Research to inform future support for delivering early education in the non-maintained sector: Executive Summary

1. Research aims

1.1 Strategic Research and Insight Limited (SRI) conducted this research between February and July 2019. The findings are based on the views provided by stakeholders and non-maintained settings consulted in the research.

1.2 The project aimed to identify the priorities, future support and developing needs for strengthening the position of early education within the non-maintained sector in Wales to enable the sector to be involved in, respond and adapt to changes, while ensuring that settings continue to deliver high quality early education.

1.3 Within this overarching aim, the project's objectives were to:

- Consult early years Foundation Phase stakeholders primarily in the non-maintained sector to understand barriers to the effective delivery of Foundation Phase practice in non-maintained settings and whether the current approach to support is effective and sustainable.

- Understand the anticipated impact of the new curriculum and assessment arrangements on umbrella organisations and non-maintained settings and implications for educational support.

- Present findings in relation to current and future opportunities and challenges affecting support provided for non-maintained settings delivering the Foundation Phase.

1.4 More detailed research questions are outlined later in this summary.

2. Method

2.1 The project comprised the following stages:

- A desk-based documentation review of Foundation Phase Development Officers (FPDOs) job descriptions and monitoring reports

- Face-to-face and telephone interviews with 18 key stakeholders from:
  - the Welsh Government (6)
  - umbrella organisations (8)

- local authorities (2), and
- education consortia (2).

- An online survey of non-maintained settings (166)
- A telephone booster survey of non-maintained settings (50)
- Telephone in-depth interviews with non-maintained settings (28).

2.2 All participants were given the opportunity to participate in Welsh or English.

3. Background: The role of Foundation Phase Development Officers

3.1 The Welsh Government provides grant funding to each of the four umbrella organisations (Mudiad Meithrin, Early Years Wales, the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) and the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY). The former three organisations have received funding since 2003, and the latter since 2008.

3.2 The grant was introduced to provide a dedicated resource for umbrella organisations to facilitate and support the delivery and expansion of early years provision in the non-maintained sector and has been used to employ an FPDO in each organisation.

3.3 The purpose of these posts is to provide support, training, policy information and advice on the Foundation Phase to the organisations' members. The officers are also required to liaise with peers in local authorities and engage with other relevant networks and organisations, and more recently to assist in taking forward the actions of the Foundation Phase Action Plan[1]. The organisations are required to submit a formal monitoring report on activities delivered and a forward work plan to inform judgements and decisions about funding in future years.

4. Key Findings and Points for Consideration

4.1 A summary of the evidence gathered to address the key research questions and their implications is presented below.

What kind and level of support do non-maintained settings require from umbrella organisations to deliver early education?

Training, resources and other support is needed

4.2 The evidence gathered points to a need for training, information and support on a wide range of topics relevant to settings, with delivery which reflects their circumstances. Training and other information needs to convey consistent messages to settings about Foundation Phase Nursery (FPN) delivery.

4.3 Training needs to be delivered at suitable times and locations to enable settings to attend which would include evening and weekend training for some although this is unsuitable for those who work irregular hours.

4.4 Face-to-face training is often preferred to online training because it enables settings to ask questions and share ideas for effective practice. Lack of ICT equipment can also be a

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[1] Published by the Welsh Government in 2016, this document for practitioners and stakeholders sets out actions to support and share learning on effective practice and ongoing staff development, while maintaining momentum in the delivery of the Foundation Phase.

barrier to accessing online training. However, others prefer online training so a full range of options should be considered.

4.5 Many settings struggle to access training because they cannot afford to pay for cover and/or the cost of the training itself. Some have no option but to close the setting to enable staff to attend training which means that they lose money and inconvenience parents. Staff also need to be able to allocate time to implement the key messages they learn from training which incurs additional cost.

4.6 Stakeholders highlighted the need for umbrella organisations, local authorities and education consortia to deliver regular training. Some settings have struggled to find spaces on local authority/consortia-led training.

