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A review of the childcare support available for parents in education, training or returning to work

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

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Glossary

Acronym/Key word	Definition
C-CAS	Coronavirus – Childcare Assistance Scheme
CCG	Child care Grant
CfW	Communities for Work
CfW+	Communities for Work Plus
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FCF	Financial Contingency Fund
FEI	Further Education Institutions
FHE	Further / Higher Education
FPN	Foundation Phase Nursery
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
HMRC	HM Revenue and Customs
PaCE	Parents, Childcare and Employment
PLA	Parents Learning Allowance
SFW	Student Finance Wales
WGLG (FE)	Welsh Government Learning Grant (Further Education)

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents the main findings from a review of the childcare support available for parents in education, training or returning to work. The review aims to understand what types of support are available; what gaps, if any, in support are present; whether the support available is sufficient to remove the barriers to education and work for these parents and what changes, if any, would be required to reduce the barriers for parents in education or training or seeking to return to work.

The review was carried out by Arad Research using desk research, interviews with Welsh Government national programme and support leads and interviews with representatives from further education institutions (FEIs) and higher education institutions (HEIs) and employment programme administrators.

The Childcare Offer is currently aimed at eligible working parents of 3 and 4 year olds. This means that, with the exception of parents on an apprenticeship, the current Offer does not extend to parents in training or education, or those looking for/seeking to return to work.

Findings

There is existing provision for parents in education and training, primarily through:

- The Financial Contingency Fund (FCF): this is a discretionary fund managed by individual further education institutions but funded by the Welsh Government. It is targeted towards learners who are experiencing financial hardship and can include supporting with the cost of childcare. The FCF is flexible and can be adapted to local needs and context.
- The Childcare Grant (CCG): this grant is for parents on a higher education course and is administered by Student Finance Wales.

There are existing schemes to support parents into work, most notably:

- Parents Childcare and Employment (PaCE): this is a joint project led by the Welsh Government in partnership with DWP and is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). It operates in local authorities outside former Communities First clusters. The Project provides childcare support for parents whilst training or looking for work, where childcare is their main barrier. PaCE aims to support parents aged 16 to 24

not engaged in education, training or employment and economically inactive parents aged 25+.

- Communities for Work (CfW): this is a joint project led by Welsh Government in partnership with DWP and Lead Delivery Bodies, funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). It operates in former Communities First areas. CfW aims to increase the employability of 16-24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training, and economically inactive and long-term unemployed adults who have complex barriers to employment. The support can cover childcare costs, for example whilst attending an interview or training/work experience.
- Flexible Support Fund: financial assistance for people claiming unemployment benefits to help them take part in activities to move them closer to the labour market, which can include financial support for childcare costs. This is a discretionary fund administered by Job Centres.

Other support mechanisms include Flying Start and smaller regional employability schemes.

Despite a range of programmes and funding sources, there are still groups potentially missing out on support or inadequately supported by some schemes to the point of this being a barrier to them pursuing education, training or employment. These groups include: postgraduate students; healthcare students; two parent households where one is in work (although the earnings of the other parent may be low); parents with several children; under-represented groups such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities; disabled learners; refugees and asylum seekers.

In addition to childcare costs, there are also other challenges which create barriers for parents. These include the complexity and length of some of the application processes; complicated eligibility criteria and thresholds for some of the schemes; lack of confidence of parents; lack engagement amongst some parents with available schemes; lack of suitable or flexible childcare; and poor access to public transport and its frequency, particularly in some rural areas.

Conclusions and recommendations

Flexible and comprehensive childcare support should be an integral part of support mechanisms to allow parents to access education, training and employment.

There are existing schemes providing childcare support for parents in education, training and on the cusp of work. However there are gaps in these schemes, as well as additional challenges which create barriers for parents.

There is a need to reduce the complexity of childcare support schemes and eligibility requirements. The methods of communicating with target groups should be reviewed to clarify and raise awareness of the support available.

It is not recommended that the Childcare Offer should be redesigned to accommodate parents in training and education and those on the cusp of employment, but rather that the gaps in support should be addressed by reviewing the scope of current programmes and creating better links between them.

Recommendations:

The Welsh Government should:

- liaise with stakeholders in further and higher education (FHE) and employability programmes to ensure there is detailed and clear information on access and eligibility to all sources of childcare funding support, including at a wider UK level.
- work with stakeholders in FHE and employability programmes to explore options for streamlining eligibility criteria, means-tested thresholds, funding caps and methods of support.
- work with partners to simplify application systems to all childcare-related programmes, with particular reference to the CCG.
- liaise with education institutions and Student Finance Wales to review whether maximum support caps could be lifted for those most in need of childcare support.
- explore options to provide childcare support for postgraduate students through current Childcare Grant structures.
- target further childcare support to asylum seekers, particularly those participating in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses. This could be achieved through current programmes such as FCF and Parents, Childcare and Employment (PaCE).
- work with appropriate stakeholders to reassess thresholds for childcare support and ensure that those currently just over the threshold have the opportunity to access childcare support.

- work with NHS Wales to ensure that students following healthcare degrees receive parity for childcare support.
- work with partners in FHE and employability programmes to develop flexible childcare support for other groups such as part-time and distance learning students and volunteers.
- ensure that monitoring and evaluation systems are robust and allow analysis of return on investment (ROI).
- explore future models to replace EU funding, which allow for continued investment in support that adequately reflect childcare costs.

1. Introduction

Aims and objectives of the review

- 1.1 This report presents the findings from a review of the childcare support available for parents in education, training or returning to work. The review aims to understand what types of support are available; what gaps, if any, in support are present; and whether the support available is sufficient to remove the barriers to education and work for these parents.
- 1.2 The research questions asked as part of the review are set out below.

- To what extent does current support for those in education / returning to work remove childcare as a barrier?
- How beneficial is the support available for childcare to parents in education, training or seeking to return to work?
- What is the monetary value, and funding sources, of the current support available for parents in education, training or returning to work?
- What are the specific issues facing parents who are studying/seeking to return to work? E.g. is the cost the only/main barrier?
- Are any types of students / parents particularly well supported or disadvantaged in terms of childcare support?
- What changes, if any, would be required to reduce the barriers for parents in, or wishing to enter, education or training or seeking to return to work? For example, a change to current provisions.
- If the Childcare Offer were to be extended to parents in education, training or seeking to return to work, what interactions or duplications would occur between existing programmes?

