



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

Winter of Wellbeing evaluation (summary)

This report sets out the findings from an evaluation of the Winter of Wellbeing programme where a package of wellbeing support was delivered for Children and young people across Wales between October 2021 and March 2022.

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Evaluation background, aims and methodology

Winter of Wellbeing (WoW) was a £20m package of wellbeing funding from Welsh Government to support children and young people to recover from the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. WoW provided children and young people aged 0 to 25 in Wales access to free activities, including opportunities to play and engage in leisure, recreational, sporting and cultural activities, as well as childcare and formal education. These activities are crucial in supporting the social, emotional, physical and mental wellbeing of children and young people and recovery from COVID-19. WoW was delivered through five strands: local authorities, national organisations, schools, Further Education (FE) institutions and Higher Education (HE) providers. Please note the HE strand was evaluated by HEFCW. Aspects of the evaluation are included in this report.

Ecorys delivered a mixed methods process evaluation of the WoW programme. The evaluation aims were to map how local authority, national bodies, school and FE delivery models were organised and have varied; explore the impacts of participating from the perspective of children and young people, their families, and providers; identify the key enablers and barriers to participation for children/young people and parents/carers; consider the efficiency of administration and operational processes; and review how strand leads and providers have considered equal opportunities, accessibility, and promoting and/or delivering through the medium of Welsh.

Rich and varied insights were gathered from qualitative interviews with 10 Welsh Government/national partner stakeholders, 21 local authority leads, 9 national body leads, 14 school and 8 FE institution leaders, and 28 focus groups with children and young people across all strands. A breadth of views were gained from 2,813 programme participants and 496 providers (commissioned by strand leads across local authorities, national organisations, schools and FE institutions), who completed an online survey. A virtual round table event involved discussion of early findings with strand leads and Welsh Government

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stakeholders, and co-development of the conclusions and recommendations.

Findings

WoW took place between 1 October 2021 and 31 March 2022, with most activities delivered in 2022. Each strand was given flexibility around programme format, design and delivery. Overall, WoW delivered an extremely broad range of activities through a mix of open access and targeted provision, despite the short timescales available to plan, launch and promote the programme. Delivery through the five strands allowed the programme to target and reach the entire target age of 0 to 25, however reaching older young people was more challenging.

Providers tended to delivery activities though a mix of internal and external staff, bringing in external people with specialist skills or to target a specific group of children/young people, for example, those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). Although strand leads considered how to offer bilingual and Welsh medium, relatively limited Welsh medium provision was offered. This was partly due to the difficulty finding Welsh-medium providers.

Overall, strand leads felt well supported by the Welsh Government to deliver the programme. They found the guidance clear and appreciated the flexibility which allowed them to tailor provision to their local needs. However, they would have benefited from longer lead-in time to plan delivery and develop partnerships with new providers and would have liked to receive marketing guidance when the funding was announced. There were examples of consultation and co-production with children and young people, particularly among national organisations, FE institutions and HE providers, but the short timescales limited the extent that this was possible.

The vast majority (95%) of children and young people who completed the

participant survey reported that they had fun taking part in WoW activities. Additionally, WoW participants reported that the programme had helped them make new friends (68%), manage their mental health (67%) and feel more confident.

Children and young people's participation helped to address some of the negative impacts of the pandemic. For example, WoW gave them opportunities to try new things (92%), learn new skills (83%) and be more physically active (87%). Children and young people self-reported improvements to wellbeing, confidence and socialisation, which they attributed to participation in WoW activities. This suggests that WoW achieved its aim of providing fun, leisure and recreational opportunities for children and young people, to support their wellbeing.

Providers benefited from much-needed financial input following lockdowns and developed relationships with local schools and the wider community. A potential unintended outcome is that WoW (following the earlier Summer of Fun programme) has raised the expectation among children and families of free-to-access provision being offered in the long-term.

The programme was well received by strand leads and providers. They called for sustained, long-term funding to provide ongoing support for COVID-19 recovery and ensure that the positive outcomes from WoW are sustained.

Recommendations

Retain the focus on fun and play

Strand leads and programme participants believed the focus on fun and play was crucial to support positive outcomes for children and young people's physical and mental wellbeing and should be retained.

Longer-term investment

All participant groups recommended sustained investment in all-year round provision for children and young people. Longer-term funding would also help to recruit and retain provider staff to support programme planning and delivery.

Longer lead-in time for planning and set-up

There was a consensus that sufficient time is needed between announcing funding and programme launch. This would support effective strategic planning, involving a wide range of partners, and create more opportunities to co-design the programme with children and young people.

Additional set-up time would also enable strand leads to carry out some background research to identify the most appropriate balance between universal and targeted provision and develop partnerships with suitable providers.

A longer planning window would have allowed strand leads to convene online sessions with providers and/or establish an online provider forum to share good practice/learning.

There was also a suggestion that additional time could have allowed for collaborative bids among providers.

Strengthen support for strand leads

Strand leads and senior stakeholders welcomed the breadth of funding criteria to allow leads to meet their local needs. Training and support provided by the Welsh Government was appreciated and should continue to be delivered in future programmes.

The change in guidance to allow provision of refreshments as part of activities was welcomed. Equally the flexibility allowing purchase of equipment and provide transport was said to add value and support take-up of activities.

Strand leads typically administered WoW in addition to a full workload. Any potential future rounds would benefit from increasing staff capacity or bringing in an additional resource to manage the procurement process, to lessen the burden on strand leads.

Planning would be enhanced by distributing Welsh Government guidance on marketing and branding at the programme outset. Whilst providers welcomed the flexibility to create a local band identity to some extent, they would have benefited from clearer guidance on requirements to use the national WoW logo and branding.

More detailed guidance around MI collection should be offered, to ensure data is collected efficiently and effectively across providers and strands. Support should be offered to providers who are struggling to record MI accurately, to ensure it is collected consistently and accurately. Enhance reach and inclusivity.

Enhance reach and inclusivity

Senior stakeholders and strand leads highlighted the importance of free provision, particularly for low-income families, to support children and young people's wellbeing and offer them opportunities they may not otherwise have. The ability to use funding to provide food and transport were seen as crucial in making provision more inclusive.

Offering suitable provision for youth and young adults was a challenge, partly due to the difficulty finding providers catering to that age group. The inclusion of FE institutions and HE providers helped to fill this gap. Future provision could increase the scale of these strands, and maintain the offer of volunteering,

mentoring, work placements and offering certification of attendance. Additionally, co-producing the offer with young people would increase their involvement and engagement.

The inclusion of Welsh medium provision was stipulated in the programme guidance. Some strand leads reported a lack of local providers with Welsh language skills and recommended supporting the capacity development of providers to offer activities through the medium of Welsh.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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