4.7 Consequently, several settings and stakeholders suggested that the Welsh Government should improve settings' access to training and its benefits through funding cover, planning and implementation time.

Support for settings not currently delivering FPN

4.8 Umbrella organisations suggested that some settings which were not currently funded to deliver FPN would benefit from FPDO support to prepare them to start delivering FPN in future.

4.9 Settings not currently delivering FPN said that they would need more resources, training, and funding to expand and/or adapt accommodation to enable them to start delivering FPN.

4.10 In addition, they would need clear information, advice and guidance on curriculum content and approaches to delivery and on documenting children's progress and feedback, tailored by setting type. This support should be combined with regular visits from an advisory teacher who would provide guidance and share ideas for effective practice.

Impact of financial issues

4.11 Whilst not directly relevant to the nature of FPDO support, financial issues are of immediate concern to settings and stakeholders with regard to the future sustainability of the non-maintained sector.

4.12 The discrepancy in funding received by maintained and non-maintained settings for delivering FPN and the Childcare Offer (the Offer) was a key issue. In some cases, the Offer funding has enabled settings to enhance their FPN delivery. However, many settings are struggling financially, and their situation has worsened because of the funding levels for FPN delivery. They, along with many stakeholders, called for FPN to be funded equally to the Offer.

4.13 Highlighting the disparity in funding received by maintained and non-maintained settings across Wales, stakeholders also expressed that local authorities across Wales should fund all settings which deliver FPN equally, regardless of location and maintained or non-maintained status.

4.14 Some felt that local authorities' allocation of Early Years Pupil Development Grant (EYPDG) funding to support FPN delivery was not always transparent nor in line with settings' needs. Settings and stakeholders therefore felt that in future local authorities should consult settings on how the funding should be spent in line with their needs and ensure that it is deployed accordingly.

Are there areas of support required by settings which are not currently delivered by umbrella organisations? What are these areas?

4.15   Overall the research suggests that umbrella organisations are meeting the support needs of their settings. However a number of areas were identified where support could be improved. These have implications for delivery from umbrella organisations but also the Welsh Government, local authorities and education consortia.

4.16   Supporting children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) is a key unmet support need for many settings, which were reported to lack specialist one-to-one support, training, and advice and guidance with assessments. Stakeholders also highlighted that settings needed more ALN support, but the Welsh Government noted that local authorities' take-up of ALN funding available through the Offer was uneven.

4.17   Settings also highlighted a need for support with aspects of running a business including accountancy, recruitment and administration.

4.18   ICT support and opportunities to share effective practice in FPN delivery with other settings were also lacking. It is understood that some local authorities and consortia are currently expanding opportunities for maintained and non-maintained settings to meet to share effective practice, but this work is in its infancy.

4.19   The research also identified some needs relating to Welsh language support, training and information, and curriculum updates. This is discussed further under the later research question relating to Cymraeg 2050.

Are there any variations in need according to type of non-maintained setting, language category[2] of the setting, geography, social-demographic, organisational structure or size of setting etc.?

4.20   In the provider survey, although few settings mentioned unmet support needs, this was more evident among pre-school playgroups and less evident with day nurseries. Cylchoedd meithrin and childminders reported similar levels of unmet need.

4.21   Some stakeholders felt that there should be a common core of support available to all settings regardless of type, with additional support provided as and when needed.

4.22   It was suggested that settings with the following characteristics faced additional challenges which required greater support:

- Settings in local authorities which had less funding to support them
- Settings in rural areas
- Welsh-medium settings
- Settings accepting children from a wide age range
- Settings accepting children from varied linguistic backgrounds.

What are the perceptions of the potential implications of curriculum reform on provision? What are the anticipated implications?

4.23   The new curriculum framework was published mid-way through this research. As a result, most settings and stakeholders had little time to develop an understanding of how they

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[2] The language category was defined by the language in which settings deliver childcare and early education. See the Annexes to the full report for full details of the wording used in the provider survey questionnaire and topic guides.

would need to adapt their provision in line with the new curriculum and assessment arrangements.

