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The Childcare Offer for Wales – Research with Parents of Children aged 1-5

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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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Table of contents

Executive Summary	3
2. Methodology	12
3. Key Findings	15
4. Conclusions and Recommendations.....	35

Glossary of acronyms

ALN	Additional Learning Needs
EPS	(Department for) Education and Public Services
IRP	Internal Research Programme
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths

Executive Summary

1. The Internal Research Programme (IRP, Knowledge and Analytical Services, Welsh Government) was commissioned in September 2016 by the Childcare, Play and Early Years Division to undertake research with parents and guardians. The purpose of the research was to better understand parents' and guardians' experiences of their current childcare arrangements and their knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of the Welsh Government's proposed childcare offer for Wales.
2. The Welsh Government recognises that childcare is one of the biggest challenges currently facing families in Wales. The Welsh Government's Programme for Government 2016, 'Taking Wales Forward', set out the aspiration to deliver a childcare offer comprising 30 hours of free childcare per week, for 48 weeks of the year, for working parents of three and four year olds in Wales. The childcare offer seeks to remove barriers to secure employment for those parents who want to work or start a business but are currently constrained by childcare pressures.
3. In August 2016 the Childcare, Play and Early Years Division launched the #TalkChildcare campaign to engage with parents and providers on the childcare offer for Wales. The campaign was used to raise awareness of the childcare offer, understand the current barriers to parents accessing childcare and allow parents and providers an opportunity to raise any concerns and suggest what would be important to them about the offer. Phase one of the campaign, delivered between August 2016 and April 2017, comprised a number of different engagement activities, including an online survey, childcare provider events, a #TalkChildcare roadshow which visited 15 towns and a number of childcare settings and direct correspondence with parents and providers who sent their views and experiences to the #TalkChildcare mailbox¹.
4. In order to gather in-depth qualitative data to inform the design and delivery of the childcare offer, the Childcare, Play and Early Years Division approached the IRP to conduct a series of focus groups with parents and guardians of children aged 1-5 years at six locations across Wales; Caernarfon, Cardiff and the Vale, Llandysul, Swansea, Tredegar and Wrexham. Researchers facilitated seven focus groups, which included both an English-language and a Welsh-language focus group in Caernarfon. Focus groups were hosted and facilitated in childcare settings, principally Flying Start integrated children's centres or childcare provision, and promoted widely to parents and guardians not currently attending Flying Start provision through Third Sector and social media networks. The focus groups comprised primarily female participants of different employment statuses, including those who were currently working full-time, part-time or were self-employed and those on maternity leave or unemployed. Participants included those from dual-parent and single-parent families. To accommodate interest in the research generated by the #TalkChildcare online campaign, two additional telephone interviews were conducted with individuals in the same areas in which the focus groups were conducted, who were unable to attend the focus groups in person. A number of enquiries in locations where there were no plans to facilitate a focus group were also directed to the #TalkChildcare campaign to maximise input from the target population.

¹ The findings from the #TalkChildcare campaign will be published following the publication of this report. More information on the campaign can be found at www.gov.wales/talkchildcare

5. The aims of the qualitative research were to:
- better understand parents' perspectives on their current childcare arrangements and, particularly, any challenges those current arrangements present to parents and children;
 - gauge parents' current understanding of early education and the distinction between this and 'formal' childcare
 - assess the proposed extension of the childcare offer in respect of:
 - the most desirable model of delivery;
 - anticipated mode of take-up; and
 - the potential and desirability of increasing employment hours as a result of take-up
 - use the findings of the research to make recommendations to inform policy development and delivery of the additional childcare offer.

Key Findings

6. The forms of childcare used by parents were varied according to the different family circumstances, work commitments of parents and to some degree dependent on the availability of different forms of childcare in the area in which they lived. There were also consistent reports across all locations of parents using a combination of different forms of childcare throughout an average week to suit their circumstances, including parents, predominantly mothers, looking after their children full-time, private nurseries, Flying Start provision², informal childcare (predominantly from grandparents) and child-minders.

7. The forms of childcare used varied across some geographic areas, due in some cases to varying availability of certain types of childcare in those areas. There was, for example, higher reported use and more positive perceptions of care provided by child-minders in rural locations such as Llandysul. In other areas parents had varying preferences for who looked after their children; in Tredegar, grandparents and other family members were more often called upon to provide informal childcare.

8. Several factors emerged as the main determinants of how parents selected and combined childcare, namely; cost, location, and suitability of childcare with working commitments. Parents across all groups pointed out that nursery costs can be so high relative to average wages that much of the money mothers earn in part-time work are used almost entirely to pay for childcare, with some questioning whether balancing work and caring for children was financially worthwhile. Cost emerged as the single most prohibitive factor to families selecting the most beneficial childcare arrangements for their needs.

9. Mothers frequently discussed the process of returning to work following having children as being particularly challenging due to the need to balance their career aspirations with

² Flying Start is available to children from the age of two until three, for families living in eligible areas of Wales. Children receive up to 12.5 hours of quality childcare per week in Flying Start areas.

their caring responsibilities, and often the lack of support available to do so. Firstly, mothers expressed the difficulties they faced re-entering the labour market following an extended period of time out of work to have children, and secondly the difficulties in balancing work commitments and childcare for those currently in work.

10. Issues of employer inflexibility in working hours and the lack of support identified for mothers going back to work present significant barriers to selecting employment that is suitable for women's skills. This issue is compounded in rural areas, where jobs are fewer than in urban areas, and is more likely to lead to women exiting the labour market altogether. The need for mothers to work part-time, both to spend time with their children and keep childcare costs down also poses problems for career progression.

11. For parents of children receiving Flying Start , Foundation Phase other formal childcare provision, or a combination of the three, continuity of care emerged as the most important factor in arranging and combining childcare provision. Wraparound care was particularly valued by parents because it enabled them to benefit from blocks of time in which to carry out other activities in the workplace or at home, however it often placed significant additional financial strain on parents. In some Flying Start areas, where children are entitled to 2.5 hours free childcare per day between the ages of two and three, it was highlighted that the 2.5 hours they receive for their children, although valued, is not enough time to work or re-train. For those who had children in receipt of Foundation Phase, there were instances in which wraparound provision to transport children between nursery and school had been important in enabling them to work longer hours.

12. The importance of flexibility was a prominent theme emerging from parents' experiences of making and managing their current childcare arrangements. The unpredictable nature of raising children meant that parents felt that allowing for flexibility from employers and childcare providers was crucial in organising a childcare routine that worked for their families.

13. Parents felt that the additional hours provided under the childcare offer would mean that their children would have increased time in formal childcare settings, and therefore this would be beneficial in terms of improving their development in readiness for school. This echoes the prevailing attitude amongst all parents across all focus groups that formal childcare was more educational and beneficial than keeping children at home, and that the more formal childcare received, the more positive the effect on their development.

14. The possibility that the offer would facilitate parents, and especially mothers, being able to either look for work more easily or increase their hours in their current job without having to worry about arranging suitable alternative care for their children, was welcomed. This would in turn have benefits for other family members who provide informal childcare, particularly grandparents whom parents frequently identified made a number of sacrifices to provide informal childcare.

15. Parents felt the time and money saved from taking up the offer would enable more much-needed quality time for the family unit, such as weekends, which was sometimes sacrificed for either parent to work or for which there was little money left over for days out. But more than this, time available could also be used solely for the parents' benefit, either being used to work or for themselves as time to socialise or pursue hobbies. Parents identified multiple benefits which were felt to have an impact on overall family wellbeing.

16. There were concerns raised about the proposal; the most prominent issue for them was whether the offer took into account the potential extra strain on demand for childcare that the offer may cause. This was a particular worry for those who already sent their children to formal childcare, namely that they would not have the same access to childcare because of the shortage of staff to meet the demands placed on the sector, which would reduce flexibility, not improve it.

17. Welsh language provision was also discussed as an option that would be welcomed as part of having choice about which providers i.e. English medium or Welsh medium, parents decided to take. However, there were some barriers to take-up, namely the patchy provision of Welsh medium providers in areas which were not predominantly Welsh-speaking. Parents highlighted that not having Welsh medium providers nearby played a part in deciding not to take it up.

18. Other considerations need to be made for diverse family forms – many parents discussed their different family situations, particularly as lone parents, and stressed the importance of the offer taking into account different thresholds of eligibility to account for different circumstances. There was also some indication that the offer may have to consider communicating the terms and benefits differently according to location and cultural background.

Recommendations

19. It should be noted that these recommendations have been shaped by the views of parents and guardians and therefore can only be said to offer indicative evidence of one perspective upon which to formulate the following recommendations. The scope of this research did not seek to include the views and experiences other key stakeholders such as those of children or childcare providers.

1. The offer should be designed to enable flexible use by parents to ensure the highest possible take-up

The research suggests that the offer would have increased appeal for parents if they were able to use it flexibly to suit their particular needs. Delivery of the offer could consider allowing parents choice over (i) the number of hours of the 30 they take up; (ii) the provider who delivers the childcare and (iii) ensuring adequate childcare is available during school holidays. It was also important to parents the offer could be taken up with a diverse range of providers, including; private nurseries, child-minders and school-based nursery settings. This was particularly important in locations where choice of provider was limited.