The context for financial support for childcare

- 1.3 This section provides context and an overview of the current childcare support available for parents in education, training or returning to work seeking childcare in Wales.
- 1.4 Education and training are important predictors of career success for parents, their likelihood of returning to work, their employment type, and their earnings¹. The importance of prioritising the first few years of a child's life, 'the early years', and trying to make it easier for working families to take up and retain employment is highlighted as part of the *Prosperity for All* Welsh Government strategy.² Welsh Government's strategies and plans support early education and childcare provision in Wales and includes the programmes set out below.

The Childcare Offer

- 1.5 All children are entitled to early education (Foundation Phase Nursery) from the term after their third birthday and all local authorities provide a minimum of 10 hours per week. The Childcare Offer for Wales provides working parents of three and four-year-olds with a combination of childcare and early education for up to 30 hours a week— made up of at least 10 hours of early education and up to 20 hours of Government-funded childcare. A commitment to providing funded childcare to working parents was set out in the Welsh Government's Programme for Government for 2016 – 2021, and expanded on in *Prosperity for All*:

We will provide working parents of 3 and 4-year-olds with 30 hours of free early education and childcare for up to 48 weeks a year, delivered in a way that works for parents and children.³

The 2019 annual report explains that the Welsh Government has '*rolled out the Offer a year ahead of schedule to help parents into work.*'⁴

- 1.6 The Offer defines working parents as those who are employed or self-employed. Both parents in a two-parent family and the sole parent in a single-parent family

¹ Harkness, S. Borkowska, M. Pelikh, A. (2019) [Employment pathways and occupational change after childbirth](#). Government Equalities Office.

² Welsh Government (2017) [Prosperity for All: the national strategy](#). Cardiff: Welsh Government.

³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁴ Welsh Government (2019) [Annual Report 2019, A more Prosperous, Equal and Greener Wales](#). Cardiff: Welsh Government. p.6 and 11.

must be working to qualify for the Offer. Parents just outside the labour market (actively seeking employment) as well as those in education and training—apart from apprenticeships—are currently ineligible for the Childcare Offer.

- 1.7 The Childcare Offer removes all or at least part of the childcare cost barriers for eligible parents, making the prospect of working a more affordable option for many parents. However, these parents may still need to access and pay for formal childcare in the process of gaining skills and experiences before gaining employment. Therefore, the cost and access to childcare may still be a barrier to parents wishing to access further or higher education as well as other activities required to access employment opportunities.

Foundation Phase Nursery (FPN)

- 1.8 Alongside Government-funded childcare, the 30 hour Childcare Offer is made up of existing Foundation Phase Nursery (FPN) provision. This universal entitlement offers all children in Wales a minimum of 10 hours a week of government-funded early years education from the term following their third birthday, in term time. Children are offered part-time education in a nursery attached to a maintained school or in local authority approved childcare settings, for example, day nurseries, playgroups, or sessional childcare. The split between FPN hours and funded childcare hours which make up the 30 hours of the Offer varies across Wales and depends on the FPN hours provided by the local authority.

Flying Start

- 1.9 Flying Start provides fully funded quality childcare which is offered to parents of all eligible 2-3 year olds for 2 and a half hours a day, 5 days a week, 39 weeks a year. Flying Start is a geographically targeted programme, focused on the areas of greatest need. This encourages the take-up of all the programme's entitlements (of which "childcare" is one) and avoids any stigma associated with individually targeted intervention programmes. Independent evaluation has shown that Flying Start is having a positive impact on families' lives and has been life-changing for some high need families. Flying Start childcare providers are required to ensure

close links to the foundation phase to make sure children transfer effectively between Flying Start and foundation phase providers.

Childcare support in employability programmes

- 1.10 The Welsh Government's Employability Plan⁵ describes how crucial and important good quality childcare is in enabling a person to take up work:

'Availability of good quality childcare and adult social care, efficient and affordable public transport, access to health care and particularly occupational healthcare are crucial; if these services work well, they enable a person to take up work, rather than creating barriers to employment. Matching people to the opportunities that fit their abilities and aspirations will help them to thrive and progress in work.'

- 1.11 The Welsh Government also emphasise their commitment to supporting the Parents Childcare and Employment (PaCE) scheme which enables parents to receive financial help with childcare to access education, training or employment opportunities. Further information about the PaCE scheme can be found in section 4.

Overview of methodology

- 1.12 The research to inform this review was:

- Mapping support available to parents in Wales:
 - Desk research mapping financial support available for childcare in Wales (and the wider UK, if applicable.)
- Interviews with key stakeholders:
 - Interviews with Welsh Government national programme and support leads to gain additional information relating to programmes supporting the target group.
- Contextual research with parents:
 - Additional research using online forums exploring issues raised by parents within the target group.

⁵ Welsh Government (2018) [Employability Plan](#) Cardiff: Welsh Government. p.10.

- Telephone interviews with representatives from further education institutions (FEIs) and higher education institutions (HEIs) and employment programme administrators:
 - Consultations to understand what support is currently available, the challenges faced by the target groups and the impact childcare support has had.

Further detail on the methodology can be found in Annex 3 of this report.

2. Further Education

Funding

- 2.1 All FEIs use the Welsh Government's Financial Contingency Fund (FCF) as their main source of support for students who face childcare issues. This is a discretionary fund managed by individual FEIs and is targeted towards learners who are experiencing financial hardship. The fund supports the cost of childcare, transport, learning materials or other barriers to study.
- 2.2 The seven FEI representatives interviewed were all positive about the FCF, its flexibility and adaptability to local needs and context for childcare. The funding is used to support all students with childcare needs who are eligible. Each institution must prepare a FCF policy that sets out criteria and childcare support available. Funding is allocated on a first-come, first-served basis and priority is given in some institutions to returning, progressing learners and lone parents, in line with Welsh Government guidelines.
- 2.3 Funding generally covers 85 per cent of childcare costs, although one college representative reported covering 90 per cent of costs. Several representatives outlined that if parents are eligible the Welsh Government Learning Grant (Further Education) (WGLG)/ Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) can cover the 15 per cent shortfall as can other internal college funds, for example, additional support to pay for school uniform for children and free transport.
- 2.4 All FCF grants are means-tested – maximum household income is one cited criterion, which has to be below EMA and Welsh Government Learning Grant limits (£23,078 and £18,370 respectively) - and students also have to be confirmed as full-time (for FEI students this is 3 days a week) to receive support.
- 2.5 The majority of representatives reported that their institutions establish a maximum daily payment based on the average childcare costs for their catchment areas. For example, one FEI puts a limit of £35 a day while another cited £32 a day. Several others reported a more flexible approach and pay 85 per cent of whichever childcare provider is used. Childcare providers are paid directly by colleges on behalf of the students, a process which is considered by the FEI representatives interviewed to be '*streamlined*' and '*efficient*'.