4.24 Awareness was mixed on changes that might be needed but Registered Education Providers (REPs) were more aware than non-REPs. There was a lack of clarity amongst settings about what would happen to the Foundation Phase in the new curriculum and how it relates to the non-maintained sector, including the age of children it applies to and what impact it would have on provision.

4.25 There were varied views on the implications of the new curriculum on provision. There was a strong feeling that settings would not need to adapt their provision much if they were already delivering high-quality FPN because the new curriculum operates on similar principles as the Foundation Phase. However, it was also suggested that the new curriculum's lack of prescriptiveness compared to the previous arrangements would require a considerable culture change among settings.

4.26 The research identified a need for more engagement to raise awareness and provide clear, consistent and accessible information on the new curriculum through resources, training and events.

What are the strengths of the current approach of support through umbrella organisations? Could these be improved upon? In what ways?

Supporting settings

4.27 Most settings valued the support they received from their umbrella organisations. They particularly valued the information, resources, guidance and bespoke support they have received and the meetings and conferences hosted by umbrella organisations. Receiving regular emails and updates had helped settings to keep abreast of important developments. The style of the written Welsh in guidance provided by umbrella organisations could sometimes be hard for settings to understand and should be made more accessible.

4.28 Settings appreciated their FPDO's strong working relationship with them and their friendly, 'can-do' approach. Most settings also greatly valued the advice and support they received from their FPDO. Evidence suggests that the key strengths of the FPDO support are its flexibility and its intense and targeted nature which allows settings to pinpoint and address weaker areas. FPDOs ability to harness and tailor their support to meet the needs of staff with different responsibilities within settings was also highlighted.

4.29 FPDOs now deliver more training and events for sharing effective practice for settings, which are well-received. However the amount of direct support to settings provided by FPDOs has decreased and there is a need to increase it in future to enable them to raise quality standards, particularly with the new curriculum and dual assessment and inspection requirements.

4.30 In line with this, FPDOs reported that they would need to broaden their knowledge and expertise in early education, Welsh language development, and in supporting settings to respond to Estyn inspections in future.

4.31 The support settings receive from local authorities / education consortia through their Early Years Advisory Teachers (EYATs) was appreciated. Strengths noted were the individually tailored support they provide; their accessibility via telephone or email outside of visits; delivering high-quality training; and their positive working relationships with settings.

4.32 The decreased amount of EYAT support now received by most non-maintained settings impacts on the support needed from FPDOs. The lack of EYATs who are able to work

through the medium of Welsh had caused problems for some Welsh-medium settings, who require consistent access to Welsh-medium support. Replacing EYATs with support from local primary schools was seen to be a less effective approach where this has occurred. In future, stakeholders and settings felt that they would need more EYAT support to help them to maintain quality FPN delivery.

Collaboration and stakeholder relationships

4.33　The partnership working between umbrella organisations and the Welsh Government was valued although sometimes could be more consistent in terms of engagement. Collaborative working was seen to have raised the Welsh Government's awareness of the needs and concerns of the non-maintained sector.

4.34　Positive working relationships were also felt to exist between local authorities, education consortia, EYATs, umbrella organisations and FPDOs. However the strength of these relationships varied by local authority and education consortia. Where communication had been less effective between these parties, this sometimes resulted in settings receiving mixed messages. Regular communication to ensure that all parties provide consistent information to settings is essential in future.

4.35　Views on collaborative working relationships between FPDOs themselves were mixed. Some stakeholders felt that the FPDOs across Wales already have strong working relationships which do not need enhancing. Others felt that the FPDOs should share effective practice and training delivery between them more in future to strengthen the relationship between them and the quality of the support they provide to settings.

Is the non-maintained sector equipped to respond to changes in early education policy?

4.36　Settings' awareness of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is currently very low. However, most support its principles of seamless delivery of early education and childcare.

