



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

POLICY AND STRATEGY

Childcare Offer for Wales: national digital service assisted digital strategy

The support arrangements to help people who are unable to use the Childcare Offer digital service unaided.

First published: 7 November 2022

Last updated: 7 November 2022

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National digital service assisted digital strategy

Introduction

The [Digital Strategy for Wales](#) set outs how digital services and digital inclusion supports the vision of modern and efficient public services.

The Childcare Offer for Wales (Childcare Offer) national digital service is embracing the new strategy and its Principles, which are set out at Annex 1. This strategy sets out the support arrangements in place to assist people in using the Childcare Offer national digital service where they are unable to do so unaided.

Main principles for the Childcare Offer national digital service

The Childcare Offer national digital service has been developed with the Digital Strategy for Wales principles at its core. The service is digital only, with no offline alternatives to the web-based application operating in parallel. However, a series of support arrangements, including a telephone support service, are in place to help those who need assistance in accessing online services.

Welsh Government is ensuring that the digital application will operate with Government Digital Service (GDS) listed Assistive Technology tools. In-screen guidance will be offered for users which will direct them to support materials or offer explanatory notes for assistance, all of which will be available in both English and Welsh.

It is being developed in both English and Welsh. Users will have the option to toggle between languages.

Prior to the establishment of the Childcare Offer national digital service,

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applications for funding under the Offer were submitted to and processed by 10 local authorities (LAs) acting as Delivery Authorities (DAs). These 10 DAs undertook much of the administration of the Childcare Offer on behalf of all 22 LAs. In moving to a fully online service we have worked closely with all 22 LAs, and specifically with the 10 DAs, as well as with a number of parents and childcare providers.

The below points were considered as part of the decision to move to an online service with the establishment of the Childcare Offer national digital service.

Paper based, or offline, versions:

- are not as secure
- take users longer to complete
- are less cost effective
- do not lend themselves to easily directing the user to further information
- are more open to errors
- do not lend themselves to iterative improvements
- do not help build the user's basic digital skills and confidence

It is also worth noting that of the 10 DAs administering the Childcare Offer, six of them do not have paper based versions of their services; they are all online but with direct support where needed. Four DAs did not respond.

Assisted digital support

Although the Childcare Offer national digital service has been iteratively tested with users as it was developed, inevitably there will be some users of the service (parents and childcare providers) who may require assistance to access it. This may be because they are not clear what is being asked of them in the online application or because they require further information beyond that provided within the service. An individual's ability to use the service could also be affected by their location, health and equipment. Therefore, some users will need help to

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use the service online; this will be referred to as 'assisted digital support' in this document.

Any user may need assisted digital support if they cannot physically use the digital service and/or lack:

- trust in the service or using the internet
- confidence to use an online service themselves
- access to the internet (connectivity and devices)
- basic digital skills
- motivation to overcome these barriers on their own

There will predominately be three types of assisted digital support that users may require:

1. Security elevation - activating accounts
2. Support with navigating through the system
3. Support with inputting the information

In developing the service, we were keen to involve users who identified as digitally excluded in user research and testing. However, we were unable to recruit any parents of children of, or close to, Childcare Offer age who identified as digitally excluded – even after using a specialist recruitment agency and offering incentives. This would seem to indicate that digital exclusion is not a significant issue for this group of users.

Intelligence from LAs, Cwlwm partners and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) told us that digital exclusion may be a potential issue for some childcare providers, particularly childminders. We therefore worked with PACEY Cymru, the representative body of childminders to find an appropriate user to inform and test the design and build.

We know that CIW sees a very high rate of digital completion by childcare providers in the Self-Assessment of Service Statement (SASS), and that over 50% of current LA application systems for the Childcare Offer are online only with no significant issues raised. All LAs have a clear plan in place to support

those who require help with the online service. LAs inform us that, to date, no issues have been reported to them from parents/providers in using these processes. We will ensure users who need assisted digital support know that it is available and how to access it. Messages about support will be shared via a variety of channels.

Whilst the Childcare Offer national digital service will only be available online, a range of offline support options will be available to users to enable them to interact with the online service, e.g. via telephony and face to face support. Online support mechanisms are also being explored at the time of writing. As the service is available via any device connected to the internet, users who do not own a device or experience data poverty can access the service via free-to-access devices in public libraries. Digital Communities Wales (DCW) are working with library staff to develop their digital skills recognising the vital role they play in supporting citizens.

DCW have developed bespoke resources, available online, for those needing support to develop their basic digital skills and confidence. Through DCW, if there was a recognised need, we could provide face to face support.

