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Evaluation of the Early Implementation of the Childcare Offer for Wales: Communication and Marketing of the Offer

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Evaluation of the Early Implementation of the Childcare Offer for Wales: Communication and Marketing of the Offer

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

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Glossary

Acronym/Key word	Definition
Childcare Offer	30 hours a week of government-funded early education and childcare for working parents of three- and four-year olds, for up to 48 weeks of the year.
EILA	Early Implementer Local Authority.
Foundation Phase	The developmental curriculum for all three to seven-year-olds.
FIS	Family Information Services - the point of contact for advice and information on local services for families and carers and provide information on childcare.
FPN	Foundation Phase Nursery Provision - a minimum of 10 hours a week of funded early education for three and four year-olds during term time, from the term following a child's third birthday. Also referred to as early education and funded early education.
Maintained provider	A childcare setting maintained by the local authority.
Non-maintained provider	A childcare setting operated by a private, voluntary, or independent childcare provider.
Tax-Free Childcare	UK Government will pay £2 for every £8 paid for childcare of children under the age of 11 years, if parents are working for at least 16 hours a week.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report is one of three additional papers produced alongside the main evaluation report of the early implementation (first 12 months) of the Childcare Offer in Wales, conducted by Arad Research between July 2017 and October 2018.
- 1.2 This report focuses on the communication and marketing associated with the Childcare Offer. It reviews the communication processes that have taken place on a national Welsh Government level, particularly in relation to the communication between the Welsh Government and the early implementer local authorities (EILAs); communication between EILAs and local providers and communication between providers and participating parents. It is informed by desk-based research, interviews with the EILA Offer teams, stakeholder organisations, childcare providers and parents.
- 1.3 The rest of this section provides background context, with an overview of the Childcare Offer's delivery across the seven EILAs. Section 2 presents an overview of the methodology and highlights the areas investigated to ensure a full understanding of communicating the Offer. Section 3 discusses the evaluation findings on communication, section 4 presents the conclusions and section 5 proposes recommendations for consideration as the Childcare Offer is implemented across Wales

The Childcare Offer

- 1.4 The Welsh Government has committed to provide a total of 30 hours a week of government-funded early education and childcare for 48 weeks of the year, which includes nine weeks during school holiday periods. The Childcare Offer targets three and four-year old children whose parents earn on average a weekly minimum equivalent to, or more than, 16 hours at national minimum wage or national living wage.
- 1.5 The intended outcomes of the Offer include:
- Parents have more employment choices
 - Parents have increased disposable income

- Parents can make an informed choice about using formal childcare
- Childcare sector grows in response to increased demand and take-up of formal childcare.

1.6 Annex A provides further detail on the outputs and outcomes for the Offer.

1.7 Since September 2017 the Childcare Offer has been available in the seven early implementer local authorities (EILAs), which included all, or part of, the following local authorities;

- Anglesey and Gwynedd (joint working)
- Blaenau Gwent
- Caerphilly
- Flintshire
- Rhondda Cynon Taf
- Swansea.

1.8 Applications for the funding of childcare places began in June 2017, for children to access places from September 2017. The number of children who accessed the Childcare Offer during the first year of rollout across the seven EILAs was 4,101.¹ The whole of Blaenau Gwent local authority was included from the outset, with the offer available in parts of the other six EILAs. Additional areas within these six EILAs were added to expand the availability of the Childcare Offer to more children in November 2017 and January 2018.

¹ Welsh Government monitoring data.

2. Methodology

2.1 A mixed methods approach was undertaken to gather feedback about the Childcare Offer's communication and marketing. The monitoring and administrative data submitted to Welsh Government by each EILA were examined, and the range of fieldwork undertaken, as outlined in Table 2.1.