4.37　Multiple types of support to enable preparation for ECEC were identified, including training, financial, and support from advisory teachers. Delivery of the support was seen to be responsibility of local authorities, umbrella organisations and the Welsh Government.

4.38　As with most of the other topics discussed, consistency between maintained and non-maintained settings in early consultation, training, information and financial support was also seen as important.

4.39　While the non-maintained sector has successfully adapted to many policy changes in recent years, some respondents cautioned that care must be taken not to overburden settings with new policy changes whilst they were still working to adapt to the raft of new policies launched by the Welsh Government.

How should support be structured to best respond to cross-cutting policies such as Cymraeg 2050?

4.40　Training, Welsh language support and support from advisory teachers were the top three ways in which settings need help to respond to the aims of Cymraeg 2050 according to evidence gathered. It was felt that the Welsh Government should fund this support and that umbrella organisations, with help from local authorities and education consortia, should deliver it.

4.41　Settings where staff already speak some Welsh need training which supports them to learn more advanced Welsh vocabulary. In instances where staff understand little or no Welsh,

they reported that training should begin at a basic level. As mentioned earlier, training should be delivered in an accessible mode, at convenient times and locations.

4.42   Settings also reported the need for support to encourage parents to realise the value of Welsh-medium education and to encourage them to speak more Welsh at home. In addition, numerous settings lacked good quality, affordable Welsh language resources such as books, posters and CDs. Enabling access to these would be helpful.

4.43   It was noted that more staff with the right language skills and qualifications are needed to support the delivery of Cymraeg 2050 and that this currently poses a significant challenge in many areas.

How should future support for the implementation of the new curriculum and assessment arrangements in non-maintained settings be structured?

4.44   The outcomes of local authorities, consortia and the Welsh Government's upcoming engagement activities with settings will be important in informing the structure of the support that they deliver to settings to enable them to deliver the new curriculum in future.

4.45   The need for non-maintained and maintained settings to receive consistent information and equal support from local authorities, consortia and umbrella organisations to enable them to deliver the new curriculum to the same standards was emphasised. Increased partnership working and shared delivery of training and information for non-maintained and maintained settings was suggested as one way of achieving this. Umbrella organisations, local authorities and consortia should share responsibility for shaping and delivering all training and information to ensure consistency.

4.46   Settings identified multiple types of support that they need to deliver the new curriculum and assessment arrangements, including:

- Training on effective practice, planning, observational learning, curriculum content, assessment processes, and on adapting the curriculum to enable children with ALN to access it fully

- A series of conferences or roadshows hosted by the Welsh Government to share information about the new curriculum for all settings across Wales

- Suitable resources.

4.47   Umbrella organisations, local authorities, education consortia and the Welsh Government should clarify what support settings could expect to receive and where it would come from to manage expectations and aid planning.

How can the interests of the non-maintained sector be best represented in strategic education policy developments at a national level?

4.48   Several ways in which the Welsh Government can represent the interests of the non-maintained sector in future policymaking were identified:

- **Treating non-maintained settings as equal to maintained settings and encouraging other stakeholders to do the same.** Perceived inequalities currently exist between the non-maintained and maintained sectors in terms of the type and amount of information they receive, perceptions or misconceptions of the standards of their provision and the value of their contribution to delivering early education and childcare

- **Involving non-maintained settings fully in consultations about possible policy and practice changes.** Improvements in this area have been welcomed and stakeholders believe it is essential that early consultation is made on matters affecting settings

- **Ensuring that Welsh Government policies are implemented consistently by local authorities across Wales** to ensure that all settings are treated equally and that parents have a real choice in early education provision

- **Funding the early education and Childcare Offer equally**, regardless of family circumstances

- **Consider the demands of the Estyn inspection process on non-maintained settings**, as many settings are currently struggling to meet them

- **Continuing to fund umbrella organisations adequately** to enable them to continue to support non-maintained settings

- **Simplify and clarify qualifications in the early education sector** to support settings in ensuring that all staff have the right skills and experience.