- 2.6 Most of the college representatives reported that they provide additional support for vulnerable learners.⁶ In some cases, colleges reported that they work closely with local authorities and that learners considered vulnerable are identified early on in their application processes. Other learners who may require additional support are referrals from skills and employability programmes (see chapter 4). Some students request assistance from college staff in sourcing evidence for their childcare funding applications. They are often referred to the respective colleges' learning support departments or wellbeing teams who can then provide bespoke support.

'Confidence is a huge barrier, particularly for those furthest away from the job market, they are completely disengaged from education and employers and nervous of reengaging. FCF is part of a package of support we provide to give these people aspirations and to raise them out of poverty.' FEI representative

Access

- 2.7 Access to childcare was not considered to be a major issue by the FEI representatives interviewed. Several colleges reported they have childcare facilities on site, (these were initially managed by the respective colleges and are now franchised out) and other private nurseries near campuses. For one FEI representative, the location of a nursery on their campus was a key factor in '*alleviating anxiety*' for some learners, adding that some learners continue to breastfeed their baby thanks to this option.
- 2.8 Several FEI representatives did acknowledge, however, that access can be an issue for some student parents if they are relying on public transport, with both costs and availability cited as an issue, particularly for those living in rural areas. FCF funding is also used to support transport costs in these cases, however, access is considered to be more of an issue than cost.

⁶ Vulnerable and disadvantaged learners can include learners with special educational needs; learners from minority ethnic groups who have English or Welsh as an additional language; care-experienced children; young carers; learners eligible for free school meals and others. See also page 3 of [Guidance for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners](#)

Barriers

- 2.9 Despite the opportunities provided for student parents through FCF and additional support for vulnerable learners a number of barriers and gaps were identified. Representatives interviewed noted that funding can still be a barrier if 100 per cent of costs are not covered during term-time. Lack of wraparound or flexible childcare required outside school and nursery hours was felt to be a key gap by four of the seven FEI representatives interviewed. There is no childcare funding for students during the college (and school) holidays, which can deny them potential opportunities to get temporary jobs to support their studies. Additionally, representatives explained that weekend childcare, or occasional ad hoc childcare to support their studies, is not usually available from childcare providers and that this can leave students to rely on their families or pay for additional days themselves.
- 2.10 While the principle of means-testing was supported, several representatives noted that thresholds meant that some families on the cusp of the threshold were being deterred from engaging with education. For most representatives, covering the additional 15 per cent beyond FCF funding can be a barrier for students if there is no further college support available. Other gaps noted by representatives are that FCF funding will only cover one child (but will pay for twins) so parents with two pre-school children can still struggle with childcare costs. One representative noted that they will make exceptions to this, for example, a victim of abuse.
- 2.11 Many institutions place a cap on the maximum amount which can be claimed for the childcare element of FCF, linked to local market rates for childcare fees. Although this was considered to be a fair system, there were examples shared of students who travel in from outside the local area and use childcare close to their home. They were reported to be paying more than the capped amount for childcare, occasionally leading to financial issues for these individuals.
- 2.12 As noted above FEI have tried to lessen barriers with applications processes, with staff helping some students to complete funding applications. However, several FEI representatives acknowledged that there is a lack of awareness of which childcare services and support is available to learners. There are further challenges when learners' circumstances are complicated. FEI representatives explained that some parents, who may have low self-esteem or mental health issues, may be supported by social services and '*tend to have a mindset in which they don't want other*

professionals or people knowing their business' or they prefer not to disclose financial or other information that could jeopardise child custody or child maintenance.

- 2.13 Similar views were expressed regarding the messaging and promotion of the support available to groups such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and disabled learners who are parents. Another college representative reported that asylum seekers can't apply for FCF, noting that '*learners on ESOL are studying in college for 6 hours a day and some would benefit from childcare but there is nothing the FCF can help them with.*'
- 2.14 It was reported that there have been additional barriers due to COVID-19 and lockdown during 2020. Vulnerable parents are reported to be requiring additional support, due to some families not being able to access the free school meals programme. Transport has been an ongoing issue with student parents in receipt of FCF funding, who are facing issues regarding accessing childcare if childcare facilities and school clubs have been shut or if public transport has been reduced. Some representatives reported being flexible with students that required that support e.g. further time for completing modules.

Impact

- 2.15 The Welsh Government FHE programme leads shared examples of participants' skills development, qualifications, and progression into employment. Programme leads also reported that the childcare support can also act as a motivating tool for potential students and assist colleges' recruitment drives to attract students. FEI representatives agreed with this view and were all positive about the impact of FCF funding, with several reporting that it would be '*impossible*' for eligible parents to study full-time without it.
- 2.16 For these representatives, FCF forms part of their individual college package of support for prospective students, for whom childcare would be a barrier to engagement without financial support. As one FEI representative noted, '*it is really key for our offer of encouraging target groups back into education.*' Several other FEI college representatives highlighted the benefits for the children of student parents with one reporting, '*it gives them more stability and opportunities to*

socialise at an early age – ‘if their parents can get to level 3 and beyond its much less likely they’ll grow up in poverty.’

*‘The FCF is an effective support tool, it’s flexible and it really fills a gap. It responds to costs of childcare and supply locally. It is less bureaucratic too. The FE institutions can just get on with it, it gives us a lot of freedom.’ **FE representative***

Data / monitoring

- 2.17 The FE programme leads did note, however, that there are still gaps in understanding the impact of the childcare element of FCF. To date, the contribution of the FCF childcare support to making a difference to the student parents has not been researched. FE representatives agreed and noted that there is little monitoring beyond what the Welsh Government expects from them e.g., numbers accessing the fund, course completions and progression into employment, further education and training. FE institutions additionally use case studies to illustrate individual pathways and support provided and promote courses to other prospective students.