Table Error! No text of specified style in document..1. Fieldwork informing the evaluation of the Childcare Offer for Wales

Participant	Method	Number of respondents	When
Welsh Government Officials	Telephone and face-to-face interviews	11	Throughout the evaluation period
All EILA Childcare Offer team representatives	Face-to-face interviews	1-4 staff in each EILA; 18 interviews	Autumn 2017; Early 2018 and September 2018
Key stakeholder organisations*	Telephone and face-to-face interviews	14	July to September 2018
Participating Childcare providers	Telephone interviews	150	March to September 2018
Participating parents	Online survey	555	May 2018
Participating parents	Telephone interviews	36	August/September 2018
Non-participating parents	Telephone interviews	21	August/September 2018

Note: further information on the methodology can be found in the main evaluation report's methodology section.

*Annex B contains the list of stakeholders interviewed.

3. Findings

- 3.1 Communication has been important in the development and early implementation of the Childcare Offer in Wales. This chapter sets out the findings relating to communication at three different levels, namely, the Welsh Government, the EILAs and the providers.

Communication between Welsh Government and wider stakeholders, EILAs, providers and parents

- 3.2 The Welsh Government consulted with a wide range of stakeholders as part of the process of developing the Offer. Most stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation (list in Annex B) noted that they felt that they had been included in the process of developing the Offer and believed that the communication with national organisations had been good. Those who were involved in the dedicated Stakeholder Reference Group also welcomed the opportunity to be involved.
- 3.3 The seven local authorities which were successful in their application to take part in the Offer (the EILAs) took part in regular meetings with Welsh Government officials. These meetings were held monthly in the period leading up to the Offer and during the early delivery period and formed a key part of shaping the detail of the Offer. As such, key elements of the Offer were known to the EILAs from the outset, negating the need to specifically ‘communicate’ the policy to them.
- 3.4 In the months leading up the launch of the Offer, the Welsh Government ran a pre-Offer publicity campaign and consultation exercise called #TalkChildcare to gather the views of parents and providers on childcare. The campaign started in August 2016 and included an online survey and a series of events and focus groups with parents. Phase two of the #Talkchildcare consultation commenced in October 2017 with a focus on providers. Summary findings from phase one were reported on the Welsh Government’s childcare pages² and summary findings of phase two are due to be shared in late 2018. Many parents and providers across Wales took part in

² Welsh Government (2017) [#TalkChildcare Campaign](#). [ONLINE] [Accessed 22 October 2018].

campaign events and there was positive feedback generally from stakeholders on the campaign. However, hardly any of the providers interviewed as part of this evaluation recognised the term #TalkChildcare, and some provider representatives were of the view that more national level communication to providers should have been included in the first round of the campaign.

- 3.5 The initial development and early implementation of the Childcare Offer took place within a challenging timescale. However, despite this challenge, the Offer was successfully launched and implemented across all seven EILAs in September 2017. Those consulted were of the view that the communication and close working relationship that was developed between the Welsh Government and EILAs during 2017 had been key to achieving this.
- 3.6 EILA Offer teams noted that they welcomed the way the Welsh Government involved them early in the process, even before the policy and guidance for early testing had been finalised. The Welsh Government took a deliberate co-production approach, which was also a necessity given the challenging timescales involved. The outcome of this was that EILAs took greater ownership of the childcare Offer delivery process which in turn supported their commitment to overcoming early challenges successfully. One EILA Offer team noted that they welcomed the fact the Childcare Offer was not 'placed upon' them by the Welsh Government in a 'prescriptive way' and that the challenging timescales involved encouraged more open working relationships, which in turn ensured that much more was achieved than may otherwise have been the case.