2. The offer should be delivered to accommodate a wide range of employment and training circumstances

The focus groups revealed a diversity of working circumstances of parents. The employment of mothers may be particularly unconventional given the need to balance childcare and employment, encompassing part-time work, zero-hours contracts, volunteering and re-training. When confirming eligibility for the offer, policy should take account of differing circumstances and whether the offer can be designed to be used flexibly by those in insecure, temporary or transitional employment situations. Furthermore, the viability of including children of parents who are currently re-training as eligible for the 30 hours should also be considered. This would have the benefit of providing support to those who are re-training in a new profession and likely to re-enter the labour market at a later stage.

3. Roll-out of the offer should incorporate engagement with a wide range of employers to make them aware of the offer and to encourage/facilitate support for employers to take on mothers returning to work

Mothers consistently expressed a number of barriers to re-entering the workplace following having children, and many accounts identified a lack of support received from prospective or current employers to enable them to do so. There was a perceived lack of understanding from parents' perspectives of the nature and constraints on parents when balancing childcare and employment. In developing the policy, Welsh Government may want to consider facilitating some engagement with key employers in Wales as the offer rolls out. This would aim to increase understanding of the offer and thus aim to reduce the barriers women face in re-entering the workplace.

4. Considerations of eligibility should ensure that different types of families can benefit from the offer and that the offer is cost effective for those families

Discussions around eligibility and questions around when decisions on eligibility would be made have highlighted the diversity of circumstances and family forms that exist. Decisions regarding eligibility should ensure that the offer is suitable for lone parent as well as two-parent families, and that it is equally cost-effective for lone-parent families when taking into account their hours of employment and benefit entitlement.

5. Consideration should be given to have different cultural groups receive information about childcare provision and communications should be tailored accordingly.

Indicative findings from individuals who have migrated to Wales have shown that awareness of the childcare system in Wales and its potential benefits may be less well known within these groups. Additionally, there may be some negative perceptions of safety and child-protection within public and private childcare provision. Roll-out of the offer should consider the channels and content of communications used to reach to eligible families, and the range of communication methods that may be required to ensure hard-to-reach groups are able to make informed decisions about whether they take-up the offer. This could consider translation of information into a variety of languages and consider a variety of sources through which this information could be made available.

6. The research indicates that parents favour the consolidation of early education with formal childcare to facilitate opportunities for parents to take up paid employment or to re-train. Further research is needed to understand how this could be best achieved for children in receipt of early education and formal childcare.

Where children were receiving a combination of early education (i.e. 10 hours minimum per week of Foundation Phase education for 3-4 year olds) and formal childcare, some parents indicated that the provision of transportation between the formal childcare provider and the school providing early education had been an important factor in enabling them to take up employment. **Although this offer will not affect the delivery of Flying Start**, the parents of children who were in receipt of Flying Start (defined as formal childcare available for 2-3 year olds in selected areas for 2.5 hours per day, 5 days a week for 39 weeks of the year) also indicated that the shorter blocks of time, although valued, were not sufficient to support them in entering the labour market. The data indicate that the delivery of the 30 hours would need to consider how early education and formal childcare could be seamlessly delivered to enable parents to work. It is advised that further research into the practicalities of delivering this in different local authorities throughout Wales is carried out to understand the possibilities and constraints of delivering adequate wraparound care.

1. Introduction

1.1 The requirement for affordable and good quality formal childcare provision has grown with the increasing trend towards mothers re-entering the workplace following the birth of children, and the consequent increase in dual-income households. There are several benefits to implementing good quality, affordable childcare. For parents and mothers in particular, a chance to return to work earlier can offer obvious advantages in boosting household income (Rutter, 2015) and offering women opportunities to continue and progress their careers. Where childcare is affordable, increases to household income can be used to improve the long term financial situation of a family, with the potential outcome of lifting disadvantaged families out of poverty. Enabling more people to work has long-term positive consequences for the economy; more people in work results in lower benefit dependency and allows people to contribute to the economy through their status as tax-payers. Academic research has also highlighted the positive effects on children's social and developmental outcomes, and on measures of school readiness (Paull, 2017). For those children from families living in poverty, formal childcare can narrow the developmental gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, but this is dependent on (i) the intensity of the provision, (ii) the quality of the childcare provided as part of the policy commitment and (iii) the quality of the existing, or counterfactual childcare (Blanden et al, 2016).

1.2 For this to be possible, families require the support of government to provide subsidised childcare. Until 1994, when the first tax relief for childcare was introduced in England and Wales, there had been no formal government support for parents requiring childcare. Increased participation in the labour market by women drove the change, and a number of reforms were introduced in order to improve the supply and affordability. In 2004, a ten year strategy *Choice for parents, the best start for children* introduced new measures upon which the provision of childcare was based, covering the areas of work-life balance, childcare supply, quality and affordability. This was followed by the *Childcare Act* (2006), obliging local authorities in England and Wales to ensure where possible, that sufficient childcare is available for parents who want to work or train.

1.3 In terms of affordability, some funding is given by Welsh Government to local authorities to deliver free provision, and parents have been entitled to childcare vouchers, as well as being able to access a minimum of 10 hours free early education per week for three and four year olds³. For two year olds living in deprived areas of Wales, there is also an entitlement to 12.5 hours per week of childcare through the provision of Flying Start⁴.

1.4 Welsh Labour, as part of their manifesto for the May 2016 Assembly Elections, committed to providing a total of 30 hours of free childcare for 48 weeks of the year, for working parents of children aged three and four (Welsh Labour, 2016). The Welsh Government committed to piloting and fully rolling-out the offer by the end of the Assembly term in 2020. The offer would provide working parents with up to 20 hours of childcare in

³ The actual number of hours per week that parents are entitled to is at the discretion of their local authority.

⁴ Referred to as *Sure Start* in England.

addition to the current minimum of 10 hours early education available to **all three and four year olds**. The aim of the childcare offer is to achieve one (or more) of the following policy goals:

- To enable more parents, particularly mothers, to return to work;
- To increase the disposable income of those in work and help counteract poverty for those in low-paid jobs; and
- To encourage child development and school readiness.

1.5 Research has shown that the cost of childcare is a significant barrier to take up, with the cost of childcare for children under five rising consistently and faster than the rate of inflation from 2014 to 2015 (Rutter, 2015). This is prohibitive to deprived families looking to use childcare, and a consequent barrier to their seeking employment as a result. Therefore, the implementation of significantly more free childcare hours simultaneously makes formal childcare more affordable and frees up time for parents to take up paid employment.

1.6 In terms of child development, evidence exists to demonstrate that early education delivered in formal childcare settings has some limited benefits for children. Research around the impact of free pre-school education in England has shown that, although children from deprived backgrounds do benefit in terms of their developmental outcomes in the short term, this progress is very much dependent on the intensity of the care, the quality of the free childcare, and the comparison with the care they received prior to receiving the free hours (Blanden et al, 2014; Blanden et al, 2016). The 'crowd-out' effect of the new public provision on existing private provision also means that relatively few truly 'new' childcare places were created, which further limited the impact of the free provision. This means that, although increasing the time available for children to access formal childcare may be desirable, considerations of the quality of the care on child development must be taken into account if the aim is to maximise the impact of the provision over the course of the child's education.

1.7 This research highlights the importance of understanding the existing conditions within the childcare market in Wales, and the importance of due attention to the eligibility criteria for the offer and the mode of implementation. These decisions have important implications, firstly for who can take-up the offer, and subsequently on the effect of delivery on key outcomes, in this case maternal employment and access to childcare for more deprived families. Eligibility also has important implications for the cost of delivering the policy, and the subsequent cost savings for families through implementation of the 30 free hours. This issue, and the limited cost savings that can be expected, have been modelled in a paper by Paull and Xu (2015). Paull and Xu (2015) and research by Blanden et al (2014; 2016) highlight important issues about the overall effectiveness of free childcare, and explore the impacts of such policies on developmental and economic outcomes. The research reported here, whilst acknowledging the limited evidence on cost effectiveness and outcomes of providing free childcare, is instead focused on how the offer could be most effectively delivered to suit the needs of parents and children.

1.8 The Internal Research Programme (IRP) was asked by the Childcare, Play and Early Years Division to undertake research into parents' perspectives on the proposed offer. The

research sought to understand parents' current childcare arrangements, asking them to identify what did and didn't work so well in relation to their childcare. Parents were then asked about their views on the childcare offer, whether it would be something they would consider using, and if there were any additional considerations that would need to be factored into any planned roll-out. This would shape the criteria for eligibility and the mode of delivery in order to maximise appeal and take-up.

1.9 The aims of the research were therefore to;

- better understand parents' current childcare arrangements and, particularly, any challenges those current arrangements present to parents and children;
- gauge parents' understanding of early education and the distinction between this and 'formal' childcare;
- assess the proposed extension of the childcare offer in respect of,:
 - the most desirable method of delivery;
 - anticipated mode of take-up; and
 - the potential and desirability of increasing employment hours as a result of take-up;
- use the findings of the research to make recommendations to inform policy development and delivery of the additional childcare offer.

1.10 This research will therefore provide indicative data from parents in order to shape effective delivery of the roll-out. This research has also been supported by number of engagement activities, including;

- the #TalkChildcare campaign, where parents can feed in their views on the proposed offer via a set of questions on the Welsh Government website;
- a #TalkChildcare Roadshow aimed at spreading awareness of the new offer and encouraging parents to complete the online survey;
- engagement with childcare providers, which included conducting a number of regional events, focus groups and webinars;
- some discussions with businesses and a focus group with employees who are parents on the new offer.