Future support

- 2.18 There was a general view from FE representatives that the current funding provision through FCF is working effectively but that there should be further flexibility to address the challenges and gaps in funding outlined. There were thus suggestions with regard to topping up FCF support from 85 per cent to 100 per cent in some cases, for example, for vulnerable learners, those returning to education to progress into employment and low-income families to ensure that financial barriers to engagement were addressed.
- 2.19 This more flexible, streamlined approach was supported by FHE programme leads who highlighted that this type of support was essential to allow individuals to progress further along the route to employment through gaining qualifications e.g., from level 2 to 3 to address employer demand for higher skills in sectors such as childcare and social services. It was noted that, as individuals progress, more time is required for study and self-directed learning and there is thus potentially a greater need for more childcare and at flexible hours.

- 2.20 A more flexible approach could allow for more support for those cases where household income is just over the means-testing threshold, thus supporting students who were reported to struggle to afford childcare thereby limiting their choices to re-engage with education and skills development.
- 2.21 It was also important for FE representatives that FCF funding is sustained in the future and that any childcare support recognises the pathways that exist between further education and employability and skills programmes. They also noted that any support should include funded childcare targeted at vulnerable learners and at groups looking to attain new qualifications to support their return to work.
- 2.22 Several FE representatives welcomed the national approach for the study and suggested future sharing of good practice for engaging and supporting parents through further education and into employment. FE representatives considered that a review of the methods of communicating how FCF funding is conveyed to more vulnerable learners and groups such as refugees would address gaps in messaging and better promote childcare support to these target groups.

3. Higher Education

Provision

- 3.1 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) generally have specialist teams who support target groups of students with a range of issues with regards to accessing and funding HEI courses including childcare. These target groups can include refugees, young carers or care givers, parents, and those from vulnerable or disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 3.2 The teams advise prospective students during open days and via email correspondence with regards to the various funding sources available to them as well as advice on eligibility and liaising with other individuals which may also be able to support them. For example, one HEI's team has individuals who specialise in health care students and the NHS Bursary while another team member specialises in Universal Credits, the benefits system, and part-time students. Part of their role is supporting parents who are struggling with accessing childcare support as well as overcoming other barriers such as the confidence to reengage. Advice is therefore both pastoral and financially focused.

Funding

- 3.3 Funding is delivered via Student Finance Wales through the HE Childcare Grant (CCG). HEI representatives noted that although the funding provision can rise to up to 85 per cent of childcare costs it is rare that students receive the full amount. Their promotion of the scheme aims to make students aware of this. However, several representatives highlighted the complexity of the funding criteria and subsequent challenges in promoting it. Student Finance Wales pays the CCG directly to the student whereas in England it is paid directly to the childcare provider. Welsh-domiciled students thus have responsibility to pay the providers and this can sometimes cause issues, which are outlined in section 3.12.
- 3.4 Funding is means-tested and there are a range of criteria including the number of dependent children; the cost of the childcare; the number of weeks that the childcare is used and the level of the income of partners (if applicable). It was also highlighted that students do not qualify for the Grant if they or their partner claims the childcare element of Working Tax Credits, Universal Credit, Tax-free Childcare

from HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) or the NHS Bursary (and the NHS Wales Childcare Allowance). Individuals can, however, potentially access support through the Parents Learning Allowance (PLA), which can cover some of the additional costs incurred by students who have children and is means-tested. Again, the complexity of the criteria and different funding strands available was noted by HEI representatives and this is further illustrated in the flowchart in annex 1.

'Unless you're a single parent, or your partner doesn't work, you're not eligible to that much help. It can also be difficult for some students to understand that it's means-tested and depends on your living costs and income.'

HEI representative

- 3.5 The application for the CCG funding is reported by the majority of HEI representatives as being a '*lengthy process*' and there were some examples of administrative delays, especially with small childcare providers who can find the administration onerous. Comments from HEI representatives included, '*we are aware that childcare application becomes a real hassle to student parents*' and '*the application process for the Childcare Grant is overwhelming.*'
- 3.6 Alongside the CCG and the PLA, several representatives reported using institution hardship funds to further support those with childcare issues and other financial concerns. These funds aim to assist students who experience unexpected financial difficulties and are usually one-off payments. One HEI representative outlined that there is a maximum cap of £3,500, which is also means-tested and looks at the household income and students go before a panel convened to hear the case. Another HEI offers various scholarships and bursaries, which includes a childcare bursary. Students can apply for the bursary annually and the maximum amount is £500.

'Students have to start a course knowing that they can cover the costs, we can help with some emergency funding, but it shouldn't be the sole help for their childcare.' **HEI representative**

Barriers

- 3.7 The complexity of funding has created a range of challenges and barriers for parents who want to access higher education. Several HEI representatives

highlighted that students cannot access both the Childcare Grant and the childcare element of working tax credits, causing confusion and additional barriers in accessing childcare support. Another group reported to be missing out on childcare were students with more than two children. In addition, the majority of HEI representatives considered that the income threshold is set too low and counts against those parents who want to study and whose partners are working. Another potential gap is those learners who are both working—but insufficient hours to be eligible for the Offer—and learning part-time (this was also true of FEI students).

- 3.8 Postgraduates were highlighted as a student group missing out on support as they receive a contribution to study costs, and no additional dependant grant for childcare. They can receive up to £17,000 of funding for a masters and £25,700 for a doctorate, but students are expected to pay for their childcare with this money which can be a strain on families. Several HEI representatives noted that PhD students consider themselves to be working as they are getting a wage each week from the University, but due to their ‘wage’ being in fact a tax-free stipend they’re not eligible for more funding to support childcare needs. They therefore have to work around the PhD to get enough money to pay for childcare.
- 3.9 A further barrier cited by several of the HEI representatives is for healthcare students. The NHS caps the financial help towards childcare at a lower level than Student Finance Wales support for university students. This was considered to particularly penalise student nurses in their final year, in terms of costs and because of the working pattern of their jobs, they require more flexible childminding which can be expensive. One HEI representative felt that this is discouraging prospective nursing students from entering the profession.
- 3.10 Childcare support is generally considered to be more straightforward for single parent students to access. Five of the eight HEI representatives reported that it can be more complicated for those in relationships as the dependants’ allowance is means-tested, and if partners are working it can be difficult to access support.
- 3.11 More practical barriers highlighted by most HEI representatives were related to timings of funding. Student parents are reported to find themselves in a position where they are having to sort out what childcare they are going to require before they have their university timetable, and sometimes if they are going through clearing, their university place itself. As one representative noted, *‘the childcare*

landscape is not very flexible, students need to commit to what childcare they want before they know their timetable.'

