group 2, Denbighshire

Discussion of language needs in the context of childcare, was closely entwined with discussion on the cultural appropriateness of childcare provision. Concerns were raised by a number of participants that the availability of such provision is lacking, and the needs of ethnic minority children in particular, are often not met in full by existing childcare providers.

“Do they understand my religion? Do they understand what my child can and can’t do? Do they understand what foods they can and can’t eat? For me, my thing was my kids’ hair, because black hair is totally different to anything else . . . I teach childcare myself now, so I do know they are beginning to teach a lot about culture to childcare workers and how to look after children from different cultures, but parents do still worry about it.”

Participant 7, focus group 3, Cardiff

“I will be lucky to have somebody from my own culture or religion look after my children, or at least see a member of staff who’s ethnic in that nursery I went to, so at least I feel reassured they will understand some cultural needs where possible.”

Participant 4, focus group 3, Cardiff

Whilst some participants weighed up the factors of most importance to them when choosing a childcare provider, others said they had no choice. Some participants highlighted the lack of childcare provision available in areas across Wales like Pen Llŷn, whilst others discussed relocating in order to access childcare.

“Originally we had a nursery in Tylorstown – that shut down and there was only one childminder who could accommodate me and that was only until my daughter went to full-time school. Once she went to full-time school, this person couldn’t accommodate me because she couldn’t do the school runs, because

she was doing school runs to a different school and then I had to beg, borrow and steal from different friends.”

Participant 1, focus group 6, Rhondda Cynon Taf

Lack of advice, support and information

Most participants discussed the support, or lack thereof, available to parents, particularly new parents, when making decisions about childcare. According to most participants, the dearth of available information meant that making informed decisions about the suitability of childcare provision, was challenging.

“... We know when choosing a school, there’s all these Ofsted reports we can look at and I don’t feel the same kind of information is provided for when it comes to childcare ... it should be as equally as important because those early years are paramount for the development of children. . . .”

Participant 2, focus group 6, Rhondda Cynon Taf

These difficulties were particularly acute for parents with children with additional needs. One parent shared her experience of attempting to find suitable provision for her autistic daughter, who was denied a space at breakfast club and after-school club.

“As she’s grown it’s become more challenging to find childcare ... with a disability comes additional needs. Not everyone’s equipped.”

Participant 4, focus group 10, Cardiff

“My 8 month old daughter has been diagnosed with a life limiting neurological condition which means she is very unsettled a lot of the time and will have severe learning disabilities and may never walk, talk or even sit up. Her life will also be shorter than average. I am back in work two days a week at the moment but back full-time in January and our chosen nursery (mainstream) is aware of (her) condition. They have agreed they will take her but will have to see how it goes. If, due to their staff ratios, they can't cope with (her) then they will have to have that conversation with us. Myself and [her] Dad are both at pivotal points in our careers so neither of us wish to take more time off. I have been promised a special needs health visitor so that I can discuss referrals to a special needs nursery or 1-1 funding for our chosen nursery but it's been almost two months and I've not heard anything.”

Written contribution from a parent, Cardiff

Word of mouth from trusted family and friends, and views shared on social media groups for parents, were two of the channels most frequently referenced by participants, when seeking information on childcare provision.

The Childcare Offer

Whilst participants shared largely positive views of the Childcare Offer and its associated benefits, some participants raised issues with its scope. These issues largely focused on two aspects.

The first concerned the age-related requirements for accessing the Childcare Offer, with the majority explaining that being able to access the Childcare Offer earlier would be beneficial to all working parents. The second aspect concerned the allocation of hours, but was discussed to a lesser degree.

“I think allowing childcare provision much earlier on in the journey at the point of need is important. I think if you’re taking another two years on top and waiting until your child is three, you’re effectively out of the workplace, so it doesn’t allow for progression, whatever sector you’re working in.”