1.11 The following section outlines the chosen methodology for this research; section three provides a discussion of the key findings of the focus groups and interviews with parents, and finally section four summarises the key findings and makes some specific recommendations for delivery of the enhanced offer based on important issues and considerations for parents.

2. Methodology

2.1 The aims of the research were to obtain in-depth data from parents with regards to their current childcare arrangements, and to determine what mode of delivery would be most persuasive when deciding whether to take up the offer. It was decided that a qualitative study comprising a series of qualitative focus groups would be the preferred method of primary data collection to understand parents' and guardians' current childcare arrangements, experience of early education provision and perspectives on the proposed enhanced childcare offer. Focus groups are useful when seeking to gain indicative views on an issue from the general public or any other diverse group. The ability to discuss an issue with several people at once is not only a cost effective method of research; it also allows for a dynamic exploration of different perspectives which is not achievable in a one-to-one interview. This can often lead to a richer discussion and more thoughtful consideration of all related issues. Focus groups, in allowing for a larger sample when compared to conducting one-to-one interviews, mean that a wider range of parents' perspectives can be considered in a single session.

2.2 Owing to the nature of plans to pilot the enhanced childcare offer in a small number of local authority areas beginning in September 2017, it was determined that the IRP would facilitate six focus groups in different locations across Wales, including urban locations Cardiff, Swansea and Wrexham and more rural locations such as Caernarfon, Llandysul and Tredegar. These locations were selected in order to gather experiences and opinions from a mixed demographic of participants resident in communities which offer different childcare provision in the context of different local labour markets.

2.3 The mixed focus groups were hosted in collaboration with local Flying Start delivery hubs, providing both the reach with which to recruit and the venue from which to host focus groups of local parents and guardians with children aged 1-5 years old. The decision was taken to include parents and guardians who acted as the primary caregiver in the family to ensure that both female and male participants were able to participate and represent a balanced set of views, despite this population largely consisting of women. It was determined that the focus groups should include parents and guardians who were both economically active, working full-time, part-time, currently self-employed or on maternity leave and those who were economically inactive. The decision was taken to include participants from a range of employment statuses in order to better explore the issues related to parental employment, including parents' and guardians' experiences of seeking, resuming and maintaining and balancing work and caring responsibilities. The mixed focus groups were held during the day and timed to precede, coincide or follow scheduled Flying Start activities targeted at families of children aged three years, who were resident in Flying Start catchment areas and routinely accessed a number of Flying Start activities.

2.4 To encourage participation in the research and to compensate participants for their time and travel expenses, it was agreed that it would be necessary to offer a financial incentive, payable following participation in the focus group. Participants who received information about the research were offered a £20 high-street gift voucher. The use of financial incentives was approved by EPS (Department for Education and Public Services).

2.5 To encourage participation from parents and guardians who resided outside Flying Start catchment areas and were therefore ineligible for Flying Start support, bilingual information about the opportunity to participate in the research was promoted via the online event planning and ticketing tool, Eventbrite. Online event invitations were created and circulated to local Flying Start Coordinators who were asked to share the information to local services tasked with providing information and support for families through Family Information Services, Family Point and Communities First. The online invitations were shared to online information portals and to the social media channels of a number of umbrella and voluntary sector organisations identified as working with single parent families, low-income families, blended families and LGBT or 'rainbow' families. Bilingual posters, written materials and factsheets about the focus groups were also circulated to Flying Start Coordinators who made the information available to families accessing their services.

2.6 To comply with the minimum standards expected following the implementation of the Welsh Language Standards in March 2016, Flying Start Coordinators were asked to indicate the preferred language of those families accessing their services. Participants who agreed to attend the focus groups were prompted to confirm their attendance by responding to contact information included in the bilingual recruitment materials and advising IRP researchers of their language of preference. Participants who responded to a Welsh language poster or online invitation or via a Welsh language social media channel were offered the option of participating in the focus group through the medium of Welsh. There was sufficient interest from respondents who cited Welsh as their preferred language in participating in the research in Caernarfon and therefore IRP researchers facilitated two focus groups simultaneously, one through the medium of Welsh for six participants and a second in English for five participants. Elsewhere, there was insufficient demand to warrant delivering a focus group through the medium of Welsh, or providing simultaneous translation.

2.7 Recruitment began in October 2016 and continued for a period of six weeks, contacting and building relationships with the Flying Start Coordinator and delivery team in each area, explaining the purpose and scope of the research, clarifying the eligibility criteria for research participants, agreeing the details and costs for appropriate venues and sending the delivery team a bilingual confirmation e-mail outlining the details of the forthcoming focus group and addressing a number of frequently asked questions. Participants who were signed up to attend online were contacted via Eventbrite to confirm their attendance at the focus group and subsequently to remind them of the forthcoming date and time.

2.8 The focus groups were facilitated over a four week period in November 2016. A total of sixty-four participants attended the focus groups. Participants who attended comprised

principally female parents of children aged 1-5 years old. The majority of participants had experience of accessing Flying Start provision.

2.9 To accommodate individuals who were interested in participating in the research but unable to attend the focus groups in one of the six locations, IRP researchers carried out two qualitative interviews with participants from Swansea and the Vale of Glamorgan. A number of other individuals were referred to the IRP or made contact with the IRP after having contacted the Childcare, Play and Early Years Division or after having seen information about the Welsh Government online campaign, entitled #TalkChildcare, which encouraged parents and the general public to contact the Welsh Government to share their experiences of finding, accessing and using childcare provision in Wales. The #TalkChildcare campaign remained live throughout the duration of the research. Consequently, a number of individuals who were unable to attend the focus groups in one of the six locations across Wales were directed to the online social media campaign and generic mailbox situated on the Welsh Government website to contribute their experiences.

2.10 More widely the #TalkChildcare has received a significant number of responses from parents wishing to share their thoughts on existing childcare provision and on the new offer. An analysis of the responses received by parents through this channel was conducted separately at the end of April 2017.

3. Key Findings

3.1 This section summarises the key findings emerging from the focus groups and one-to-one interviews with parents of young children aged one to five. Through firstly addressing the current childcare arrangements that were in place for their children, we could understand what it was about these arrangements that worked for them and their families, and also the difficulties they experienced. This enabled identification of recurring issues for families which could potentially be addressed through adjusting the delivery of the offer. Focus groups allow for the gathering of multiple perspectives from parents, and enables exploration of a multitude of situations, comparing and contrasting experiences within one session. It can therefore tell us much about the homogeneity or diversity of situations within a particular location, the detail of which can be particularly rich in a dynamic discussion. Focus groups therefore allow parents to share common experiences of childcare provision, but also to weigh up the different possibilities for delivery of the offer based on these experiences.

3.2 The analysis will discuss prominent and recurring themes emerging from the focus group discussions, but also significant but less widely discussed issues for policy to consider in shaping the delivery of the free 30 hours. Although focus groups enable rich discussion, the method is not intended to be representative of all views and therefore issues discussed occur anecdotally in the data. Further engagement or exploration may be needed to understand the implications in delivering and publicising the offer to eligible families, and further research with families where children have specific needs, such as those children who are disabled or have additional learning needs (ALN), may be required to understand the specific issues.

Parents' Current Childcare Arrangements

3.3 **The forms of childcare used by parents were varied according to the different family circumstances, work commitments of parents and to some degree dependent on the availability of different forms of childcare in the area in which they lived.** There were also consistent reports across all locations of parents using a combination of different forms of childcare throughout an average week to suit their circumstances;

I don't like being away from my children anyway, I like being with them, that's why I'm with them 24/7, I don't like someone else having them. I adore them. I've been with them since day one. I've never had anyone else watch them. I'm happy with that.

Mother, Caernarfon

I've got three children; one's nine in full time school, one's four he's in morning nursery and [son]'s just started in Flying Start now. Hopefully, he'll go...once a week. Other than that it's my parents. I'm a self-employed [job title] and I work part-time so if unless the husband's home, he'll have him in the evenings and that but apart from that it's mum and dad.

Mother, Swansea

I've got a two and a half year old and a seven month old. On maternity but use two days child-minder and three days [my] mother because it saves money, and my little girl goes to nursery in the mornings as well.

Mother, Llandysul

I look after them but I started to have this thing called Flying Start and [it's] so for my two year old, she started Flying Start nursery, which is really good for two and a half hours everyday in the morning and you have to be in a [eligible] postcode to be entitled for those free hours of nursery and fortunately my husband can afford to put...for extra afternoons in private nursery so, that's to give me a bit of free time so that I can have time with my son, who's eight months and I'm staying at home with him.

Mother, Cardiff

3.4 These quotes reflect the diversity of childcare arrangements parents use, including; mothers looking after their children full-time, private nurseries, Flying Start nursery care⁵, informal childcare (predominantly from grandparents) and child-minders. **There were some geographic differences noted, in some cases this was due to varying availability of certain types of childcare in certain areas.** For example, in Llandysul there was higher reported use, and more positive perceptions of, the care provided by child-minders;

For one day, but I was actually working in [village] one day a week and if it hadn't been for one of the child-minders in [village] being fully booked actually knowing all the child-minders in the village here, I was really struggling. And luckily somebody ... was just starting up at the time and luckily she had spaces, so I managed to just get [daughter] in [to be cared for by a child-minder]

Mother, Llandysul

3.5 Due to its rural setting, this area had a limited number of private nursery places, and parents often needed to travel further afield to access private nursery care. This led to a higher number of child-minders starting up in the area, and the creation of informal networks of knowledge about who was offering child-minding services. In other areas parents had varying preferences for who looked after their children; in Tredegar, grandparents and other family members were more often called upon to step in to look after children;

I'm on maternity at the moment and so obviously I work full time because I'm a teacher so I'll be going back full time, but luckily my parents are going to be looking after them, so my Mam will look after them for three days and my partner's mum two days.