- 3.12 It was reported that childcare providers generally require a month's fee in advance and as HEI students are paying providers directly, they can face challenges if this is before they received their grant. This can be exacerbated when student parents are clearing applicants or get a late offer for their course and so have not already applied for the grant. In some cases, HEIs have support structures in place to pay childcare providers directly until funds are received.
- 3.13 The timings of childcare providers' opening hours was also cited as a barrier to student parents, either through opening times or university holidays. The funding is for term time only and individuals have to fund their own provision during holidays, which can impact on their opportunities to source employment during this period.

Impact

- 3.14 Financial support for childcare plays an important part in supporting parents in higher education. All representatives interviewed believed that the Childcare Grant removed a huge barrier to accessing Higher Education, particularly for single parents. Without childcare support, it is envisaged that these groups would have found it very difficult to enter into education and universities would have seen a corresponding drop in student numbers. Anecdotally, several representatives also noted that students who are parents are also less likely to drop out if they have good levels of support from the outset. They did note, however, that with childcare costs increasing all the time, it will be a challenge to cover the fees in future without a corresponding increase in funding.

*'There are a lot of single parents that have had the Childcare Grant from SFW or NHS. I can imagine that it would have been impossible for them to start studying without this support.' **HEI representative***

4. Employability

- 4.1 Parents needing childcare support while training or looking for work are potentially eligible for childcare support from two main schemes, Parents Childcare and Employment (PaCE) and Communities for Work (CfW), and some other more local schemes, as illustrated in the flow chart in annex 1. The two target groups for childcare funding support - and the wider skills and employability support - are young people aged 16 to 24 not in education, employment or training and economically inactive parents aged 25 and over who face a range of barriers to securing employment. Childcare is considered an essential part of the holistic offer for these target groups and linked to wider Welsh Government priorities including the early years and skills and employment.

PaCE

- 4.2 Since its launch in 2015, the PaCE project has provided childcare support for parents whilst training or looking for work, where childcare is their main barrier. It is funded through the European Social Fund and was originally designed to target its support outside Communities First⁷ clusters. The former Communities First areas are served by Communities for Work (details below).
- 4.3 PaCE is delivered through Parent Employment Advisers, employed by the Department of Work and Pensions, who work in communities to engage and support parents. Parents voluntarily engage with the project and Advisers provide support that is tailored to individual parents' needs which typically includes: guidance on benefits; advice on applying for training and jobs; solutions to overcoming childcare barriers, mentoring and providing support for accessing sustainable employment.
- 4.4 PaCE Advisers can draw on funding whilst a participant attends training and/or volunteering opportunities, although they must use other sources of funding first (so act as a last resort, so as not to duplicate funding support). The PaCE childcare funding is intended for parents needing childcare whilst accessing training or employment opportunities, and they can typically offer childcare while the parent

⁷ Communities First ran from 2001 to 2018 and was a community-focussed programme that supported the Welsh Government's Tackling Poverty agenda in the most deprived areas of Wales.

attends a course or a volunteering opportunity, attends sessions with an Adviser to look at their CV or to job search, and can support in the weeks leading up to employment to allow the child or children time to settle and adjust to a childcare setting. The Adviser can also access the childcare funding for parents during the first 4 weeks of employment if there is an issue with paying for childcare which would jeopardise the parent staying in work.

- 4.5 During the first couple of years of operation, demand for the childcare funding support was low. However, following revisions to the application process, and an increased awareness of the scheme, demand has increased, leading to more pressure on budgets for the remaining eighteen months of the operation. There are no minimum or maximum levels of support available however each childcare application is considered on a case by case basis, must be work-focused and ensure the parent is pro-actively committed to their journey into or closer to the labour market.

Communities for Work

- 4.6 Communities for Work (CfW) is a community-based advisory service also funded by the European Social Fund and co-sponsored by the Welsh Government and Department for Work and Pensions. It is larger in scope than PaCE and works with people in the most deprived communities across Wales – the previous Communities First areas - to increase the employability of all adults, so 16-24 year olds who are not in education, employment or training, and economically inactive and long-term unemployed adults who have complex barriers to employment. It can help with childcare advice and financial support to attend training, job interviews, and to start work.
- 4.7 The support for parents with childcare as a barrier usually includes advice and mentoring, training and access to a barriers fund which can cover childcare and other costs. This is a pot of money to spend normally on new clothing, or travel costs, but could also cover childcare costs whilst attending an interview or training/ work experience and the initial childcare costs to start work. Communities for Work Plus is delivered alongside these two programmes and provides employment advice and support to people who are not eligible for Communities for Work, PaCE or other regional programmes and who are in or at risk of poverty. Although these are

separate programmes, they work side by side and unemployed parents would be referred to the advisers relevant to their needs and eligibility.

Other funding

- 4.8 In addition to PaCE and CfW, some childcare support can be made available by other sources. Individuals looking for work are among those who get Universal Credit to help with living costs. Where a parent has accepted a job offer, there is childcare support available under Universal Credit for the month before they start work.⁸ Financial assistance for childcare costs is also available to eligible parents undertaking activity to move them closer to the labour market under the Flexible Support Fund offered by jobcentres. Jobcentre Plus understands the importance of childcare as a key enabler to work. It also recognises how childcare provides support for parents by removing childcare as a barrier to work. In order for parents to enter sustained employment, many will need to source and use formal childcare. Financial assistance may be awarded in a number of circumstances including but not restricted to:
- When a parent is attending DWP approved training provision
 - Where it has been agreed a parent can participate in a Work Trial or Work Experience
 - When a parent is attending pre-arranged Work Coach interviews at the Jobcentre. This applies only in the exceptional circumstances where the interview could not be arranged at a time when childcare costs would not be incurred
 - When a parent is attending an interview with a training provider or employer
 - in the period between commencing employment (at least 16 hours per week) and first receipt of wages.
 - When a parent is working under 16 hours a week – paid to a maximum of £87.50 per week for one child and £150 per week for two or more children.