Participant 5, focus group 4, Gwynedd

“My son is three. I work part-time at the moment and [my son] goes to a childminder and wraparound care. So I use the Childcare Offer, but because the childminder has to claim for a full day, even though she doesn’t have him for a full day, she takes up the majority of my hours so I have to pay towards the day care as well.”

Participant 2, focus group 1, Cardiff

Some participants also explained that as new parents, they were largely unaware of the Childcare Offer and its eligibility criteria. Indeed, there were varying degrees of awareness and understanding amongst participants during focus groups.

Accessing Flying Start

“The whole Flying Start debate is ridiculous, because my street is made up of Flying Start and non-Flying Start (families).”

Participant 1, focus group 9, Rhondda Cynon Taf

"I've got a friend who lives two streets over from me who can go to Flying Start but I can't because of the postcode lottery. I don't think it's fair because we're exactly the same."

Participant 2, focus group 9, Caerphilly

Participants in focus groups who access Flying Start were largely positive about its benefits, explaining that free, high-quality childcare makes a big difference. However, a number of participants expressed disappointment that they were not eligible to access Flying Start, with many references to a "postcode lottery", when discussing the eligibility criteria.

Similar to the Childcare Offer, there were varying degrees of awareness about the scope of Flying Start and its eligibility criteria.

Opening times

"I would say flexibility is very important. Childcare shouldn't be open from just 9 to 5 to accommodate the people working in the offices. They have to understand they have people who have other sort of jobs that are also very important"

Participant 1, focus group 8, Wrexham

The opening times for formal childcare provision was considered a barrier by many participants to entering, sustaining or progressing within employment. Drop-off and pick-up times which failed to meet the needs of parents with different working patterns, meant that some relied on family or friends to plug the gap in childcare needs.

One participant, a single mother working full-time in an academic post with a child in private nursery, shared the challenges she faced in a role, which by her own admission, was relatively flexible. Similar experiences were shared by other participants.

"Mine closes its doors at 6:00pm so for example this evening, I was lecturing 'til 5 and there's no way I would have got to the nursery at 6:00pm, so my sister had to pick my daughter up and bring her home for me and now I've got my mum watching her downstairs . . . "

Participant 3, focus group 6, Cardiff

Support from employers

Working parents explained that whilst their employer may have policies in place designed to support the needs of working parents, the efficacy of such policies in practice, was often dependent upon the attitude of line managers to childcare.

“I’ve been back in work for about six months now and I think that I had a lot of anxiety because whether your re-integration to work is going to pan out is really based on how flexible your employer is willing to be with you . . . So I’ve been fortunate enough, my employer has been able to be flexible . . . but I also feel like I’m on a knife edge because if I have a change in line manager that decides they can’t be as amenable to my needs, that’s really worrying.”

Participant 3, focus group 6, Cardiff

Some participants also perceived public sector employers as more sympathetic to the needs of parents, with some participants in one focus group having made a conscious decision to leave private sector roles for the greater flexibility perceived in public sector employment.

Many participants welcomed the flexible working initiatives implemented as a result of the restrictions introduced in light of the pandemic.

“When Covid-19 started, I worked from home so I think that was a positive experience for me because I had a lot of time with my kids . . . financially it was better for me to stay at home and look after my children.”

Participant 3, focus group 7, Cardiff

Whilst flexible hours and home working were cited as largely positive initiatives, some participants were eager to emphasise their limitations when managing childcare. Others stressed that due to the nature of their role, home working and/or flexible hours was not possible.

Career progression

The societal presumption that women will put their careers on hold in order to fulfil childcare responsibilities was a theme which arose during most focus group discussions.

A number of participants reflected on missed career opportunities, whilst others explained that the cost of childcare in comparison to their salary and/or earning potential, meant that it was not worth returning to work.

“I’ve had to work my life and my job around my childcare . . . when I first didn’t go back to work, I took a £24,000 pay cut to work part-time because it was my only choice, and I still to this day do not earn the money that I earned when I was pregnant, and my daughter is now 10.”