Mother, Tredegar

⁵ Flying Start is available to children from the age of two until three, for families living in eligible areas of Wales. Children receive up to 12.5 hours of quality childcare in Flying Start areas.

I've had to drop from full time work to three days a week just so my mam can work. My mam is a qualified nursery nurse, but she's gone into banking now so her hours are flexible so she can work around me...

Mother, Tredegar

3.6 Grandparents in particular appeared to play a much more prominent role in the care of children in this area, sometimes adjusting their working commitments to suit childcare needs.

3.7 **In terms of selecting childcare, several factors emerged as the main determinants of how childcare was selected and combined, these were; cost, location, and suitability of childcare with working commitments.** Cost was consistently raised as a major factor in making decisions about which provider, and how much provision would be taken up by parents. When raised, the issue of cost elicited particularly emotive views from parents, as these quotes illustrate;

I pay a lot of money; I pay £124 a week in childcare costs. It's killing me... [murmurs of agreement from the group] It's killing me... And then in the evenings, ... I work in the evenings, come home about 10pm, on shifts but I literally feel like I'm just working and paying childcare costs.

Mother, Swansea

I had to give [work] up when my middle son ... went to nursery when he was, say I was working stupid hours all the time and most of wage went on childcare so it became a point of what's the point.

Mother, Caernarfon

Here, you don't get any support for private nursery, because it's all private and y'know it's £900 minimum per child – who can afford that?

Mother, Cardiff

it's not an easy choice to go back to work. My salary pays entirely for the boys' nursery. When gran looks after the boys for one day a week that's how I break even. So the boys go to nursery for three days but I work for four so, ... That's my whole salary going to childcare. My heart is very torn but I want to...I'm very career-minded but then I also want time with the boys so I do feel very torn.

Mother, Vale of Glamorgan

3.8 Parents across all groups pointed out the issue that the cost of childcare can be so high relative to average wages that much of the money mothers earn in part-time work are used almost entirely to pay for childcare, with some questioning whether balancing work and caring for children was financially worthwhile. This appears to be the most prohibitive factor to selecting the childcare that would be most beneficial for families. Parents were therefore motivated to choose childcare that was affordable relative to income, and some would substitute formal childcare for informal care by family or friends for a portion of the week in order to keep costs manageable.

3.9 Other important considerations in the selection of childcare included the location of the provider; parents noted that selection often depended on the convenience of the nursery or child-minder in relation to their home or place of work;

The location of the childcare is also important. The child-minder we had was convenient because I passed on the way to work.

Mother, Caernarfon

For me personally, having [child] in [name of provider] in the back, my middle child who's now eight, he went there when it first opened and because they're in school and I work here as well it's easier for us all to just be here during the day.

Mother, Caernarfon

3.10 As the second quote also illustrates, parents often felt that having children in nursery on a school site which their older children also attended was desirable as it eliminated the need to travel between nursery and school and prevented problems around picking up school-aged children on time.

3.11 Parents also took into consideration recommendations from other parents in assessing the suitability of a provider for their and their children's needs. Word of mouth was often cited as a key factor in deciding which nursery or child-minder to use. Assessments of the quality of childcare in terms of formal inspection criteria were not frequently mentioned as a major consideration, parents were much more likely to take into account practical considerations such as location and suitability of the provision in relation to their work commitments above quality considerations. That said, there were clear distinctions made between the quality of different forms of childcare. Those parents who were entitled to Flying Start provision placed a much higher value on the quality of this provision when compared to informal childcare, the reason for this being that parents felt Flying Start providers were better resourced, had well-trained staff and contributed significantly to improving their child's social and developmental skills in preparation for school.

Since she's been coming to Flying Start and gone into nursery, she's come on leaps and bounds.

Mother, Swansea

I think it's brilliant, I think it's fantastic, I'm super, super happy with it, the ratio of carers to children is amazing, the play is fantastic, the quality of the toys and the play that they do there is amazing. ... it's a great initiative.

Mother, Cardiff

3.12 Flying Start were also praised by parents for their ability to identify any developmental issues and additional needs children may have and to utilise the integrated service they had with various health and educational providers to obtain an early diagnosis and provide appropriate support, as one mother points out when recounting her experience of getting help for her son;

I said my concerns and they booked an appointment... [Flying Start] had him into early assessment... Because I had put my concerns forward, he was diagnosed with autism by the time he was two and a half. If I was still in the process now, he'd probably be seven by the time he'd be getting the support he needs.

Mother, Swansea

3.13 Formal childcare was often viewed as preferable to informal childcare overall due to the perception that providers were better equipped to provide children with a range of developmental opportunities and experiences, and children experienced social interaction with their peers from a young age, which was considered good preparation for school. Parents also identified other benefits to formal childcare, including the good communication between home and nursery, and, in the case of Flying Start provision, the opportunity for mothers to interact and form support networks.

3.14 In terms of Welsh language provision and the appetite for it in childcare settings, this predictably varied by location. For areas that had a high proportion of Welsh speakers in the community, such as Llandysul and Caernarfon, the need for bilingual provision was present and well integrated into the childcare offer in the area and so the high demand was met by the plentiful supply.

It's all Welsh anyway. Everyone's Welsh here. Everything's in Welsh...So we don't really think about the English part

Mother, Caernarfon

3.15 However, in the other focus group locations, where Welsh is less widely spoken, bilingual provision was mostly welcomed, but not necessarily considered a priority over other issues such as cost and location;

P1: It isn't he's in this [provider] or he's in that [provider]... It's only [a] Welsh [provider] because it's closer.

NP: Right, so location is a priority there?

P1: Yeah

Mother, Wrexham

3.16 Nevertheless, many parents felt that access to learning Welsh from an early age would be beneficial for their children, whether they lived in a predominantly Welsh-speaking community or not;

Yeah, I agree with [other mother], I wanted to socialise my children because I'm not Welsh, but we want to feel part of the community, y'know it helps prepare their language skills because they'll go to school here and it's a Welsh medium school.

Mother, Llandysul

I would love to make sure that they do learn Welsh. I am going to start looking to see if they can do a class outside of school to learn... I suppose the passion is, I'd like them to stay in Wales when they actually grow up. So, with the new Welsh Language Act they're going to be the need and the requirement for people to speak Welsh in the future.

Mother, Vale of Glamorgan

3.17 However, the key barrier to take up Welsh medium nursery care was the patchy provision in many areas. The inability of parents to access this sometimes had a knock-on effect on decisions over their future schooling concerns that children may have a difficult time playing 'catch-up' with their peers if they had not previously been exposed to the language at home or in nursery (see page 40)

3.18 Despite many positive aspects of their current arrangement, the main difficulties identified were; the cost of formal childcare and the challenges parents, and particularly mothers, faced in balancing childcare with a return to the labour market, or looking for work following a period as a full-time mum. There were a number of factors that mothers feel have restricted them in returning to employment which will now be discussed.

Balancing Childcare and Returning to Employment

3.19 **Mothers frequently discussed the process of returning to work following having children as particularly challenging due to the need to balance their career aspirations with their caring responsibilities, and often the lack of support available to do so.** There were two aspects to this which presented slightly different issues for mothers depending on their circumstances; the first was the difficulty in re-entering the labour market following an extended period of time out of work to have children, and the second was the difficulty in balancing work commitments and childcare for those currently in work.

3.20 Emma's story illustrates the challenges faced by professional women re-entering the labour market following a career break to raise children.

Returning to Employment - Emma

Emma lives in Cardiff and has been a full-time mum for a number of years following the birth of her daughter, aged two. She uses a combination of Flying Start and private nursery provision available to her for her daughter and this allows her to spend time at home with her son, who is eight months old. This arrangement saves her money on the cost of putting her daughter in nursery all day. Before having children, she worked in the STEM sector and has recently been looking to return to employment in that sector. This is partly to increase income to ensure childcare is more affordable, and to regain a career foothold in that sector. She feels that childcare costs are unaffordable, forcing mothers to give up work to care for children at the cost of their career.

She has recently started applying for STEM sector jobs and found it very difficult to secure employment – she believes the reasons for this are partly because she has been out of the sector for several years, and therefore has a gap in her CV that others do not. In addition, the fact that she has young children will necessitate part-time working and flexibility to accommodate childcare commitments, which she feels employers are not sympathetic to, and may not make efforts to accommodate these needs. In her experience, employers have expected mothers to have childcare in place before resuming employment, which she believes is not practical given the need for mothers to know what their work commitments are before paying in advance for childcare. She believes the fact that she was unable to arrange childcare in advance was the reason why she has been passed up for several jobs. She identifies a lack of understanding from employers about the situation facing mothers looking to get back into employment and that the government needs to offer incentives to employers to take on mothers so that it would be easier for them to take time out to look after their children initially without it becoming too difficult to return to work later.