⁸ [Universal Credit website](#)

Each application for the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) will be considered on a case by case basis. However, if the Work Coach has recommended an activity, or agrees that a proposed activity will be beneficial in moving a parent closer to the labour market, then reasonable childcare costs will usually be met via the FSF. It's also available for a limited period of time once a parent starts work or self-employment.

- 4.9 There are regional employability support projects that support economically inactive and unemployed people. For example, one such programme, Bridges into Work⁹, operates across five Local Authority areas in South East Wales (West Wales and the Valleys). If a parent is supported by these projects, and childcare was identified as a barrier, they would be referred to CfW or PaCE for funding if they needed childcare for an interview or work placement.
- 4.10 Other projects named by interviewees were Inspire 2 Achieve¹⁰ and Inspire 2 Work¹¹ for those aged under 25, and Journey 2 Work¹² for 25+ long term unemployed and economically unemployed and Skills at Work¹³ – supports individuals in employment to upskill to level 1 and 2 qualification. There is some flexibility in these projects to provide funding for additional support for people, and scope to use this funding for childcare if needed.

⁹ [Bridges into Work 2](#) project factsheet.

¹⁰ [Inspire 2 Achieve](#) project factsheet.

¹¹ [Inspire 2 Work](#) project factsheet.

¹² [Journey 2 Work](#) project factsheet.

¹³ [Skills at Work project webpage](#), Newport City Council.

Barriers

- 4.11 The ten individuals interviewed from employability support programmes did not raise the issue of access to the support as such, in that those parents who are in contact with the schemes' advisers could be supported with childcare costs. However, reaching parents and providing support with childcare rely on programmes working well together, on parents approaching the job centre or self-referring, and on suitable referrals being made. Three interviewees referred to the Genesis Wales¹⁴ programme and explained that they believed that there was more support previously available for childcare e.g. funds to provide creches for courses, a longer period of funded childcare.

'There might be a gap there, but due to the programme not being structured towards childcare support whilst learning, we don't really know and can't measure that. Genesis was a fantastic programme to help parents with that, and we could really measure how many people needed that help. The programme was used as an engagement tool for the community which engaged more parents.' Programme representative

- 4.12 Awareness of these programmes has grown through the work of local teams, word of mouth, social media and application processes which have been made more streamlined and linked to increases in local demand. Certain programmes, for example PaCE, have made childcare integral to their offer to participants and provided intense support for participants who are furthest away from employment, with no minimum or maximum levels of support. Other programmes are more targeted at short, sharp interventions aimed at improving skills and employability and therefore demands for childcare are lower.

'PaCE is about transitioning people into employment so the childcare offer does give a flexible extra element to the programme – this means there is a continuum of support for the target groups.' Programme lead

- 4.13 Other key barriers reported by those interviewed for this review include access to childcare: some areas in Wales, including parts of the Valleys and rural areas, were reported to be lacking available and affordable childcare. Employability programme leads noted that levels of financial and other support with childcare help can vary between programmes and areas, which can limit support and progression if

¹⁴ Genesis Cymru Wales 2 (2008-2013) and Genesis Cymru Wales (2005-2008) were Wales-wide programmes funded by ESF aimed at increasing employment and economic activity amongst key target groups and female lone parents in particular.

participants move home. Even where access to childcare is available, a lack of flexibility to support women working in the foundational economy on shift or temporary work can be a barrier. Furthermore, while engaging with programmes and looking for work, there is a lack of ad hoc childcare available to cover job interviews or work placements. A lack of public transport – again predominantly within rural areas – can also impact on access to childcare.

- 4.14 Two employability programme leads commented that accessing childcare can still be a '*bewildering*' process, with many programme participants initially confused about costs, timetables (e.g., where costs are supported in term-time only for students) and availability in their local area. This can result in 'soft' barriers e.g. confidence and trust in the system, which can lead to target groups missing out on potential support. The complexities of the current system are further illustrated in the flow chart in annex 1.
- 4.15 Despite programme support, childcare costs can still be a barrier, particularly for those seeking routes into employment. Parents are reported to struggle with issues such as up-front childcare costs, registration fees and advance payments before they get their wages, particularly if they lose their benefits at the same time. The picture is especially complicated with regard to older parents who have been out of the labour market for longer and face other barriers beyond childcare such as confidence, lack of up-to-date skills and digital awareness. For many programme participants transition into work can be a drawn-out process and access to childcare is a key element to avoiding a financial '*cliff edge*' whereby individuals moving into employment or another training scheme and not immediately getting grants or a salary.

'Some of the childcare on offer is not flexible enough for those on the cusp of returning to work or those in work poverty who have to work at weekends or are studying in evening classes. Just as skills provision has to be flexible for the individual participant's needs childcare provision also needs to respond to this.'

Programme lead

- 4.16 Evaluation and monitoring take place at a programme level, but no data or monitoring on childcare take-up and expenditure by each scheme was available.

Impact and future support

- 4.17 There was an agreement among the employability interviewees that although funding for childcare does exist for parents looking to return to work, more support for parents who are looking to enter or return to work would be welcome. Challenges remain in terms of the lack of availability of ad hoc childcare to cover interviews and short courses or placements, access and transport and the upfront childcare costs causing difficulties to parents starting in employment. The level of support available varies geographically and there were calls for more parity between the level and type of support available in CfW and PaCE areas, which would, in turn, help the communication and awareness-raising of both programmes.
- 4.18 The programmes outlined in this chapter are supported by EU funding, and there is a commitment from the Welsh Government to deliver until June 2022. Questions were raised by interviewees as to how these programmes will be replaced in the future.

5. Parents' Views

5.1 Due to Covid-19 restrictions, it was not suitable to carry out primary interviews with parents. As an alternative method of collecting evidence, additional qualitative research was carried out, analysing and exploring issues raised by parents regarding childcare within the target group via online forums, where similar discussions had already taken place.