Communication between EILAs and local childcare providers

- 3.7 A key role for the EILAs, particularly during the initial implementation stage of the Offer, was to engage with childcare providers within their local authority area to inform them of the Offer and encourage them to sign up to deliver the funded childcare. Once the Offer was launched, the EILA Offer teams were in regular contact with the providers to answer any queries and to receive booking and payment information.
- 3.8 From spring 2017 onwards the EILA Offer teams delivered workshops aimed at childcare providers across their delivery areas to publicise the Offer and answer any questions or concerns. This process was largely successful with most providers across all the EILAs having signed up to deliver the Offer.
- 3.9 The level of engagement between EILAs and providers has largely been dependent on the historical links between EILA Offer team members and the local childcare sector. This has been stronger in some EILAs than others. Nevertheless, a large majority (85 per cent of the providers interviewed) had heard about the Offer from their local authority. This was consistent across all the EILAs, and almost all providers interviewed as part of this evaluation reported that they had good on-going working relationships and communication with their EILA Offer teams. This on-going communication once delivery had started, was mostly in the form of 'phone queries about the booking or payment system' or to check how to deal with new scenarios not yet in the guidelines.
- 3.10 Some providers were slightly critical of the timing at which they heard about some details of the Offer, explaining that many questions remained unanswered in the introductory workshops, with clear information, including confirmation of the rate to be paid, only becoming available nearer the launch date. However, providers commented that they understood that the EILAs 'were still ironing out some details at the time of the meeting' and that in fact, 'some things weren't clear until they were actually running the Offer'.
- 3.11 Although the engagement between EILAs and providers has been good, the focus of the engagement process has been mainly, as would be expected, with providers operating within the pilot area of the EILA. However, as the Offer follows the child,

parents can take up the Offer with a childcare provider located outside their home local authority – including authorities that were not included in the early implementation stage. These providers were less likely to have been involved in initial rounds of EILA communication and engagement.

- 3.12 Further to this, some providers are located in areas where parents from more than one local authority are accessing childcare funded by the Offer with them. In these cases, the provider had needed to engage and maintain regular contact with, as well as provide monthly information on hours booked, attendance and invoicing schedules to, two or more EILAs. This was the case for three of the childcare providers interviewed, although they did also note that communications between them and the EILAs had been very positive. However, maintaining regular administrative contact with more than one local authority could be challenging for some providers, especially if the hours of FPN delivery (and therefore number of childcare hours available) differ for children located in different local authorities - as is currently the case in many instances. A few providers already noted some challenges in this respect where different school nursery settings, within the same local authority, provided different number of hours of FPN. In some cases, this could differ according to whether the child took up morning or afternoon FPN sessions within the same setting.
- 3.13 Organisations representing the childcare sector played a key role in supplementing the information from EILAs to providers (and to a lesser extent, to parents). They briefed their members through newsletters, events and contact with regional/support workers. Interviews with these stakeholders revealed a determination on their part to make sure that the early implementation was delivered as smoothly as possible and they invested a great deal of staff time in making sure that the childcare providers were well informed and encouraged to take part. The level of support varied from area to area since organisations (such as Mudiad Meithrin, Early Years Wales) have regional staff members working on the ground in some local authority areas, paid for by funding from the local authority, and would therefore be more involved and up to date with the Offer in that area.

Communication between EILAs and parents

- 3.14 The EILAs mainly shared information with parents via their websites, social media accounts (Facebook and twitter) and by providing printed materials to be distributed via the providers. Just under a quarter of the parents responding to the survey had heard about the Offer from the local authority.
- 3.15 One EILA delivered the Offer local-authority-wide during the first year of early implementation and as such were able to publicise the Offer more widely to all eligible parents regardless of postcode. This EILA delivered parent information sessions across the authority, (with attendance levels varying from area to area), promoted the Offer using social media, a rolling banner on the local authority website and posters in local authority premises. Towards the end of the year they had commissioned an information video³ ready for the second year of delivery.
- 3.16 Despite the local authority wide promotion, the number of parents accessing the Offer in this EILA was relatively low compared to the other EILAs for the first year. However, this is an area which historically has a low use of formal childcare. As such it is not possible to attribute the number of parents accessing the Offer with the promotional approach adopted in this area.
- 3.17 Although some parents noted that they became aware of the Offer through their direct contact their EILA Offer team, most became aware of the opportunity from their childcare provider (see next section). Parents' contact with EILAs focussed primarily on the application process particularly providing eligibility evidence and other administration tasks.