Emma has found her search for employment to be so difficult that she is considering retraining in a different career. This may offer career progression whilst also being more family-friendly. However, she is unsure how she would be able to balance studying and childcare, and does not know what financial support would be available to enable her to retrain.

3.21 Emma's experience highlights some of the difficulties in aligning the needs of work and childcare, and the perception that employers are reluctant to take on women with children due to mothers being viewed as 'unreliable' when, for example, they have to leave work to attend to sick children. This is a frustrating experience for highly-skilled women who are looking to participate in supporting their families financially. The preference of employers of women having childcare in place before employment commences leads to a 'catch-22' situation in which employment is needed to pay for childcare, and childcare is needed to give employers confidence that mothers will be 'reliable'. Emma is therefore considering re-training in a career which is more family-friendly, the potential downsides being loss of income for the individual and loss of a skilled employee for the STEM sector.

3.22 Mothers currently in work cited difficulty in arranging employment that was suitable for their skills and which was flexible enough to suit their childcare commitments;

But then [employers are] saying 'no, you've got to work this time' and then it's finding someone else then to take your children to school...

Mother, Cardiff

P1: And a lot of jobs these days they put 'flexible', they need to be flexible. Well, with kids that's not the case.

P2: You're not reliable...Not you've got to be there for them if they're poorly. Do you know what I mean, it is hard...It's nice when you get extra hours and although you'd love those extra hours, you can't fit them in. So I think it's hard...

Mothers, Wrexham

Not many places want you to work when you've got kids. I know in my interview, they were "Are you going to be able to fit in childcare as well as work?" I was like "Yeah, I'll be able to fit in but it's just going to be a bit of a struggle." But you know if your child's ill and you phone work and they go ballistic...

Mother, Swansea

3.23 The inflexibility of some employment arrangements means that alternative childcare has to be found to cover picking up and dropping off children from school or nursery. It can also mean that mothers have to find alternative employment that is more family-friendly, or give up work altogether due to the lack of alternative support available;

[The child-minder] had to leave at 6:30 in the morning – coz that's when I started work...and I wanted to go back [to work], but finding somebody that was available to have my child at that time of the morning was impossible, which was why I had to finish [working]

Mother, Llandysul

I had to give up my job because I couldn't get the childcare because of the time I started and finished.

Mother, Llandysul

3.24 Issues of employer inflexibility in working hours and the lack of support identified for mothers going back to work present significant barriers to selecting employment that is suitable for women's skills. This issue is compounded in rural areas, such as in Llandysul, where jobs are fewer than in urban areas, and is more likely to lead to women exiting the labour market altogether. The need for mothers to work part-time, both to spend time with their children and keep childcare costs down also poses problems for career progression, as one mother notes;

That's why you don't see many women in management positions as well... where you see mainly men... because it's women they feel like they can't go for promotion... they feel they can't have that responsibility at the moment because they've got children in the house and things...

Mother, Swansea

3.25 Mothers who were able to return to work on flexible arrangements felt fortunate to be able to benefit from working flexible hours. This was felt however to compromise other aspects of their professional lives, such as their visibility in the workplace and their perceived availability or interest in progression opportunities:

There have been opportunities where people have been given jobs while I've been on maternity leave...Umm I guess, a lot of people sort of ...It took a lot of people a while to realise, I was back from maternity leave part-time but it takes a lot of time for people to pass on work to people who are part-time. I work four days and ... it isn't ...I wouldn't call it really short part-time hours...

Mother, Vale of Glamorgan

3.26 In balancing current childcare requirements with long term career planning, some mothers had undertaken employment which did not make financial sense in the short term, but ensured secure employment and the possibility to increase their hours in the future;

It is pointless me working an hour and a half a day, I work half past eleven till quarter past one which puts my day out completely, I can't do anything and then my wages are about £200 at the end of the month but I don't want to give that job up, because it's with [the local authority], I get a good pension and everything; I get all the holidays the same as them and when I do go full time, when [daughter is] old enough...I can have the extra hours there and have extra hours through the day if and when a job comes up.

Mother, Tredegar

3.27 Discussions around employment have identified the difficulties around mothers obtaining employment, fitting employment around childcare, women's' ability to progress their career in part-time work, and ensuring the balance of childcare and employment is financially viable. A lack of support for each of these aspects was expressed consistently throughout all sessions, and the form of delivery of the 30 hour offer should take into account; the challenges mothers may face in negotiating working hours, particularly where work is precarious; and the ease with which highly skilled women are able to resume a career in the sector for which they are trained, and have the support from their employers to progress.

Early Education Provision

3.28 Parents were asked specifically about whether their children received early education provision, in what circumstances, and their assessment of the quality and impact of early education on the development of their children. This was of interest to understand whether parents were aware of the distinction between early education and standard formal childcare i.e. that early education is curriculum-based and that children's progress is recorded in preparation for their entry into school. Understanding whether the distinction in the type of childcare provision was understood and valued by parents was important in considering what proportion of the 30 free hours should be dedicated to early education, and how this could be resourced. Discussions indicated that there was patchy understanding, with some having a grasp understanding of the distinction, but with many not aware that part of children's time from the age of three was dedicated to early education. As these mothers state, they only became aware of her child receiving the provision when she noticed the price of her childcare reduce when her child turned three;

P1: I only knew because of Meithrin, [child] was going into the Meithrin and you had to pay until they were three, and then once they were three you were cut down to...

P2: Yeah, because down here it went from £20 a week then down to £7.50 a week once they turned three.

Mothers, Llandysul

3.29 Because early education was in some instances delivered seamlessly as part of the integrated formal childcare provision in schools, it was not viewed as distinct and therefore awareness amongst parents as a distinct form of nursery education was low. Discussion of the quality of the care was often not made distinct from standard nursery care. Where there was understanding, parents often highlighted the learning children received at nursery;

Yeah [children are taught] different themes...Sometimes it'll be two weeks and then they'll change the theme to something else but then within that you've got different themes like the seasons or something else so the children are always learning something different. It's always feeding into their progression which is nice for them

...

Mother, Cardiff

3.30 Although parents were able to identify some benefits of nursery provision, and in some cases distinguish early education, this was not the most important factor when evaluating how suitable their current childcare arrangements were overall. What was most important was ensuring continuity of care for their children throughout the day, which often meant the provision of regular sustained childcare with affordable wraparound when needed.

3.31 In some Flying Start areas, where children are entitled to formal childcare provision from the age of two until three, it was highlighted that the 2.5 hours they receive for their children, although valued, is not enough time to accomplish other things whilst their children are in nursery;

P1: And it's 2.5 hours...it seems forever doesn't it that you're always taking them to school for 2.5 hours!

P2: That's it because it does constantly feel like you're back and fore back and fore don't it?

P3: Especially if you've got a child who's also in school.

Mothers, Wrexham

P1: I'd love to go back to work

P2: Full-time working...

JC: So it's not just the ability to go back...having the hours free to go back...

P1: You need the hours free. 2.5 [hours] is not enough...

Mothers, Wrexham

3.32 Whilst this offer will not have an effect on the way Flying Start is currently delivered, these comments highlight the needs of parents to have longer blocks childcare to enable them to go back to work or re-train.

3.33 For those who had children in receipt of early education as part of the Foundation Phase, there were instances in which wraparound provision to transport children between their formal childcare and Foundation Phase provider had been important in enabling them to work longer hours.

So went to this [name of] nursery and it was incredible so to be honest, what we'd look for now is the flexibility being able to do the drop off and pick up to school [Foundation Phase provision] for [son].... There was a risk of him not being able to go because of ferrying him back and forth. So, that was a huge stress actually. But the whole point was to get him ready, to get him on the curriculum and I know [formal childcare setting] do work to that but I just wanted him to be in a school setting

Mother, Vale of Glamorgan

That's the thing with [Foundation Phase provider], everything's in the same place. I don't live in Caernarfon, I live in a [village] outside, so I bring her because I work here, so she has the 'cylch' and the crèche altogether in the same place. But by next September, I'll want her to go to [x school] in [the village]. There's a 'cylch' in [the village], but it's separate from the school. But they do a taxi service from the 'cylch' so they're in the 'cylch' until lunch and then the 'cylch' takes them to school with the taxi. That will be a big help because, like you, I'm in work, so there's no possibility of me to come from there to take her from one place to another, as I'd have to make that time up. When it's all in the same place like here, it's brilliant.

Mother, Caernarfon

3.34 These comments highlight the importance of the provision of transport between formal childcare settings and schools to enable children to benefit from early education, and to enable parents to look for, or resume, employment. This indicates that parents rely on this provision to ensure access to early education for their children, and that the construction and delivery of the offer needs to consider how these two forms of provision could be seamlessly delivered to enable parents to access work opportunities.

3.35 However early education is integrated into the enhanced offer, it was clear that the success of current arrangements relied upon well co-ordinated wraparound arrangements, and that where possible, the delivery of early education sessions to three and four year olds should be placed directly before or after standard formal childcare so as to enable parents to have longer available blocks of time to keep on top of the housework, or to undertake further study in order to take up skilled employment in the future.

3.36 It became apparent through parents' accounts of their current arrangements that there were a range of different needs and circumstances, and that families needed to be adaptable to fit with these often changing circumstances. Thus the importance of flexibility occurred frequently in their accounts, and was discussed in a variety of contexts. The following section outlines these different dimensions of flexibility and the need for any offer to be adaptable in order to be effective.

