



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

RESEARCH, DOCUMENT

# Evaluation of Progress for Success: summary

Progress for Success funded existing workers to undertake recognised childcare and play qualifications to increase their skills levels. The aim of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of Progress for Success.

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# Contents

**Introduction**

**Findings: delivery**

**Findings: outcomes of Progress for Success (PfS)**

**Conclusions and recommendations**

**Contact details**

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# Introduction

Progress for Success (PfS) funded existing workers to undertake recognised childcare and play qualifications to increase their skill levels. This evaluation report examines the implementation of PfS and evaluates its impact on the childcare and playwork workforce's training and qualifications.

## Background

PfS was part-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) within Priority Axis 3 Youth Employment and Attainment, Specific Objective 4: To increase the skills of the Early Years and Childcare Workforce within the West Wales and Valleys (WWV) area. PfS was also available to workers in East Wales (EW), funded by the Welsh Government, therefore all training opportunities were available across Wales.

It initially ran from 2016 to 2019 and was extended to be delivered from 2019 to 2023. This report focuses on the 2019 to 2023 period.

The operation funded existing workers aged 18 years and above to undertake recognised childcare and play qualifications to increase their skill levels, build capacity and capability in the sector by broadening the suite of qualifications available to the workforce. It did so by providing opportunities to up-skill to those working less than 16 hours per week. Additionally, it aimed to facilitate compliance with the National Minimum Standards (NMS) by 2022, which set out a requirement that settings offering out-of-school and holiday provision were expected to ensure that an appropriate proportion of their staff held suitable playwork qualifications.

PfS delivered distinct pathways for qualifications:

Apprenticeships for existing practitioners working between 10 and 16 hours per week in Children's Care, Play, Learning and Development (CCPLD) or Playwork. This pathway provided work-based training at levels 2 or 3 for existing practitioners who would otherwise be unable to apply for an apprenticeship due to working fewer than 16 hours a week.

Pathway to Play. This pathway included playwork qualifications to help the play sector with the relevant qualifications to meet registration requirements of revised NMS. The Level 3 Transition to Playwork was available for individuals who already had childcare or early years qualifications, and a L2 Award in Playwork Practice (L2 APP) short course as a foundation of knowledge on play and playwork.

Some originally planned pathways were not implemented, specifically, the implementation of the Playwork Practice Principles (P3) award, the Level 3 award in Managing a Holiday Playscheme, the Pathway to Welsh Language, and the Step up to Management Pathway at Level 4.

## Methodology

The evaluation assessed the efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of PfS, with objectives including evaluating the achievement of PfS's aims, assessing its impact on workforce skills, examining employer engagement, and assessing alignment with other initiatives.

A mixed methods approach was used. This involved desk research of policy and programme documentation and monitoring data from participants, interviews with seven training providers responsible for delivering PfS-funded qualifications, interviews with 28 participants—20 following a Transition to Playwork qualification and 8 enrolled in an apprenticeship, interviews with 18 employers and interviews with five childcare and play organisations.

# Findings: delivery

## PfS participant numbers

The target number of PfS participants from 2016 to 2023 for WWV was 2,849. A target was not set for EW. A revised target was set for 2019-2023 of 2,247 participants for WWV and 1,564 for EW.

Participation in both WWV and EW significantly fell short of the set targets. In WWV, 1,063 participants engaged in PfS from 2016 to 2023, which represents 37% of the target.

Focusing only on the period 2019 to 2023, WWV saw the engagement of 556 participants in PfS (25% of the target for the period), while in EW, 359 participants engaged in PfS (23% of target for the period).

Linked to the reduced numbers taking part, the final expenditure was also lower. The operation had an approved budget of £6.9 million for WWV, made up of just under £4.7 million in ESF costs and £2.2 million in match funding, providing a targeted intervention rate of 68%. Actual spend was just £3.31 million, and ESF expenditure was £2.25 million which was substantially lower than the approved figure and provided a final intervention rate of 68%.

## Reasons for under-achievement of targets

The under-achievement of operation targets was linked to various factors. During the first phase of PfS (2016-2019), the widening eligibility criteria for other training opportunities affected the operation's original intent. The eligibility criteria were also considered restrictive, particularly for part-time employees working fewer than 16 hours, which posed challenges for certain settings.

While the second phase aimed to address these limitations by providing options for those working less than 16 hours, additional challenges emerged. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the operation's timeline, delayed procurement, and impacted setting owners' priorities. The rollout of the Transition to Playwork awards was delayed, leaving less time for recruitment and support. Funding for some awards was awarded late, coinciding with a busy period for playworkers.

Other contributing factors included lower demand for part-time apprenticeships, the absence of certain pathways, and ESF rules that excluded volunteers from participation.

## **Participants' experiences**

Participants were informed about the qualification opportunities primarily through their managers, colleagues, or direct contact from training providers. Motivations for completing qualifications included meeting new NMS requirements, enhancing CVs, improving career prospects, and gaining playwork knowledge.

Participants' experiences with course structure and workload varied. Some found the workload manageable, especially those in senior roles or working part-time. However, others were surprised by the volume of work, describing it as challenging, often requiring weekend and evening commitments.

Participants generally appreciated the course content, which either reinforced existing knowledge or introduced new insights. However, some reported issues with repetitive content, lack of depth, and disjointedness. The support provided by training providers, tutors, and employers varied. While many were satisfied, some faced delays in feedback, inconsistencies, or challenges related to online learning.