Contextual research – parents' views via online discussion forums

- 5.2 The main themes raised by participants included information regarding their experiences, personal situations, and queries regarding how the various funding streams might change depending on their individual circumstances.
- 5.3 Thread lengths varied from one to 16 messages, with minor differences in the platforms used and how parents chose to engage with each other. Users used platforms to brainstorm and share information, and, at times, official representatives would answer questions from users.
- 5.4 Nine threads were identified as relevant queries relating to childcare grants and funding available to parents accessing further education, higher education or returning to work. Key themes that were raised by users included:
- Enquiring about what funding and support is available to parents of young children whilst studying various levels of degrees including undergraduate, post-graduate and PhD level;
 - Questions regarding various bursaries available and whether these are available simultaneously with other funding sources;
 - Questions regarding Universal Credit and child tax credits and how these may be dependent on household income.
- 5.5 Further interaction with users included:
- Other users giving advice or their opinion on the respective individual's situation, based on their own similar experiences;
 - Users referring others to external websites or services that could help them further understand their needs or funding available to them;
 - Representatives suggesting two main approaches as to how to find further information about funding opportunities for students:

- Speaking to student support departments within various universities;
 - Suggesting to privately contact the official representatives responsible due to assessments being made on a case by case basis;
- 5.6 The thread that provided the most insight in relation to parents' understanding of funding and grants available to them was a thread of 16 messages posted in September 2019. This was a conversation with 6 users. The main user explained that she had received confirmation of a place on a social work degree, with the hopes of receiving the 'childcare grant' to help with childcare costs. She had since been informed that they are not eligible for the grant due to it being means-tested. She asks other users '*know of anything that may help me because as it stands I am looking at having to give up my place and am devastated as I was so looking forward to this career change.*'
- 5.7 Other users suggested a range of potential solutions. These included re-calculating any received benefits to fully understand which grants would be the best option to receive the most assistance with childcare. Users suggested speaking to a money advisor within the student services at her University, explaining that '*there is sometimes a funding pot for this very scenario.*' Other funding options are also mentioned by users included Tax-Free Childcare, the Childcare Offer and the possibility of working a few evenings per week to cover the childcare costs.
- 5.8 The research illustrates that information searches are being undertaken by individual parents regarding access to childcare whilst studying various levels of degrees. Key themes relate to identifying the various funding sources available and whether these are dependent on household income, receipt of benefits and tax credits. Solutions to queries generally related to signposting to external information sites and student support services as well as users providing their own experiences and views.
- 5.9 The research found only a small number of relevant forum discussions. However, there were some clear themes that were used to steer the development of an interview topic guide with student support services. This focused on the types of information request received, those who are requesting the information and how they are responding as well as their views on other useful support available.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

- 6.1 The research has shown that, despite the positive impact of childcare support through the childcare element of FCF for FE learners, the Childcare Grant for HE learners and a range of employability and skills programmes, there are still groups potentially missing out on support, and thereby the opportunity to return to education, training and employment.

Gaps in FHE support

- 6.2 In education and training these groups include post-graduate students; part-time students, under-represented groups such as minority ethnic communities, disabled learners, and asylum seekers. There are also groups that, while not necessarily missing out on funding, cannot access full childcare support and are therefore reliant on families or sourcing additional funding through college and university hardship funds to ensure that they can continue in their studies.
- 6.3 These groups include NHS healthcare students whose childcare support is currently funded at a lower level than other higher education students, individuals with more than two children, those undertaking distance learning courses, those in volunteering roles and those studying with partners who are earning more than the threshold to be eligible for support. Student nurses were highlighted as being particularly penalised in their final year because of the working pattern of their jobs where they require more flexible childcare, which can be more expensive or difficult to access.
- 6.4 While the flexibility of the FCF was welcomed by Further Education colleges, some gaps were still highlighted, for example for families with more than two children where that funding will only cover one child so parents with two pre-school children can still struggle with childcare costs.
- 6.5 The thresholds, in particular for the CCG, are perceived by stakeholders within the HEI sector as being too low, meaning that those with employed partners are less likely to be able to access support. Several HEI representatives highlighted that students cannot access both the Grant and the childcare element of Working Tax Credits.

- 6.6 Linked to these eligibility issues are accessibility and costs of childcare, with complications regarding lengthy application processes (particularly for the CCG). There is some confusion amongst learners and providers around the 85 per cent funding limits in FEI/ HEI with some more vulnerable groups reported as requiring 100 per cent funding to engage and progress with education and employability programmes.

Gaps in employability programme support

- 6.7 The employability programme PaCE has childcare support integral to its design and delivery while other schemes at a regional and national level offer more limited, ad hoc support. This support requires the various programmes to work effectively together through referral processes.
- 6.8 The complexity of - and variations in -eligibility and funding criteria can however result in barriers to engagement and progression opportunities for participants such as those moving between programmes or living in different geographical areas. This can result in 'soft' barriers e.g. confidence and trust in the system, which can lead to target groups missing out on potential support.
- 6.9 Groups potentially missing out on childcare support through employability programmes include the working poor, those undertaking shift work and those engaged in volunteering activities as a route back into employment.
- 6.10 Messaging and promotion of childcare support is therefore considered to need improvement, particularly with regard to under-represented groups to support their engagement. This was linked to the complicated eligibility criteria and thresholds noted above - and illustrated in the flow chart in Annex 1.

Further challenges

- 6.11 There are not only challenges regarding the costs of childcare but also the bureaucracy and providers themselves are reported to find the administration 'onerous' at times. Some childcare providers require a month's fee in advance, and this can cause issues with parents in FHE. This can be exacerbated when student parents go through the clearing process or get a late offer for their course.