Participant 1, focus group 6, Rhondda Cynon Taf

“The third child came as a complete surprise. I’d finally taken a full-time job. A permanent position. I was going to lessen my hours and then two days before starting said permanent job, I found out I was pregnant. My nursery fees alone, if I would have gone back to work would have been £2,500 a month. Now, we know social workers do not get paid lots of money so I would have been working for maybe £200 - £300, and that wasn’t to include what my older son’s after-school costs would have been . . . I was faced with becoming pregnant, and then knowing I wouldn’t be returning to work for a considerable amount of time, and I’m now reliant on benefits when I have a huge amount of working potential . . . having that choice taken away from me has been a massive identity issue . . .”

Participant 2, focus group 5, Cardiff

How parents can be better supported

Participants discussed the solutions to some of the issues raised that would, in their view, support parents to enter, sustain or progress within employment in Wales.

Whilst a number of solutions and/or initiatives were offered with varying degrees of support, those that were referenced most often, or garnered the greatest support were as follows:-

- The need for **more affordable childcare** was considered paramount; a request echoed by participants from a variety of backgrounds, from those on low incomes to participants with, by their own admission, “good salaries.”

“...it doesn’t make sense me leaving my child with someone so I can go to work and be worse off . . . it doesn’t encourage anyone to go back to work because it’s (childcare) so expensive”

Participant 1, focus group 8, Wrexham

- **Greater flexibility** from employers in different sectors, with meaningful policies to support working parents with different working patterns.

- A number of participants explained that **more information on childcare is needed**, with some suggesting that it could be provided by health visitors.

“I know when I was on maternity leave and had planned to go back to work, I wasn’t aware of childminders . . . it was just day nurseries and they were just out of my budget at that point. So I think there needs to be a lot more information out there about options for parents.”

Participant 5, focus group 2, Bridgend

- An **extension in scope to the Childcare Offer** which would allow parents to access it at the point of need, before the age of three. Some participants were also of the view that its scope should be extended to include parents who wish to study in order to upskill and re-enter the workforce.
- The need for more **available and flexible childcare provision**, particularly in some parts of Wales was called for by some participants, with many participants explaining that more breakfast and after-school clubs are needed. This also included widening access to Flying Start.

“It’s not acceptable in certain pockets of areas for there to be no childcare, and when you talk to people and you try and convince them that they want to go back to work . . . so I’ve worked in employability, and they’ll get this buzz, they’ll do a course with you and then realise they can’t work anyway because there’s no childcare, and they can only work between 9 and 3, and they live in Tylorstown and they don’t drive. It’s just not possible and then you end up with generations of unemployment.”

Participant 1, focus group 6, Rhondda Cynon Taf

“I always feel that I can’t access the breakfast club because it has been said, that I’m taking away from vulnerable children. Now, I wouldn’t class my children as vulnerable but they do have needs and one of their needs is that their mum works. So, I don’t access it often, I pay for my childcare, however if my childminder is unwell or recently she had Covid so obviously she had to shut down, then I have to access these things otherwise I simply can’t work . . . It’s almost expected as well, that as soon as they reach secondary school age that they don’t need childcare provision whereas I disagree. At age 11 they are still very much children but it seems to be forgotten.”

Participant 2, focus group 6, Rhondda Cynon Taf

- There was call from both parents and those working within childcare settings for an **increase in pay and greater stability for professionals working in the childcare sector.**

“We’re on zero hour contracts and we’re minding the future.”

Participant 1, focus group 7, Cardiff

“Childcare costs seem so high and childcare workers aren’t paid much. There’s a huge disparity there. They’re forming the minds of these children at a crucial point in their development. I saw somewhere that a childcare worker couldn’t afford to put her child in the nursery she works in.”

Participant 1, focus group 5, Cardiff

- **Better maternity pay and an extension of time to maternity leave** was also offered as a solution by some participants to better support parents.

“We need better maternity pay and an extension of time to maternity . . . because it’s a massive stage of development for children, often when parents are returning from maternity leave. We need to look at the lead taken by other countries.”

Participant 2, focus group 5, Cardiff