DCW are working with community focused organisations to undertake 'digital skills audits' which help identify gaps in knowledge of staff to support citizens with digital queries. This audit allows DCW to tailor training accordingly to ensure all front-line staff are digitally confident and therefore can meet the needs of citizens when seeking support to engage with digital services.

General support

DAs will continue to consider applications and all LAs will maintain their role in supporting parents and childcare settings in accessing the Childcare Offer. Prior to rollout, staff in all LAs will have received training and support on each area of the service and will be familiar with the processes to support parents and childcare settings. The user (parents/providers) will be able to access this

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support in either English or Welsh via an online form, by telephone or in person through their LA. When a user contacts the national helpline for support the call will be routed to the appropriate LA, depending on the nature of the query and language choice of the caller. If for some reason this fails, the LAs can transfer with ease to each other.

Support via webchat will not be available initially but will be explored as part of the Target Operating Model.

All LAs will be trained on all aspects of the digital service and can offer general assistance. For more specific queries, e.g. when a parent has already applied and wants to discuss their application, these calls will be automatically routed to the relevant DA.

Wrexham County Borough Council will be the dedicated LA to support with Government Gateway queries and any Welsh-language calls not able to be dealt with by the home Local Authority, whether that's a DA or one of the other 12 LAs (known as Engagement Authorities).

LAs are funded to raise awareness of the Offer locally, and this will include information on how to access support. A national campaign contract is also in place to support this activity and to raise awareness via traditional media channels, such as radio ads, as well as the use of social media. LAs have been provided with artwork that can be printed out for use by childcare settings to raise awareness with parents through leaflets, posters and banners. LAs can also use these to advertise in local newspapers and magazines if considered appropriate.

The Childcare Offer national digital service has been tested and designed to ensure it is as intuitive as possible. We will also provide bilingual, online support materials to help users to be as self-sufficient as possible when accessing the service. The support materials will be written using plain language and will be published in html so that the content is accessible to assistive technology and will therefore meet the needs of many users. The information will be hosted on the GOV.WALES website, and will therefore meet the **Web Content**

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Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA standard. Information on the **Welsh Government website is also available in other languages.**

In accessing the support materials on Gov.Wales, users will be able to:

- change colours, contrast levels and fonts
- zoom in up to 300% without the text spilling off the screen
- navigate most of the website using just a keyboard
- navigate most of the website using speech recognition software
- use most of the website using a screen reader

If additional formats are required for specific accessibility needs, this will be considered. Where a user is unable to access the online support materials, the LA team will be able to provide the information by telephone or in person. It is also the intention to develop support materials in video format, with audio and subtitles. The possibility of developing British Sign Language versions will also be explored, with optional transcript captions. Through our Welsh Government procured digital inclusion and health programme, Digital Communities Wales (DCW), we will ensure accessibility of the videos is considered.

We will also provide additional information on the elements of the Childcare Offer that parents and providers have told us can be complex to understand, such as how the early education and childcare elements of the Offer work together, and the childcare hours available during school holidays.

Service support provision

We will work with LAs to ensure that:

- support services can be offered bilingually
- they are sufficiently funded through grant funding, including to be able to manage changes in demand for support, such as seasonal peaks or increases when legacy channels are phased out particularly through the transition period

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- the level of support required of them is monitored throughout the transition period
- support is provided free of charge to users
- staff are appropriately trained to offer support
- users find the digital system convenient and easy to use
- information about users is kept secure and their privacy is protected
- as LAs, they can provide feedback on support by setting up feedback loops so that any examples of user confusion requiring help informs decisions around system design or support updates
- they can guide users easily through Government Gateway

Telephone support

Telephone support will be available to both parents and providers in Welsh and English, with LA staff establishing whether the query is related to the Childcare Offer or whether it is of a technical nature. Following initial diagnosis, the query will either be answered quickly over the phone or it may require further investigation.

As first line support, LA staff will continue to provide the necessary support for queries relating to the Childcare Offer and will provide step by step guidance where required. LA staff will be provided with guidance to enable them to resolve simple technical issues, such as password resets. However, for more complex technical issues, LA staff will escalate the issue/request to a second line technical support team for resolution.

LA staff will be provided with Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), be fully trained on each element of the digital service and have access to the support materials to assist parents and providers as required. LA staff experiencing technical issues themselves will be able to raise an incident request. The process on incident logging will be provided to LAs.