³ Blaenau Gwent CBC 2018 [Information for Parents ONLINE](#). [Accessed 22 October 2018]

Communication between providers and parents

- 3.18 Childcare providers were parents' main source of information about the Offer. Most of the parents surveyed (60 per cent) found out about the Offer from their existing childcare providers. Just over a quarter of parents surveyed (26 per cent) found out about the Offer by word of mouth and 26 per cent from their LA⁴.
- 3.19 Childcare providers have therefore played an important role in promoting the Offer and raising parents' awareness. Over 90 per cent of the childcare providers interviewed noted that they had promoted the Offer to parents. Childminders tended to promote and explain the Offer in direct conversations with parents while many day nurseries and playgroups informed their existing and potential future customers of the Offer through posters and flyers provided by the EILA. Some providers also produced their own versions of these posters and flyers and promoted the Offer on social media, their own website, newsletters and one-to-one discussions with parents. Two providers interviewed had invested in extra promotion, such as banners and adverts in the local free paper; one of these providers noted that this promotion had resulted in new customers while another explained that despite all their promotional efforts they hadn't had any new clients for the Childcare Offer.
- 3.20 Generally, however, providers were of the view that their direct contact and awareness raising with parents had worked well and considered it a way of both reassuring parents of the legitimacy of the Offer as well as an opportunity to answer initial queries about the application process. Some providers noted that they had to repeat some messages several times to parents and in some cases offer direct support in the application process. If providers were unable to provide parents with the information and/or support they needed they referred them on to the EILA Offer team.

'I had to repeat things to parents quite a few times - many didn't understand or believe that they would be eligible, and some parents found the application process difficult, so we had to help them with this as well'. (childcare provider)

⁴ Some parents noted more than one source, so the total is greater than 100 per cent.

3.21 This point raised by providers about some parents not understanding the Offer was also raised by EILAs and stakeholders. A couple of providers noted that some of their parents thought the Offer ‘was too good to be true’ or initially ignored it without checking the details as they assumed that as working parents it wouldn’t apply to them.

Limitations of the communication between providers and parents

3.22 Although the process of disseminating information relating to the Offer to parents directly from providers worked well in most cases, there have been some limitations to this form of promotion. The first limitation has been the level of consistency and accuracy in the information passed on to parents by providers. Although most providers were given posters and information flyers supplied by the EILA that they could share with parents, these were adapted by some providers and others relied on verbally sharing with parents the information they had picked up during their meetings with EILAs. Most of the information passed on was accurate – however, there were cases when the information passed on lacked clarity and led to some confusion on the part of parents, regarding the detail of what they would be eligible for.

3.23 Another limitation of placing a reliance on providers to promote the Offer is that it is mainly parents who already access formal childcare who become aware of it. Messages promoted in this way are less likely to reach parents who currently access informal childcare only. In addition to this, providers are only likely to promote the Offer if they have the capacity to deliver childcare funded in this way. Providers who decided not to sign up to deliver the Offer have been less likely to promote the Offer. A couple of parents interviewed noted that they had not become aware of the Offer for some time after their child had become eligible and so missed out on a few months’ funded childcare. In these two cases their existing childcare provider had not registered to deliver the Offer and therefore had no reason to bring the Offer to the attention of the parent.

3.24 During the first year of implementation, the Offer was only available in selected wards in six of the seven EILAs. As a result, communication and promotional

activities had to be targeted to specific areas. EILAs avoided authority-wide promotional campaigns as they did not want to mis-lead parents who were located in non-eligible wards. For the same reason, a national all Wales promotional campaign could not be implemented during the first year. This placed further limitations on the potential reach of communication and promotional activities during the pilot phase. These limitations will diminish as the Offer is further rolled out and opportunities for national awareness campaigns to be launched.

Communication with schools

3.25 Most of the communication and engagement relating to the Offer has been between EILAs, parents and childcare providers operating in non-maintained settings. This is understandable as these are the individuals and organisations that mainly need to respond in some way to accommodate the Offer.

3.26 The Childcare Offer includes the provision of Foundation Phase Nursery (FPN) education as well as childcare. The majority of FPN provision in Wales is delivered within primary school settings operating within the maintained sector. However, communication and promotion of the Offer with schools has been limited during the first year – possibly since it is business as usual for FPN providers as they did not need to change any of their FPN delivery or administration processes to accommodate the Offer. A small number of providers said that they had been invited to parents' events or asked to provide material for new parent packs, but these invitations built on long-standing relationships or co-location with their local schools. Most providers were not aware of any information sharing about the Offer from their local primary schools, and were, 'surprised that the parents hadn't heard about it through the schools.'