The Importance of Flexibility for Parents

3.37 The unpredictable nature of raising children meant that parents felt that allowing for flexibility from employers and childcare providers was crucial in organising a childcare routine that worked for their families. Earlier discussions have emphasised the need for employers to be sensitive to the needs of their employees to balance childcare and work, but parents also felt that nurseries could be more flexible in when they provided care, and in how they charged for that care. Parents felt nurseries' pricing and charging rules could be unfair;

What I notice with nurseries, you still have to pay if he's ill. Or if you book a holiday, I think you have to still pay a half, or over Christmas, you still have to pay half. Maybe nurseries could be a little more flexible with things like that.

Mother, Caernarfon

Yet some nurseries say well our half day is from 7:30am till 1pm or something and from 1pm until 6:30pm, so you've gotta pay, if you don't pick them up before 1pm, you've gotta pay for the full day, because you may finish work at 2pm, so you've finished four hours before that full day ends, and yet you don't get paid for the extra hours you have to pay for the nursery.

Mother, Llandysul

And the childcare, they do all day or half day. Sometimes my job is in between the mid-day, so you have to put them [in] all day. It costs me quite a lot, it would have to be a bit cheaper. But a half day is 7.30 am till 12pm and 12pm till 6pm. But my job is from 8am till 4pm, so you have to put them in all day, it's a lot of childcare. Sometime I start at 11am until 3pm, in the middle...yeah, but I still have to pay all day.

Mother, Cardiff

3.38 The tendency for formal childcare settings to charge for sessions used as opposed to numbers of hours used was problematic. This meant that parents felt they were paying for more childcare than they were using, and that this did not represent good value for money, which was having a continual negative impact on family finances over time. Parents wanted nurseries to be fairer and more flexible in their charging practices i.e. only charging for hours used, as well as being slightly more flexible for those who started work earlier.

3.39 The importance of having continuity of care throughout the day was prominent in discussions; namely having children in childcare for extended periods of time to reduce the need to pay for wraparound care and multiple drop-offs and pick-ups. This was restrictive for those who had school-aged children and who needed to travel quickly between nursery and school in order to pick their children up;

I've gotta leave my eight year old as well – wait for me outside whilst I pick up [son] because I've got to pick him up at 3.15pm and the other one comes out at 3pm, ... I've gotta leave [school aged son] out the front for me... so like sometimes I'm worrying about my son left outside, it's cold and if it was raining, I'm not gonna leave him outside raining, so I'll be waiting for him and be like 'hurry up', I'm running late to pick up my other one.

Mother, Cardiff

3.40 Paying for childcare in the school holidays and after-school can also add an additional financial burden, whereby some parents are periodically paying for nursery and wraparound after school care for their older children;

JC: So [childcare is] particularly difficult with holidays?

P1: Especially holidays – half terms. Summer holidays, they're really expensive. For three days, they cost £158.

P2: It's too expensive.

Mother, Cardiff

3.41 These additional costs for wraparound care place additional financial strain on families, which combined with inflexibility in selection of childcare can cause financial and time constraints on parents, particularly when balancing this with work or commitments to re-train for future employment.

Perspectives and Perceived Benefits of the Childcare Offer

3.42 Parents were then asked to discuss their views on the proposed childcare offer and invited to evaluate how the offer could work for them when it was fully implemented. Overall, the media reporting of the offer, in addition to the announcement of the locations of the pilot areas for the offer just before these focus groups took place, meant that awareness was fairly high. There was however some misunderstanding over details of eligibility, the details of which had not been confirmed at the time the focus groups took place.

3.43 Overall, parents were positive about the proposed implementation of 30 hours of free childcare. They outlined positive impacts for their children in the following ways;

Just the opportunity for the children really, being taught different things – like we said earlier the timing issue really, and I know that they develop so much more if they were there all day,

Mother, Tredegar

...it would enable me to go places on the weekends and so on because, after paying £600 a month [on childcare], it doesn't leave anything for me to do anything. So we just go to nursery and work, go to bed, and then start again the next day. I don't have the money to be able to do anything other than that, so it would give me the

opportunity to take her maybe swimming – because everything costs so much money. ... it would allow me to take her once on the weekends, or at least once a month to do something different, a little treat.

Mother, Caernarfon

Something like that would be better for me to work through the week as well...because I don't get weekends with my children.

Mother, Cardiff

3.44 Parents felt that the additional hours would mean that their children would have increased time in a formal childcare setting, and therefore this would be beneficial in terms of improving their development in readiness for school. This echoes the prevailing attitude amongst all parents across all focus groups that formal childcare was more educational and beneficial than keeping children at home, and that more formal childcare would have an increased positive effect on their development. The limits of the effect of free preschool education on child development have been found to diminish as children progress through school (Blanden et al, 2014), however, parents feel strongly that formal childcare is important in giving children a good start. Additionally, parents felt that the money saved through not having to pay for 30 hours of childcare could be used to pay for activities with their children that would otherwise be unaffordable, such as swimming or other days out with the family. This also tied in with parents being able to have more time with their children. Often parents worked extra hours, often on weekends, in order to cover living costs, and they felt that the free hours may relieve some of the pressure to work and instead spend quality time with their children.

3.45 Parents also noted some benefits for themselves and other family members that were closely tied to the benefits identified for their children;

P1: It would get more people back to work definitely...

P2: More people would want to go out to work...

P1: And they'd know that they're actually earning the money, they're earning it and they're keeping it. It's not going to...

P3:... pay childcare.

P1: I mean I can't afford to work full-time because I can't afford more hours in nursery.

Mothers, Swansea

So it's nice to be able to go and be yourself and then come home and enjoy time with your children. So it's important for mothers' health that they go to work and get some time to themselves. So I think the offer will make a difference if it allows people to do that

Mother, Caernarfon

3.46 The possibility that the offer would facilitate parents, and especially mothers, being able to either look for work more easily or increase their hours in their current job without having to worry about arranging suitable alternative care for their children, was welcomed. This would in turn have benefits for other family members who provide informal childcare;

...because I know I rely a lot on my mum on a Tuesday and a Wednesday, but they're her days off from work, so I'm taking up her days off by making her look after...which is a hell of a guilt trip for me.

Mother, Llandysul

Plus then it takes the strain off, like I rely on my mother, it just takes the strain off her then as well so then obviously my mother gets stressed running round and [she would have] spare time to do what she wants to do, whereas at the moment now, she gotta ring me and my brother and say 'what time have I gotta be there? What time are you doing this?' before she can book the dentist or book the doctor's appointment around him then...

Mother, Tredegar

3.47 Providing relief for grandparents who played a significant part in the care of their grandchildren was also a prominent concern for parents, as accounts of informal childcare were often overlaid with feelings of guilt about the amount of time grandparents spent doing childcare. Many parents were aware of the sacrifices made by grandparents, such as reducing working hours or even giving up much-needed employment to care for young children, and the enhanced offer was seen as a way in which parents could rely more on formal childcare and reduce the burden on family members. Thirdly, parents discussed the benefits to themselves and the family unit as a whole in terms of increased quality time spent as a whole family, and for making the management of day-to-day life more convenient;

P1: It's having that time...even if you're not completely by yourself, you're with your friends...Being with your kids constantly...It's not healthy either..

P2: Going back to work would benefit...

P1: I think everyone appreciates each other a lot more too. And you appreciate them when they've been at school. "I've missed you all day, and you come in in a mood!" "No!" You would appreciate that if you worked...You'd feel good for yourself wouldn't you?

Mothers, Wrexham

But it is hard leaving before school because I don't see her going into school then and I've got to work out then who has assemblies, we have them in the mornings until 10.30-11am so it's a case then, I've got to try to get out then and try to see her. But lucky enough, my partner doesn't start work until 10am but he's out of the house until 10pm so ... We don't see each other, basically yeah. He's there when I wake

up and that's it. I'm gone before he wakes up then because he don't hear me getting up so yeah...it's hard...

Mother, Swansea

But if you can have your weekends off with your kids...If you've got your childcare provided and you can have your weekends with your partner, you're not hammering yourselves with work you know?

Mother, Caernarfon

3.48 Parents stressed the importance of more much-needed quality time for the family unit, such as weekends, which was sometimes sacrificed for either parent to work or for which there was little money left over for days out. Parents foresaw that both the time and money that was made available could facilitate better quality time together. But more than this, time available could also be used solely for the parents' benefit, either being used to work or for themselves as time to socialise or pursue hobbies. There were therefore multiple benefits identified for parents and the wider family offered by the additional hours that were compatible with the earlier discussed benefits for children, primarily in the structuring of routine for the family and enabling better organisation of family time in order to build productive and caring relationships between parents and children.

Additional Considerations of Parents

3.49 Despite there being many positive aspects of the offer identified by parents, both for themselves, their children and their wider family, they also felt that there were many aspects of the offer related to its delivery that would impact in different ways on families with very different circumstances. Here again, the issue of flexibility arose as important if the offer were to be attractive to them. Parents noted the importance of flexibility and choice in the way they used the 30 hours;

...those hours need to make it flexible to be used in normal, either pre-schools or nurseries, so that we can actually benefit from that, otherwise it's just not bringing any benefit at all, so...so like it needs to save money for parents and parents can actually have the benefit and can afford to go back to work, otherwise it just isn't changing anything.