Support in person

For those users without a device or internet connection, support will also be available in person. If parents require help to complete their application or providers need assistance in submitting their details, e.g. because they are digitally excluded, then they should approach their Family Information Service (FIS) or other LA contact for help. This is also true for those who cannot physically type their own information into the service because they are disabled or lack confidence in using digital services. In these cases, LAs will provide support by sitting with the user and, where possible, helping them to use the digital service themselves. Some users will need in-person support at different locations, for example:

- LA offices/ family centres
- childminders may receive support in their own home
- childcare settings may receive support in the childcare setting

Both the user and the support provider must have access to the information on screen.

Ideally, users will be supported to type in their own information rather than LA staff doing this on their behalf. This is for data security purposes and because it helps the user develop basic digital skills and build confidence.

For anyone who is disabled or cannot physically complete the application, the LA would need to create a user account and input data for the user and scan documents to upload on behalf of the user.

We recognise that there may be occasions when a parent/provider may use a trusted adult to complete information on their behalf. The parent/provider would need to be present, know all the data required and have paper copies of documents for upload.

Those who are physically able to complete the application would be required to

bring copies of their documentary evidence into an appropriate workspace, where the LA officer can support them to upload the documents themselves.

Those who can input into the digital application but have difficulty photographing, scanning or uploading documentary evidence would need to visit the LA offices so that staff could offer guidance and support in uploading the evidence. Library staff could also support with the scanning and uploading skills required.

The national support telephone number will be staffed between 8.30am to 5pm Monday to Thursday and 8.30 to 4.30pm Friday. Should any parents ring the national service out of hours, an answer phone facility will be available to request a call back where further localised arrangements for support can be discussed.

Support for users in a language other than English and Welsh

LAs are ideally placed to understand the needs of their local communities and deliver a quality service to all, regardless of demographic or community background. Services such as Language Line or the Wales Interpretation and Translation Service (WITS) may be used, and many LAs already have their own processes and contracts in place to offer translation services for citizens.

Welsh Government recognises the opportunity to build on good practice from LAs that provide information in several languages beyond Welsh and English. This effective practice will be highlighted in ongoing discussions with FIS services.

Additional support for childcare providers

We have worked closely with Digital Communities Wales to offer generic training to the childcare sector to support and increase their digital confidence. Between

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September 2021 and September 2022, some 427 childcare settings have registered to access this resource. Working with DCW we will consider the need and type of support for parents as we start promoting the digital service to parents from autumn 2022. The upskilling of LA front line staff with a role in delivering the Childcare Offer is also being considered to enable effective support to end users.

Welsh Government has also provided funding via LAs to help providers to purchase digital devices or install broadband where required through the Childcare Offer Small Capital grant.

Additional support for parents

The Childcare Offer for Wales national digital service is a web-based application and, therefore, to benefit from the Childcare Offer policy intervention, parents will need access to the internet and an internet-enabled device to access the service. At the point of rollout, autumn 2022, many citizens across Wales, and more widely, will be experiencing cost of living pressures, potentially leading to data poverty, i.e. not being able to afford sufficient access to broadband or mobile data and/or not having access to digital devices.

Options for further intervention to mitigate any impact on a parent's ability to apply for the Offer have been considered. These are:

- produce paper forms for users to complete and allow local authority administrators to manually input and amend parents' applications and agreements on the digital service
- develop an IT 'agency' solution to allow local authority administrators to log in as the user and input and amend applications and agreements.
- purchase digital devices, data bundles and MiFi for local authorities to loan to parents, either directly, or via their childcare provider

At this time we would not recommend pursuing these further interventions as:

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- any parent who does not own a device or is experiencing data poverty can access the Offer via local council offices, public libraries or other public locations offering free internet access. Parents may also be able to access devices and wi-fi at childcare settings, particularly as WG has provided funding towards IT equipment where required;
- most, if not all, local authorities in Wales have mechanisms in place for supporting digital and financial inclusion and we would ask local authorities to signpost affected parents to these;
- a Welsh Government initiative to develop an interactive map of free-to-access broadband provision is scheduled for publication in autumn 2022. This will assist any parents wishing to locate free internet access in their local area.

We would, however, keep a six-monthly watching brief on the situation by keeping in regular touch with local authorities. We could also commission additional research into this issue through our independent evaluations. We will investigate further with colleagues in Education their experiences of parental access to IT during the pandemic to garner any lessons learnt.

Annex 1

Mission 1: digital services

Mission 1 digital services is focused on the delivery of public services in Wales, and designing them around user needs. A key supporting element of this mission is the role of the Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS). The Centre has been developing a set of Digital Service Standards that are common across all public service organisations in Wales. The Standards will support and embed user-centred service design and deliver better services and outcomes for users.