'The schools don't seem to know a lot about it though. It seems that childcare providers like us, and the nurseries and childminders, they seem to know a lot about the Offer, but schools don't, they've got no leaflets or banners up around the school. (Sessional day care provider)

3.27 Given that the FPN is a universal offer available to all 3 and 4-year olds in Wales, publicising the Offer through the primary school settings where most FPN is

delivered may have provided further opportunities to reach a wider group of eligible children and parents, and would have been welcomed by childcare providers. However, EILAs reported that they had encountered some challenges encouraging schools to engage with the Offer. A few possible reasons for this were suggested.

- 3.28 The first was capacity. The EILA Offer teams were usually small – typically consisting of one or two members of staff – who had limited time and capacity. Most of their time was taken up promoting the Offer to childcare providers, processing applications for the Offer from parents and administering payments and collating monitoring data etc. This left little time for further engagement with the schools.
- 3.29 Secondly most EILA Offer teams consisted of individuals who had already established good working relationships with the local childcare sector and less experience of engaging with the local education sector. One EILA Offer team however, sat within the 21st Century Schools team of the local authority's education department. In this authority attempts have been made to engage with schools in order to gain their support in promoting the Offer to parents, but even here it has been a challenge. Some schools in this EILA did not feel comfortable promoting an Offer that was not aimed at all parents and children; this was particularly the case for schools located in relatively disadvantaged areas where the school was of the view that the Offer would not be relevant to many if any of the parents as they would not meet the employment eligibility. Additionally, some schools in this EILA currently provide 30 hours a week of FPN and as such, parents could not access further childcare hours funded by the Offer during the school term.
- 3.30 Other findings emerging from this evaluation – particularly those relating to the extent to which the childcare Offer aligns with and influences FPN provision, support the view that closer working relationships between childcare providers and early years education providers would benefit the accessibility of the Offer. Closer alignment and working arrangements such as these could also be beneficial to the way in which the Offer is promoted to parents and in supporting their understanding of the Offer.

Communication challenges

- 3.31 The greatest challenge in communicating the Offer during the first year has been the fact that it was delivered in pilot areas across most EILAs. This required targeted communication and restricted the use of any national or authority-wide campaigns. Some of the parents interviewed felt that they had found out about the offer 'by chance' while others noted that they had only become aware of the Offer some time after it had been launched. Providers also noted that they had anticipated that there would have been more press coverage and adverts regarding the Offer to support their own promotion of it.
- 3.32 Providers reported that it was difficult for some parents to fully understand the Offer, and that they were often asked about what was covered under the Offer, when the child became eligible, which parents were eligible and how the Offer could affect other schemes that contribute to childcare costs. Providers went on to explain that the childcare and early years issues in general could be difficult to understand and that parents' confusion was not necessarily just linked to the Offer.
- 3.33 Terms used in the communication such as '30 hours' and 'free childcare' also caused some confusion. Some parents and stakeholders also noted that referring to the Offer as the 'Childcare' Offer detracted from the fact that early years education forms an integral part of what is being offered. Parents and providers also noted that the way in which the availability of funded childcare during school holidays was communicated was also confusing. For example, many parents noted that they didn't realise at the outset that the Offer only provided funded childcare for nine of the 13 weeks of school holidays.
- 3.34 The Childcare Offer is not the only support available to parents in Wales. Other programmes and initiatives such as tax-free childcare, child tax credits and childcare vouchers are also available to some eligible parents. The range of other support packages and how they interact and influence each other has also led to confusion amongst some parents. Two parents interviewed during this evaluation, who were eligible for the Offer, had not accessed the support as they feared that by doing so they would be required to give up their Child Tax Credit support which in their view, would leave them worse off financially.

