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Welsh Government

RESEARCH, DOCUMENT

# Early years policies in Wales and a post-pandemic future: mixed methods research study (summary)

This study explores the impact of the pandemic and the extent to which current early years programmes and policies are addressing the needs of children and families in Wales post pandemic.

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# Introduction

This executive summary presents the findings for the mixed methods research study into early years policies in Wales and a post-pandemic future. [\[footnote 1\]](#)

In June 2022, Miller Research were commissioned to conduct a research study to further understand how the Welsh Government can counteract any disadvantage or delay that has developed as a result of children and their families losing access to the usual support systems and interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the research was also to consider whether existing early years policies and programmes need refining or developing to meet the needs of children and families in a 'post-pandemic future'.

## Method

The final approach included two stages. Stage 1 consisted of 17 qualitative interviews with academics affiliated with a range of research institutions and universities across Wales and England. Stage 2 involved a series of eight virtual focus groups with a total of 76 early years practitioners, followed by an online survey of practitioners, which received a total of 178 responses.

A thematic approach was utilised throughout the study, with recruitment and research questions focusing on the key themes of child and holistic development, Speech, Language and Communication (SLC), child mental health and wellbeing, and parent mental health and wellbeing. This was combined with a review of key early year policies and programmes in Wales. These included:

- Flying Start
- Families First
- Early Years Integration Transformation Programme (EYITP)

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- Healthy Child Wales Programme (HCWP)
- Parenting. Give it time
- Talk With Me: Speech, Language and Communication delivery plan
- Welsh Government policies aimed at mitigating the adversity arising from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Additional Learning Needs (ALN) System
- Curriculum for Wales

## Impacts of COVID-19

Academics and early years practitioners frequently cited the negative impact on the wellbeing and mental health of children and parents, reporting higher levels of anxiety and a loss of confidence. Additionally, physical development and SLC skills were seen to have been inhibited, the latter even regressing for many children as a result of the pandemic.

Generally, academics believed that the lack of access to Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care during this period largely resulted in the exacerbation of pre-existing issues, as opposed to the creation of any distinctly new problems.

## Priorities for the future Early Years policy in Wales

Practitioners emphasised the importance of a person-centred, holistic understanding of child development moving forward, with a particular focus on providing appropriate support to the needs of children with ALN. In alignment with the principles of the Curriculum for Wales, a play-based approach, especially focussing on outdoor learning, was seen by academics and practitioners as a crucial strategy for helping child development. This approach

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was considered particularly important for mitigating the impacts of any trauma that children experienced during the pandemic. Similarly, practitioners across the sector expressed that children's mental health and wellbeing should be prioritised by focusing on their safety, security, and happiness. For parents, signposting accessible and appropriate resources was viewed as central to meeting mental health and effective home learning needs.

Overall, improved multi-agency collaboration, the sharing of best practice and data-sharing were seen as key to ensuring success in the early years.

Another highlighted priority was the volume and quality of training, particularly that which enables practitioners to be more 'trauma informed', as well as training to support children with SLC needs, ALN and Autism Spectrum Disorder.

To address the aforementioned SLC issues experienced by children, participants called for a greater standard and volume of SLC training in the early years sector, as well as more robust SLC checks by Health Visitors (HVs). The need for a better or universal SLC assessment tool was also raised.

## Barriers

The research identified several barriers faced by the early years sector. This included the overall funding available for various interventions and the general short-term nature of centralised grant funding. Difficulties in recruitment and retention in the sector were attributed to the relatively low salaries for early years staff. This in turn limited current staff in their capacity to engage with the relevant training and to provide the most effective support possible.

## Priorities for programmes and policies

Data from the online survey showed that practitioners felt that Flying Start was the most suitable programme to meet the needs of children and families post pandemic, particularly in the field of speech and language. The phased expansion of Flying Start was well received, with many practitioners viewing it as a key priority going forward. Furthermore, there were some calls for expansion of Flying Start to not only include the childcare element, but also enhance visiting support, parenting support and SLC support.

Across a range of early years policies and programmes, practitioners suggested improving communication to improve awareness of the support on offer, alongside enabling greater flexibility in their respective delivery models. In the case of Families First the need to extend the time window of support was deemed crucial. Amongst respondents who were familiar with the EYITP, further rollout and longer-term investment in the programme was identified as an important next step. In coherence with the principles behind the EYITP, practitioners also recognised the need to improve the continuity of HV contacts for service users through the HCWP, alongside changing the contact schedule.

## Summary of recommendations

In response to the priorities and barriers laid out above, general recommendations are:

- consideration of the wages for the early years workforce
- encouraging collaboration between agencies and services
- improving the quality and volume of training
- making early years jobs more secure
- prioritising SLC development

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- adopting a play-based approach (particularly for children with ALN)
- encouraging face-to-face engagement with children and families
- use of a strengths-based approach, as opposed to a deficit-focussed approach

## Programme-specific recommendations

- Continue with the expansion of the Flying Start roll-out, but extend this to include enhanced health visiting, Speech, Language and Communication support and parenting support. This should be based on need.
- Allocate proportionate funding for the Flying Start expansion, to ensure the service is not diluted and remains effective.
- Introduce greater flexibility into the current time-limited window of support eligible under the Families First Programme. This is to recognise that families' needs are more complex and require more time to address.
- Increase awareness of the Welsh Government's commitment to move policy away from the narrow focus on the original ACEs, to one which recognises the existence and impact of a much broader range of potential sources of childhood adversity and trauma.
- Revisit the contact schedule for the HCWP in recognition of (limited) health visitor capacity and the value of allowing health visitors to use their professional judgement over which contacts are needed (i.e. more or potentially fewer than the minimum 10).
- Explore more meaningful process and outcome measures for the main early years programmes in Wales (specifically Flying Start, Families First and HCWP).

## Footnotes

[1] The 'early years' is one of Welsh Government's five cross-cutting priorities

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and is defined as the period of life from pre-birth to age 7.

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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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