## Employer views

Employers mostly praised the support provided by training providers, noting its positive impact on their staff's learning experience. However, some employers highlighted discrepancies in support quality and communication depending on the tutor, and commented on the impact of the pandemic on communication.

## Findings: outcomes of Progress for Success (PfS)

This section of the report outlines the outcomes of PfS, focusing on participants' and employers' perspectives regarding its impact on knowledge, skills, job prospects, and further training.

### Impact on improved knowledge and understanding

Overall, participants who completed PfS-funded qualifications expressed positive feedback about the operation's impact on their knowledge, understanding, and skills as childcare/playwork practitioners. This impact was observed across both the Transition to Playwork qualification and the apprenticeships. Details were not available for the participants following L2 APP, so no feedback was gathered from them.

Participants undertaking the Transition to Playwork qualification reported increased knowledge of playwork principles, various play styles, child development stages, and methods for supporting play across different age groups. They highlighted the course's role in enhancing their confidence as practitioners and encouraging a child-led approach to play, ultimately improving the children's experiences.

Employers confirmed the positive impact, noting that their employees became more skilled and better practitioners after completing the Transition to Playwork qualification. The improved knowledge enabled them to better adhere to policies, safety regulations, and children's welfare.

Apprentices who followed CCPLD and Playwork qualifications reported a better understanding of their company's policies, procedures, and children's development milestones. This knowledge empowered them to observe children's development more effectively and to improve their interactions with parents.

## **Impact on job prospects and further training**

Many PfS participants reported that they believed there to be positive effects on their job prospects and career progression. Almost all of the Transition to Playwork and apprenticeship participants interviewed had remained in their roles or took on additional responsibilities, often leading to promotions within their workplaces. The qualifications strengthened their commitment to the childcare/play sector.

Several participants expressed interest in pursuing higher-level qualifications, such as Level 4 or 5 in Playwork, demonstrating their continued dedication to professional development. Others focused on mentoring colleagues and integrating their newly acquired knowledge into their practice, contributing to a wider impact on childcare/play settings.

## **Alignment with Welsh Government priorities**

PfS aligned with several Welsh Government priorities and the cross-cutting themes of equal opportunities, gender mainstreaming and the Welsh language, sustainable development, tackling poverty, and social exclusion. PfS



incorporated these cross-cutting themes into its design and delivery, and in particular the operation was designed to contribute towards access to higher-quality childcare. Training providers adapted their materials and practices to support accessibility and inclusivity for all learners, promoted peer support activities, implemented resource efficiency measures, supported the Welsh language, and offered mentoring for disabled participants.

## Value for money

The evaluation of the PfS operation's value for money focused on cost-effectiveness and the perceived benefits. Initially, the operation aimed to up-skill 2,849 practitioners with a projected average cost per participant of £2,423. However, due to lower participant numbers and expenditure, the actual average cost per participant rose to £3,115. This analysis has some limitations, including the inability to differentiate costs between apprenticeships and shorter courses and covering the entire PfS period.

Comparative analysis indicates that PfS offered favourable value for money, with costs per participant in line with industry benchmarks, particularly when considering European Structural Funds. PfS's competitive tendering approach shared costs and risks among training providers. Qualitative data highlighted the perceived benefits from this expenditure, such as a more qualified workforce and professional development opportunities for practitioners.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, the operation made progress towards several key intended outcomes. Notably, it successfully enhanced the knowledge and skills of childcare and play practitioners, leading to enhanced confidence and competence among practitioners. This, in turn, helped settings meet the National Minimum

Standards.

However, PfS was ultimately delivered on a smaller scale than was anticipated and fell well short of its overall targets in terms of the number of participants who engaged with the operation and were upskilled. The lower participant numbers impacted on the amount of ESF funding that was drawn down to support activity. The final expenditure through ESF and match funding was £3.32 million, compared with eligible expenditure of £6.9 million.

The evaluation highlights a continued demand for funded qualifications within the childcare and play sectors. The report makes the following recommendations which would enhance the effectiveness and impact of any similar future initiatives delivered.

## **Recommendation 1: continued support for upskilling**

The Welsh Government should continue to support the upskilling of the childcare and play workforce, promoting progression opportunities and supporting retention.

## **Recommendation 2: support the upskilling of volunteers**

The Welsh Government should explore ways to engage volunteers from play and childcare settings as part of future initiatives to upskill workers in these sectors. Recognising the key role of volunteers, this could offer a route from volunteering to employment which could help address workforce shortages and provide additional support for settings.

## **Recommendation 3: continue to explore ways of providing flexibility in learning**

The Welsh Government should continue to explore ways to build more flexibility into childcare and play training programmes, ensuring that any future operation can cater to different types of learners, settings, and situations.

## **Recommendation 4: improve data collection**

As part of any future training programmes, the Welsh Government should collect employer contact details and consent to take part in evaluation activity in order to support an understanding of the impact of the programme on their setting.

## **Recommendation 5: ensuring learners and employers are clear about the time commitment associated with qualifications**

The Welsh Government should work with training providers to ensure that learners are made aware of the time commitments involved in completing various childcare and play qualifications, including sessions and coursework completed outside usual working hours, where applicable. This would enable participants and employers to better understand and plan their time and schedules.

## **Contact details**

Report authors: Duggan, B

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

For further information please contact:

Kim Wigley

Social Research and Information Division

Email: [kasemployabilityandskillsresearch@gov.wales](mailto:kasemployabilityandskillsresearch@gov.wales)

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