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Mission 2: digital inclusion

Mission 2 digital inclusion discusses alternative ways of accessing public services: “For people who cannot, or decide not to, participate digitally, we will continue to apply the principles of user-centered design so that there are alternative ways to access public services in Wales. The alternative access routes will be as good as those offered online.”

Our future policy will continue to build on the recognised need to support everyone to gain the motivation, confidence and skills in order to make informed decisions and choose how they participate in, and make the most of, our increasingly digital world. For those who cannot, or decide not to participate digitally, we must ensure alternative ways to access services remain. Digital needs to be seen as an approach to solving problems based on user needs and wants, rather than technology alone being the solution. We as Welsh Government will work to ensure that no citizen is left behind as we embrace a digital first approach and digital inclusion will be at the heart of all we deliver.

Digital services, websites and apps need to be accessible to everyone, including users with impairments to their:

- vision - like severely sight impaired (blind), sight impaired (partially sighted) or colour blind people
- hearing - like people who are deaf or hard of hearing
- mobility - like those who find it difficult to use a mouse or keyboard
- thinking and understanding - like people with dyslexia, autism or learning difficulties

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

Welsh Government has adopted the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1, which is based on 4 design principles:

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1. perceivable
2. operable
3. understandable
4. robust

By focusing on principles, not technology, we will consider the need to think about the different ways that people interact with content.

Principle 1 and elements of Principle 4 are applicable to the support materials surrounding the digital system, Principle 2, 3 and elements of Principle 4 are more system specific

Principle 1: perceivable

To meet **WCAG 2.1 Principle 1: perceivable (on w3.org)** we will make sure users can recognise and use the service with the senses that are available to them, such as:

- provide text alternatives ('alt text') for non-text content
- provide transcripts for audio and video
- provide captions for video
- make sure content is structured logically and can be navigated and read by a screen reader - this also helps if stylesheets are disabled
- use text colours that show up clearly against the background colour
- make sure every feature can be used when text size is increased by 200% and that content reflows to a single column when it's increased by 400%
- make sure your service is responsive - for example to the user's device, page orientation and font size they like to use
- make sure your service works well with assistive technologies - for example, important messages are marked up in a way that the screen readers knows they're important

Principle 2: operable

To meet [WCAG 2.1 Principle 2: operable \(on w3.org\)](#), we will make sure users can find and use content, regardless of how they choose to access it (for example, using a keyboard or voice commands), such as:

- make sure everything works for keyboard-only users
- let people play, pause and stop any moving content
- not use blinking or flashing content - or let the user disable animations
- provide a 'skip to content' link
- use descriptive titles for pages and frames
- make sure users can move through content in a way that makes sense
- use descriptive links so users know where a link will take them, or what downloadable linked content is
- use meaningful headings and labels, making sure that any accessible labels match or closely resemble the label you're using in the interface
- make it easy for keyboard users to see the item their keyboard or assistive technology is currently focused on - this is known as 'active focus'
- only use things like mouse events or dynamic interactions (like swiping or pinching) when they're strictly necessary - or let the user disable them and interact with the interface in a different way
- make it easy for users to disable and change shortcut keys

Principle 3: understandable

To meet [WCAG 2.1 Principle 3: understandable \(on w3.org\)](#), we will make sure people can understand the content and how the service works, such as:

- use [plain English \(on GOV.UK\)](#)/Welsh
- keep sentences short
- not use words and phrases that people won't recognise - or provide an explanation if you can't avoid it

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- explain all abbreviations and acronyms, unless they are well known and in common use - for example UK, EU, VAT
- make it clear what language the content is written in, and indicate if this changes
- make sure features look consistent and behave in predictable ways
- make sure all form fields have visible and meaningful labels - and that they're marked up properly
- make it easy for people to identify and correct errors in forms in accordance with best practice for form design as set out in the [GOV.UK Design System \(on GOV.UK\)](#)

Principle 4: robust

To meet [WCAG 2.1 Principle 4: robust \(on w3.org\)](#), we will make sure content can be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents (including reasonably outdated, current and anticipated browsers and assistive technologies), such as:

- use valid HTML so user agents, including assistive technologies, can accurately interpret and parse content
- make sure your code lets assistive technologies know what every user interface component is for, what state it's currently in and if it changes
- make sure important status messages or modal dialogs are marked up in a way that informs user of their presence and purpose, and lets them interact with them using their assistive technology
- lets the user return to what they were doing after they've interacted with the status message or modal input

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For more information refer to our [accessibility statement](#).

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