Mother, Cardiff

P1: ...It can't just be for the one setting...If it was just here, the one place it wouldn't work would it?

P2: Yeah, yeah...

P1: You need it where you'd want it to be ...for like the holidays too.

Mothers, Wrexham

It would really help I think if the 30 hours would allow the children to be like - either Flying [Start] four mornings or y'know three days in nurseries and that. It needs to be blocks so that mums can work around that...

Mother, Cardiff

It's just going to make my life easier. My son will be in childcare anyway, so if it's free, it will be a bonus. I'm concerned that, if it's 30 hours, that it's not just split across five days, that maybe you could do four whole days and then pay for the fifth. Because if it's six hours each day, it's not quite enough every day.

Mother, Caernarfon

3.50 These quotes illustrate that the offer needs to be flexible for parents in a number of ways. Firstly, many parents stated that the offer needed to be available in a number of settings in order that the introduction of the enhanced offer did not disrupt the existing arrangements of families, and that they would be able to take up the offer with their provider of choice. Secondly, it was important for parents that provision should also be available during school holidays, when there is extra financial pressure on parents to pay for childcare for other school-age children. Thirdly, parents wanted to be able to take the 30 hours flexibly; choosing for themselves how many hours they took for their children, and at which times of the day, to suit their existing arrangements. Finally, parents also pointed out that wraparound care would need to be adjusted to fit with the offer in order to secure continuity of care for their children. In summary, for the offer to be taken up successfully, parents needed autonomy to choose how they used it.

3.51 There were concerns raised about the proposal; the most prominent issue for them was whether the offer took into account the potential extra strain on demand for childcare that the offer may cause. This was a particular worry for those who already sent their children to formal childcare, namely that they would not have the same access to childcare because of the shortage of staff to meet the demands placed on the sector, which would reduce flexibility, not improve it;

But [the offer] would reduce flexibility though, wouldn't it? You know, if you asked for the Friday and stuff well, they're going to be full if having free childcare so the flexibility of the children that are already here will be gone because there'll be no availability.

Mother, Caernarfon

That's my concern with it really...That's there's enough capacity to do it for 48 weeks.

Mother, Wrexham

3.52 The consequences of focusing the availability of the offer on just one type of provider i.e. private nurseries, were unhelpful for parents who lived in areas where the supply of this type of provision was low. This parent highlights the need for the offer to be available from child-minders and by extension, all forms of childcare provider, to ensure that access to it is

suitable for all, but also so that child-minders, their provider of choice, are not driven out of business by not being able to offer 30 hours free childcare;

Because if they just do it in one place, like just in a 'cylch', that's going to lose business for child-minders because people won't be able to afford to go to child-minders if the 30 hours is only available in a nursery. So if they could make it across the board, then it would be better for childminders too so they don't lose business.

Mother, Caernarfon

So my thoughts were that if it starts putting nurseries and childcare providers out of business, there will be less options for everybody full stop. It might cause a problem that way was my only thought.

Mother, Llandysul

3.53 In terms of going back to work, mothers were mindful that although the offer provided greater potential opportunity to work longer and increase household income, that people could find the initial return to work expensive;

P1: There is a lot of stress when you start a new job, coz you normally get paid a month in arrears, don't you? So you've got your work clothes, because you might not have the clothes to go back to work and your fuel and then your childcare and everything – so that first month probably is still going to be...

P2: Hard.

P1: So I think it would be better if there was some sort of initial payment to just help you through...

Mothers, Llandysul

3.54 This exchange provides an indication of the sunk costs that enter into consideration for women when returning to work, and the need for support in the initial return to employment to prevent women becoming discouraged. Furthermore, the labour market in the last decade or so has also become more precarious, with zero hours contracts much more prevalent. Women often enter into this form of employment as it enables them the flexibility to balance work and childcare. However, consideration needs to be made around how the offer could work for these types of employees;

...and what about for zero hour contract jobs? Because some days you don't have work, some days you do, some days you don't. Because that's what I was doing.

Mother, Cardiff

3.55 As well as looking to increasingly diverse forms of employment, mothers were also looking to retrain before taking up employment in their new field of expertise. Many expressed that they would like to, or were already doing this, and would want to be considered eligible for the offer if they were engaging in training or education to improve their career prospects;

What if you wanted to go back to school? But you couldn't because they're not going to provide our childcare...because see if you needed a different qualification because you wanted to go back to work, but you needed a specific qualification to do that, you can't go and do that course because you haven't got childcare and you're not entitled to this 30 hour childcare.

Mother, Cardiff

Yeah, if I can use it flexibly, yeah – that would be ideal because I can't afford to retrain, I just can't afford to retrain and put them in nursery full time...

Mother, Cardiff

3.56 This was a recurring issue across locations, with many women considering new careers to fit with the commitments of the family whilst improving their earning potential. This is potentially an important source of support for these individuals as they learn new skills, and eligibility for the offer would enable them to train now, whilst becoming important contributor to the economy at a later date.

3.57 **Welsh language provision was also discussed as an option that would be welcomed as part of having choice about which providers i.e. English medium or Welsh medium, parents decided to take.** However, there were some barriers to take-up, namely the patchy provision of Welsh medium providers in areas which were not predominantly Welsh-speaking. Parents highlighted that not having Welsh medium providers nearby played a part in deciding not to take it up. The data indicate that this may make it difficult for parents to then enrol their child in a Welsh medium school due to their not wanting to make their children feel like they were having to play 'catch-up' with their peers;

So, it's important that parents can decide and have [whichever language] they want in their local community you know. And they don't have to travel far and take the bus to whatever they want, you know?

Mother, Wrexham

Our preference would be English. If it was to be for Welsh schools only...I would feel that my sons would be at huge detriment in that they would feel very much behind joining people that had already been learning Welsh at that age.

Mother, Vale of Glamorgan

3.58 Responses indicate that take-up could be higher if access to Welsh medium provision was more readily available. As we have seen through parents accounts, convenience and flexibility often take priority over ensuring children are educated bilingually. However, the data indicate that parents may be reluctant to switch from English to Welsh provision, or vice versa, once their child has entered formal childcare. Consideration of how the promotion of the Welsh language may fit with the delivery of the offer should take into account the degree of availability of Welsh medium early education providers across different parts of Wales. Limited availability in some areas may impact on the number of

children becoming bilingual, and the offer may want to consider how it could best be used to maximise opportunities for parents to take up bilingual education for their children.

3.59 Finally, other considerations need to be made for diverse family forms – many parents discussed their different family situations, particularly as lone parents, and stressed the importance of the offer taking into account different thresholds of eligibility to account for different circumstances. There was also some indication that the offer may have to consider communicating the terms and benefits differently according to location and cultural background, as this vignette illustrates;

Cultural Considerations – Hubert Mbula Matari’s Story

Hubert is a father of three, living with his wife in the Swansea area. They are both employed. His family are originally from Congo, and his mother-in-law, who was until recently resident in Belgium, has come to live with the family to assist with childcare. Hubert felt this was the best option for his family in order that the children are raised with an awareness of their cultural heritage. He also feels that care from a family member ensures the transmission of the values that are important to them. As a father, he was discouraged from putting his children in private nursery due to the frequent media reporting of child abuse in institutions and feels that it may be too unsafe for his children to be put into the care of strangers in nurseries and other forms of childcare. Hubert also says that his understanding of where to get information on childcare provision in Wales is limited, and that he would not be sure where to obtain accurate information should he want to place his children in nursery.

3.60 This vignette highlights the difficulty for those settling into life in Wales from elsewhere in receiving relevant and inaccurate information on how to access childcare. In this case, the lack of objective information has meant that perceptions of professional childcare providers have been associated with media stories of abuse and the risks that childcare providers may pose has therefore been inflated. **This highlights the need for communication of the offer to consider different cultural groups in the promotion of the enhanced offer, and there is some further engagement to be done here with respect to understanding where information would be effectively transmitted, and that communication in a number of languages is possibly necessary, not just English and Welsh.**

3.61 The final section of this report draws together this analysis into a set of conclusions and recommendations for policymakers when considering how to deliver the offer.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 This section provides a summary of the key findings of the engagement research with parents of children aged 1-5 across Wales on their current childcare arrangements, and their views on the proposed enhanced childcare offer. A set of recommendations for how these findings can be considered in shaping the roll-out of the offer are then offered.

4.2 Discussions around parents' current childcare arrangements revealed a diverse range of choices, which were often dependent on the employment situation of parents and the availability of different forms of provision in their local area. Parents frequently reported using a mix provision throughout an average week, often involving grandparents either as the main source of childcare provision, or to fulfil the role of dropping off and picking children up from nursery whilst they were at work. The most important criteria for parents in selecting their childcare were; affordability, convenient location in relation to work and/or home and suitability in relation to their working arrangements. A high value was placed on Flying Start provision by those whose children were eligible for it; parents felt it helped speed up their child's development as well as providing timely access to additional support when required. The availability of Welsh medium or bilingual provision varied by location, with areas where the proportion of Welsh speakers were higher more likely to receive Welsh medium or bilingual provision. In areas which had higher proportions of English-speakers, Welsh medium provision was patchy. Parents were receptive to Welsh medium provision despite it not being a high priority when selecting their childcare.

