

Childcare and parental employment: Summary of roundtable sessions

Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol
Equality and Social Justice Committee

Introduction

This paper summarises the key themes emerging from the roundtable the Committee held on 22 November. There were 12 participants, split into 3 groups. These included childcare providers, staff from organisations representing childcare providers, representatives from local authorities, and staff from third sector organisations.

Key themes

Impact and scope of the Childcare Offer

While some participants felt that the Childcare Offer had been beneficial in supporting parents into employment, to work additional hours, and helping parents to avoid having to rely on their families, others felt that there wasn't sufficient evidence to come to a view on this.



The evaluation of the Childcare Offer undertaken by Arad was raised by one participant, who highlighted its recommendation to the Welsh Government to undertake research on this topic.

The upfront childcare costs that families with low incomes face were raised by some participants as a barrier to accessing childcare, and to mothers entering work. The scheme recently introduced by the Northern Irish Executive was suggested as a way of addressing this by one participant in group 3.

The lack of suitable childcare for families where parents work atypical hours was raised by a number of participants. A participant from group 2 who runs provision which is used by many parents who are shift workers said that opening earlier in the morning allowed greater flexibility, but that she would not want her setting to open later in the evening. One participant from group 3 suggested that the upcoming Childcare Sufficiency Assessments that local authorities will undertake will provide an evidence base around provision, and hopefully drive changes.

Group 2 highlighted additional barriers facing families from ethnic minorities as some communities are less likely to use childcare provision. It was suggested that the Childcare Sufficiency Assessments could do more to engage with ethnic minority groups, for example with the Polish community and the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. A participant stated that:

I think the settings don't always know what the needs of the community are ... I think settings do satisfaction surveys but they don't always have the time and resources to seek out the views of specific groups within their community ... need to make sure settings are marketed which taps into the needs of the community.

A number of participants across the groups highlighted challenges for self-employed people who wanted to access provision for their children. The administrative burden on self-employed parents to complete forms was mentioned, as was the support providers are required to give although support from HMRC was seen as helpful. One participant gave the example of advising a farming family not to buy a new tractor while they were trying to access the Childcare Offer as they need to show a certain level of profitability.

Extension of the Childcare Offer to two-year-olds

While many participants welcomed the announcement of the extension of the Childcare Offer, the point was made that parents make choices about working arrangements when maternity leave ends, and parents will still face childcare costs at this point that are more than many parents, particularly mothers, earn.

Participants had some questions about the detail around the extension of the offer. These included whether all two-year-olds would receive childcare or whether there would be eligibility criteria, how many hours a week would be covered by the extension, and when it would be introduced. One group raised questions around how the agreement would affect the existing Programme for Government commitment to provide childcare to three and four-year-olds whose parents are in education or training.

Participants raised practical issues that the Welsh Government will need to consider in rolling out the policy such as investment in “more space and more staff”, as was needed when the Childcare Offer was rolled out. A particular consideration raised in group 1 was that one member of staff is needed for every four two-year-olds, which is different to three and four-year-olds, where one member of staff is needed for every eight children.

The childcare workforce

Many participants raised the low levels of pay in the childcare sector, with one from group 3 describing the job as being “paid the same as Aldi” but with a lot more responsibility, and another from group 1 saying that it was a “catch-22 issue” where better wages are needed but you also need to keep costs for parents as low as possible. A number of participants who are childcare providers raised the need to increase the £4.50 hourly rate the Welsh Government pays to childcare providers in relation to the Childcare Offer, as this would enable providers to pay higher wages, and to help with costs associated with training and DBS checks.

To address this, some participants suggested more childcare courses in schools, and raising awareness of childcare as a career. One participant from group 1 felt that the 30 hours of volunteering required for the Welsh Bacc could be linked to childcare provision to promote childcare as a career.

The low wages had led to staff shortages in the sector, as staff have left to work in better-paid jobs. While this was seen by participants as a UK-wide issue, participants also raised specific issues in recruiting sufficient staff to provide Welsh-medium childcare provision. Factors affecting this included a lack of Welsh speakers in some parts of Wales, qualified staff moving to schools, which have better pay and conditions, and complexities around qualifications.

One participant from group 2 raised the issue of low levels of staff from ethnic minorities, stating that there is a need to recruit more staff to enable familiarity and understanding, and for providers to reflect their local community.

Childcare for school age children

One participants' view that "wraparound care is a lottery" summed up the views of others in group 3. An example was given of a school in Cardiff where parents queued from the early hours to ensure that they could access breakfast club for their children.

Parents sometimes have to transport children between settings, and some participants from group 3 highlighted that costs of holiday care in particular can be expensive, and can often require a car to access.

Childcare providers highlighted issues around the sustainability of wraparound and holiday provision. One participant from group 2 stated that:

We used to provide holiday places but because the Childcare Offer runs for 48 weeks of the year parents are using those childcare hours during the holiday too ... This does have a knock-on effect for children of other age groups

They also mentioned that the Childcare Offer running for 48 weeks a year has affected the sustainability of some providers, as parents no longer require holiday provision. Participants in group 2 also highlighted their concerns around the impact of unregistered holiday care providers on registered providers, who can provide childcare under the exceptions order, which they felt needed reviewing. One participant from this group stated that:

We have had situations where they have been running from a school or a community building and there is an unregulated holiday camp and have put a childcare setting out of business and the local authority were advertising the unregulated holiday camp ... children have the

right to be safeguarded and parents to know there are policies in place and a lot of parents don't know the difference between a Care Inspectorate Wales provision and one that is operating outside of the national minimum standards and when they see the local authority advertising it they think they are endorsing it ... brilliant to see investment in SHEP [the School Holiday Enrichment Programme] or holiday of fun but we mustn't lose sight of the regulated provision ... we must find a way to work in partnership.

The pandemic has particularly affected out-of-school clubs, with one participant highlighting that 19% of clubs had closed permanently since March 2020 with others remaining temporarily closed. The participant also stated that some settings had needed to reduce capacity, due to reasons such as lack of staff and infection control measures. A participant in another group highlighted that when lack of staff had required a setting she ran to close, there was considerable backlash from parents, as they were "desperate" to have this facility continue.

Childcare in local communities

Some participants felt that schools could play a greater role in providing childcare, and that there should be more partnership working between them and childcare providers. There are some good examples of this, but one participant stated that there tends to be a "them and us" relationship between schools and childcare providers. Another participant in the same group noted that:

I managed a Flying Start setting on a school site and we had a number of issues – we couldn't be key holders ... we were not allowed to use their bins ... we were supposed to open during the school holidays but we couldn't because the caretaker wouldn't allow us access to the site.

Community focussed schools were seen as a potential solution to this, and it was suggested that new schools should be designed with childcare in mind. One participant also expressed concern that new housing developments sometimes had very few community facilities, and that childcare needs should be borne in mind.

Childminders

A number of participants highlighted the importance of childminders to providing affordable childcare, particularly in deprived and rural areas where there may not be enough demand for after school club provision. However, concern was expressed about the decline in childminders, and the impact that this can have on families working atypical hours for example. The fall in childminder numbers was described by one participant in group 1 as being worse than in the care sector, and this participant suggested that a bespoke recruitment campaign was required to increase numbers.