3.35 At the time when the Offer was first launched, findings relating to the evaluation of the childcare offer pilot in England were being reported in the national press; some of which were quite negative at the time. This created some confusion for parents and providers in Wales as it was often difficult, from the information available, for them to distinguish between the childcare offer in England and the Offer in Wales. For example, general internet searches undertaken by parents and providers wishing to gain more information about the Offer in Wales, often directed them towards websites relating only to the offer in England. The lack of any national promotion of the Childcare Offer in Wales at the time added to this confusion.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 This paper has summarised evaluation findings relating to the communication and marketing of the Childcare Offer during the first year of early implementation.
- 4.2 One of the key success factors associated with the early implementation of the Childcare Offer in Wales has been the good working relationship and communication established between the Welsh Government and EILAs. EILAs welcomed the openness of the communication process adopted as this ensured that the Offer was not viewed as a 'prescriptive' policy placed upon them by Welsh Government.
- 4.3 Efforts to promote the Offer were mainly focussed within the agreed pilot areas across each of the EILAs. Within these areas, information was cascaded from the Welsh Government to EILAs, from EILAs to providers and from providers to parents.
- 4.4 This communication chain generally appears to have worked well. However, the absence of a national or even, in most cases, EILA-wide campaign to promote the Offer, limited the reach of this information cascading process. Further limitations were placed on the reach of early promotional activities due to the large reliance placed on the childcare providers to inform parents of the Offer.
- 4.5 In many cases, only parents who already used formal childcare with those providers became aware of the Offer during early rollout. Parents using informal childcare as well as those taking up childcare with providers who had not signed up to deliver the Offer, were less likely to be aware of its existence. This is evident in the fact that that the vast majority of the parents who accessed the Offer (90 per cent) previously accessed childcare from the same provider (See main evaluation report).
- 4.6 The role of schools in communicating and promoting the Offer to parents was not a focus of this evaluation. Evidence relating to this is, at this stage, is therefore limited compared to the evidence gathered from the perspective of providers and EILA Offer teams. However, the evidence that has been gathered suggests that the schools have not played a significant role in promoting the Offer to date. Feedback

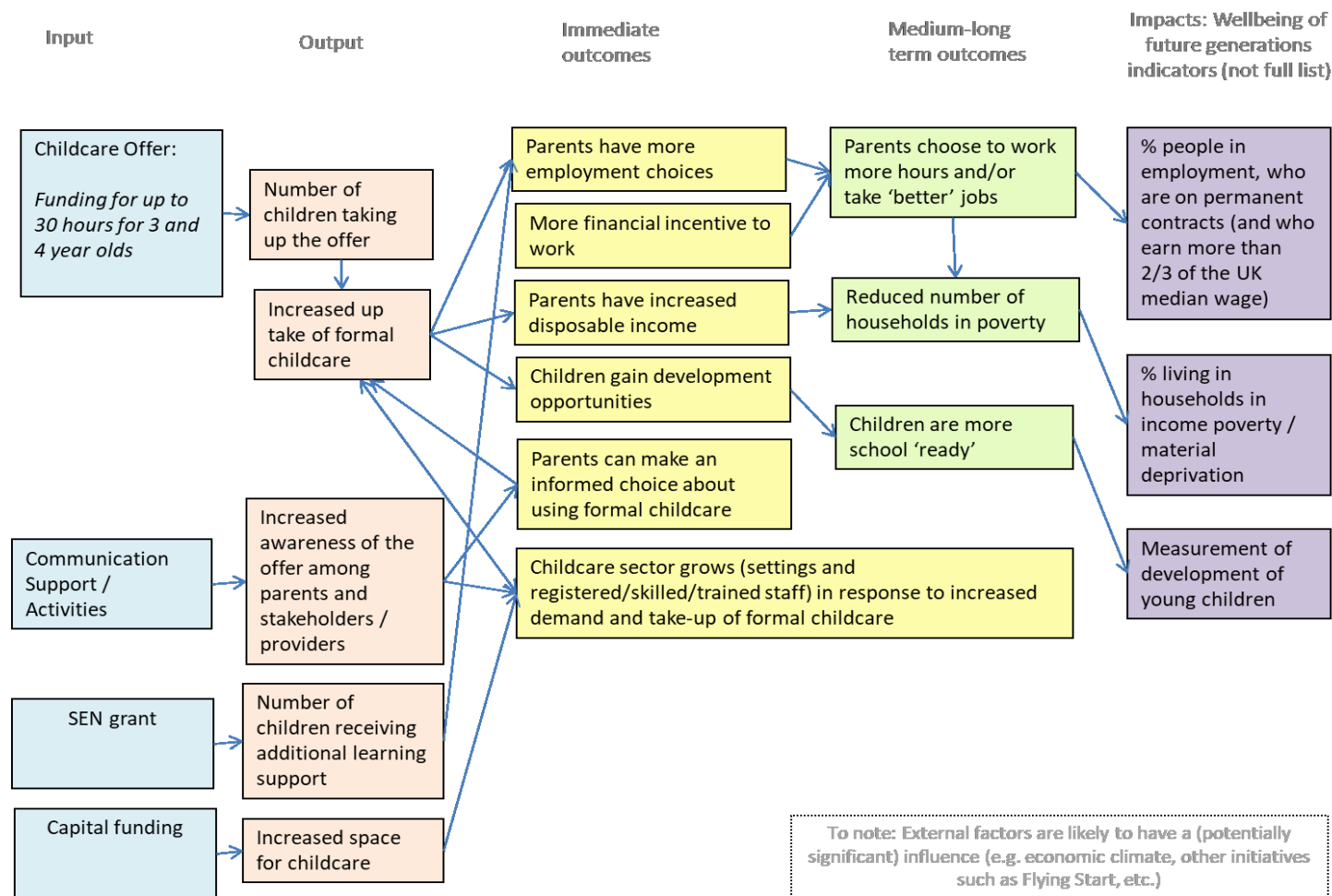
from childcare providers also suggests that an increased role for school in publicising the Offer in future would be welcomed.