4.3 When discussing balancing childcare with employment, there were a number of difficulties experienced. Often discussed was the lack of support from employers for mothers attempting to balance their employment and childcare commitments, and the lack of flexibility permitted to leave work, for example, to attend to sick children. For some, it had been too difficult for them to return to the sector they worked in before having children, and this had caused a number to consider or undertake re-training in more family-friendly career paths. For those currently looking for work, a lack of understanding and support from prospective employers, particularly with respect to the expectation that childcare would be arranged to suit the demands of the job, posed a significant barrier to women re-entering the workplace.

4.4 Focus group discussions also highlighted the parents' inconsistent understanding of the distinction between standard formal childcare received in nurseries and from child-minders, and the curriculum-based early education provision. This was because the provision was in some instances delivered seamlessly within school based settings. Although parents placed great value on the developmental and social advantages that formal childcare offered, they did not attribute this specifically to the receipt of early education and consequently it was not a primary consideration when selecting childcare.

Parents whose children received Flying Start were also largely positive regarding the perceived developmental advantages this provision offered, although they found that the 2.5

hours offered could be offered more seamlessly with formal childcare in order that they could do more with that time, such as retrain or go back to work.

4.5 When highlighting what did and did not work about their current childcare arrangements, parents placed high emphasis on flexibility being key to making their childcare work. Receptiveness to flexible arrangements needed to come from two main sources, firstly from employers as already discussed, but also from formal childcare providers themselves, whose inflexible pricing terms often made formal childcare less cost-effective for parents.

4.6 In terms of parents' views on the proposed 30 hours of free childcare, many potential positive outcomes were identified. For their children, parents' felt that more time in a formal childcare environment would offer further benefits to their development, whilst for the family as a whole, less income spent on childcare would offer the opportunity for family days out, holidays and other treats. It was anticipated that this would reduce the need to work overtime, which would free up time on the weekends to enable families to enjoy more quality time together, thus improving relationships with partners and children. This may also offer the possibility of reducing the requirement on grandparents to undertake childcare, enabling them to enjoy more time for themselves.

4.7 However, parents called for the offer to take a number of issues into consideration when finalising eligibility and delivery of the offer. Most prominent was the requirement for the 30 hours to be used flexibly, allowing parents to choose the number of hours they used, to allow different types of provision to be eligible to enable parents choice in selecting their provider, and for provision to be available in school holidays to make childcare affordable during these periods. Parents required autonomy in their take-up and use of the offer.

4.8 Questions and concerns were raised with regard to diverse employment arrangements and the eligibility of those who were on zero-hours contracts, and whether there would be additional support for those returning to work, a process which could be expensive. In relation to providing additional support that would enhance employment prospects in the long term, some parents requested that eligibility be extended to those who were currently retraining. Some parents also questioned whether there was enough funding and staff to support the offer, and how resource gaps would be addressed. Finally, there were indicative data that suggested that special consideration should also be paid to how those from different cultural backgrounds were made aware of the childcare offer as it was rolled out, as research with these individuals indicated low levels of knowledge about the support on offer.

4.9 A number of recommendations regarding the delivery of the offer are therefore outlined below;

1. The offer should be designed to enable flexible use by parents in order to ensure the highest possible take-up.

The research suggests that the offer would have increased appeal for parents if they were able to use it flexibly to suit their particular needs. Delivery of the offer could consider allowing parents choice over (i) the number of hours of the 30 they take up; (ii) the provider who delivers the childcare and (iii) ensuring availability of childcare during school holidays. It was also important to parents that the offer could be taken up with a diverse range of providers, including; private nurseries, child-minders and school-based nursery settings. This was particularly important in locations where choice of provider was limited.

2. The offer should be delivered to accommodate a wide range of employment and training circumstances.

The focus groups revealed a diversity of working circumstances among parents. The employment of mothers may be particularly unconventional given the need to balance childcare and employment, encompassing part-time work, zero-hours contracts, volunteering and re-training. When confirming eligibility for the offer, the policy should take account of differing circumstances and whether the offer can be designed to be used flexibly by those in precarious employment situations. Furthermore, the viability of including children of parents who are currently re-training as eligible for the 30 hours should also be considered. This would have the benefit of providing support to those who are re-training in advance of entering a new career and likely to re-enter the labour market at a later stage.

3. Roll out of the offer should incorporate engagement with a wide range of employers to make them aware of the offer and encourage/facilitate support for employers to take on mothers returning to work.

Mothers consistently expressed a number of barriers to re-entering the workplace following having children, and many accounts identified a lack of support received from prospective or current employers to enable them to do so. There was a perceived lack of understanding from parents' perspectives of the nature and constraints on parents when balancing childcare and employment. Policy officials may want to consider facilitating some engagement with key employers in Wales as the offer rolls out. This would aim to increase understanding of the offer and thus aim to reduce the barriers women face in re-entering the workplace.

4. Considerations of eligibility should ensure that different types of families can benefit from the offer and that the offer is cost effective for those families

Discussions around eligibility and questions around when decisions on eligibility would be made have highlighted the diversity of circumstances and family forms that exist. Decisions regarding eligibility should ensure that the offer is suitable for lone parent as well as two-parent families, and that it is equally cost-effective for lone-parent families when taking into account their hours of employment and benefit entitlement.

5. Consideration should be given to how different cultural groups receive information about childcare provision, and communications should be tailored accordingly.

Indicative findings from individuals who have migrated to Wales have shown that awareness of the childcare system in Wales and its potential benefits may be less well known within these groups. Additionally, there may even be some negative perceptions of safety and child-protection within public and private childcare provision. Roll-out of the offer should consider the communications to eligible families, and the diversity of communications that may be required to ensure hard-to-reach groups are able to make informed decisions about whether they take-up the offer. This could consider translation of information into a variety of languages and consider a variety of communication channels through which this information could be made available.

6. The research indicates that parents favour the consolidation of early education with formal childcare to facilitate opportunities for parents to take up paid employment or to re-train. Further research is needed to understand how this could be best achieved for children in receipt of early education and formal childcare.

Where children were receiving a combination of early education (i.e. 10 hours minimum per week of Foundation Phase education for 3-4 year olds) and formal childcare, some parents indicated that the provision of transportation between the formal childcare provider and the school providing early education had been an important factor in enabling them to take up employment. **Although this offer will not affect the delivery of Flying Start**, the parents of children who were in receipt of Flying Start (defined as formal childcare available for 2-3 year olds in selected areas for 2.5 hours per day, 5 days a week for 39 weeks of the year) also indicated that the shorter blocks of time, although valued, were not sufficient to support them in entering the labour market. The data indicate that the delivery of the 30 hours would need to consider how early education and formal childcare could be seamlessly delivered to enable parents to work. It is advised that further research into the practicalities of delivering this in different local authorities throughout Wales is carried out to understand the possibilities and constraints of delivering adequate wraparound care.

Further Research

4.10 This research provides insight into parental priorities and choices in relation to childcare arrangements, and the degree to which parents feel that the 30 hours per week offer would suit their childcare and employment arrangements. However, there are some important issues which require further consideration in the shaping and roll-out of the offer.

4.11 Firstly, the research completed does not take into account the needs of disabled children, or those with additional learning needs (ALN). Whether they are in mainstream or specialist nursery arrangements, these families will have particular requirements and considerations which will need to be taken into account when developing and rolling out the offer. Other engagement work with parents has been undertaken by the policy team to better understand these issues.

4.12 Secondly, the availability to deliver the offer depends on there being sufficient staff and resources to accommodate the anticipated additional requirement for nursery places, as well as there being sufficient resources to be able to integrate early education and formal

childcare. Further research with providers will offer insight into the extent of this issue and how it can best be addressed so that the offer can be delivered equitably across Wales.

4.13 Finally, continuous monitoring of the progress of the roll-out, overall take-up of the offer and the outcomes of children who are taking up the 30 hours should be undertaken through an evaluation. This will provide accurate baseline data and the ability to monitor the effectiveness of the offer to determine whether it is targeting those families it aims to benefit. It will also determine whether its implementation has been equitable across Wales, and enable the offer to be adjusted to ensure it is achieving its outcomes.

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Annex A

Childcare Definitions

Early education

Children are entitled to access early education through the Foundation Phase curriculum ahead of mandatory schooling, from the term after their 3rd birthday. All local authorities in Wales are required to provide a minimum of 10 free hours of Foundation Phase education per week for all 3 to 4-year-olds; this can be in a maintained primary (nursery) school or a funded non-maintained setting.

Cylch Meithrin

Cylch Meithrin is a Welsh-medium playgroup, of which there are over 500 throughout Wales. They are co-ordinated by the Welsh-medium early education charity, Mudiad Meithrin. The aim of the Cylch Meithrin is to promote the education and development of children from age two until they enter school. The emphasis is on learning through play and developing the Welsh language skills of each child.

Formal childcare

This is defined as regulated childcare, encompassing a wide range of different types of provision, which are subject to a set of national minimum standards (NMS) and are regulated and inspected by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW). The NMS allows a flexible approach, allowing providers to develop quality provision tailored to the needs of children, parents and local communities. They are intended to reflect the needs of children from birth to 12 years, and to be proportional in the way in which they are applied.

Flying Start

Flying Start is an early years programme for families with children under 4 years of age living in disadvantaged areas of Wales. Part of the Flying Start programme provides quality childcare which is offered to parents of all eligible 2-3 year olds for two and a half hours a day, five days a week for 39 weeks. In addition, there should be at least 15 sessions of provision for the family during the school holidays.