- 4.7 As noted above, many of the challenges relating to communication and marketing are ones associated with delivering an initiative in selected pilot areas, and the challenges of targeting parents in certain postcodes will not apply in future. However, there are some lessons that have already been learnt and are relevant for future delivery. Firstly, the issue of some parents potentially missing the publicity because they assume that they are not eligible is one that needs addressing. Secondly, the principle of simplifying all correspondence with parents should apply across all new delivery areas. The EILAs have refined and simplified their messages to parents so that they draw the parents' attention to the key information in what is already a complicated early childhood education and care environment.

5. Recommendations

- As we move closer to national rollout a more centralised approach to promoting and awareness raising should be considered. There seems to be a current reliance on childcare providers to raise parents' awareness of the Offer which appears to limit the potential reach of promotional activities, especially amongst those who do not currently use FPN or formal childcare.
- Further research and analysis to understand why some parents/guardians choose not to take up free early education or childcare entitlements is worth consideration. Awareness and understanding may be part of the issue so further testing of communication methods or wording prior to national rollout in 2020 could contribute to a better understanding of what works in raising awareness and interest in this context.
- Closer alignment may be required between schools delivering FPN and Childcare providers in order to raise awareness of the Offer as well as ensuring that parents can access the childcare and early years education strands of the Offer.
- More, and clearer information may be needed to help parents work out childcare costs taking into account other benefits available to them including child tax credit.

Annex A: Childcare Offer for Wales Logic Model



Source: Welsh Government, dated April 2018.

Annex B: Organisations consulted during the evaluation

Care Inspectorate Wales

Children in Wales

Children's Commissioner for Wales

Chwarae Teg

Clybiau Plant Cymru

Early Years Wales (previously called Wales Pre-school Providers Association)

EILA Childcare Offer teams

Estyn

Future Generations Commissioner for Wales

Mudiad Meithrin

NDNA (National Day Nurseries Association)

PACEY (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years)

Play Wales

Social Care Wales

Welsh Government (officials from the Childcare Offer, Foundation Phase, Enterprise and Parents Childcare and Employment (PaCE) teams)

WLGA (Welsh Local Government Association)