- 6.12 Similar financial challenges were reported for those engaged in employability programmes, particularly those who have been out of the labour market for longer and face other barriers beyond childcare such as confidence, lack of up to date skills and digital awareness. For many programme participants transition into work can be a drawn-out process and access to childcare can be an important element of sustaining progress towards employment. Challenges are also reported for those who are self-employed and lack the necessary documentation to prove earnings.
- 6.13 There is also a lack of availability of flexible, ‘wraparound’ childcare and this can particularly impact on parents working on weekends or shifts, or on student parents who need to work to support themselves through their education. These factors can act as a further disincentive to those who may want to return to further and higher education or employment. Other challenges linked to individuals’ potential take-up of the childcare include access to public transport and its frequency, particularly in some rural areas.
- 6.14 At a wider strategic level there is a lack of consistent monitoring and evaluation to support decision making regarding the impact of childcare support. This should be addressed when designing future programmes to support work progression and skills where childcare is an element of the support, and also to ensure that FCF and CCG continue to be effective and relevant to need.

Benefits of childcare support

- 6.15 Work returners have benefited from the different types of childcare support outlined in this report. This support has allowed those on the cusp of employment to increase their skills, aspirations, confidence and progression routes and address barriers to their engagement. A programme such as PaCE with integrated childcare support has allowed participants to return to employment or take up further learning and skills opportunities and other employability programmes’ childcare elements have also contributed to their overall positive impact.
- 6.16 Childcare support has enhanced aspirations and removed barriers for students to access further and higher education and progress to better quality job opportunities. Students are anecdotally also reported to be less likely to drop out due to childcare support. Childcare is also an important element for FHE institutions to attract

students from a range of target groups and sustain their engagement and progression. The flexibility of the FCF programme and its adaptability to local context and needs was also considered to be an effective support mechanism.

- 6.17 There has also been anecdotal evidence of the positive impact on children of target group learners; namely enhancing opportunities for social engagement, identifying with the career aspirations of their parents and contributing to families being raised out of poverty.
- 6.18 Support for childcare through FHE and employability programmes also links to wider Welsh Government economic, skills and tackling poverty strategies and overall goals towards a more equal and prosperous society with lifelong learning and fair work opportunities for citizens.

Future support

- 6.19 A more streamlined approach to childcare funding support can contribute to recognising the pathways that exist between education and employability programmes. This approach could also support the progression of learners. As such, flexible childcare support is essential to allow parents to progress further along the route to employment through gaining qualifications.
- 6.20 While there is a need to further explore how those missing out on financial support for childcare could be better supported, it is not recommended that the Childcare Offer should be redesigned to accommodate students and those on the cusp of employment. As an alternative, the gaps in support should be addressed by the schemes which are already working with these groups.
- 6.21 Actions are required to reduce the complexity of childcare support schemes and eligibility requirements. The methods in which communication is made with learners should be reviewed to address promoting the package of support to these target groups and clarify the support available. More detailed and clear information is required, as outlined by views from the parents' forums and stakeholders, to address confusion with regards to eligibility and access. This is part of a process of building trust and engagement through awareness-raising and a review of messaging of childcare support to enhance its reach.

Recommendation: The Welsh Government should liaise with stakeholders in FHE and employability programmes to ensure there is detailed and clear information on access and eligibility to all sources of childcare funding support, including at a wider UK level.

- 6.22 Various schemes exist for different groups of parents to help with childcare funding, but they vary greatly in their design. Different schemes (and different institutions in the case of FEIs) have their own eligibility criteria, means-tested income thresholds, applications methods and timescales and levels of funding, which are difficult to navigate for parents. A more consistent and coherent approach to eligibility would therefore contribute to addressing confusion for parents.

Recommendation: The Welsh Government should work with stakeholders in FHE and employability programmes to explore options for amending and streamlining eligibility criteria, means-tested thresholds, funding caps and methods of support.

- 6.23 There is also a need to address gaps in childcare support with more steps towards parity for all parents from under-represented groups. This approach should encourage more funding flexibility so that 100 per cent of support can be provided for childcare where required and up-front childcare payments can be covered for students and work returners. This will require clarifying options for institutions so that full funding can be guaranteed for the individuals most in need, instead of requiring individuals to source childcare funding from a range of sources.

Recommendations: The Welsh Government should work with partners to simplify application systems to all childcare-related programmes, with particular reference to the CCG.

The Welsh Government should liaise with education institutions and Student Finance Wales to review whether maximum support caps could be lifted for those most in need of childcare support.

- 6.24 There are particular gaps in support that exist currently and therefore extended childcare support should be targeted towards these groups. Postgraduate students, vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers and families earning just over the

current threshold are currently missing out on childcare support. This is impacting on their potential to engage in education and employment and further support could be provided as a result.

Recommendations: The Welsh Government should explore options to provide childcare support for postgraduate students through current HE Childcare Grant structures.

The Welsh Government should target further childcare support to asylum seekers, particularly those participating in ESOL courses. This could be achieved through current programmes such as FCF and PaCE.

The Welsh Government should work with appropriate stakeholders to reassess thresholds for childcare support and ensure that those currently just over the threshold have the opportunity to access childcare support.

- 6.25 Healthcare students require revised support structures to ensure parity with other higher education students. Further, flexible support could also be extended to part-time students who are also in employment, those who are distance learning, parents with more than two children and those using volunteering as a route back into employment.

Recommendations: The Welsh Government should work with NHS Wales to ensure that students following healthcare degrees receive parity for childcare support.

The Welsh Government should work with partners in FHE and employability programmes to develop flexible childcare support for other groups such as part-time and distance learning students and volunteers.

- 6.26 At a wider strategic level there is a lack of consistent monitoring and evaluation to support decision making regarding the impact of childcare support. This should be addressed when designing future programmes to support work progression and skills where childcare is an element of the support. It can also ensure that FCF and CCG continue to be effective and relevant to need.

Recommendation: The Welsh Government should ensure that monitoring and evaluation systems are robust and allow analysis of return on investment (ROI).

- 6.27 EU funding has been an important aspect of some of the funding support for programmes offering childcare to work returners. While this has caused some challenges with access to support sometimes dependent on postcodes there is now a gap as to what will replace this funding and how childcare can continue to be an integral part of employability programmes.
- 6.28 Strategies for future support will also have to consider current and post-Covid options with regards to access and affordability of childcare and changes to working and studying. It was noted by stakeholders across education and employability sectors that childcare costs are likely to increase and it will be a challenge for individuals and institutions to cover their support needs in future without a corresponding increase in funding.

Recommendation: The Welsh Government should explore future models to replace EU funding, which allow for continued investment in support that adequately reflect childcare costs.

Summary of Recommendations

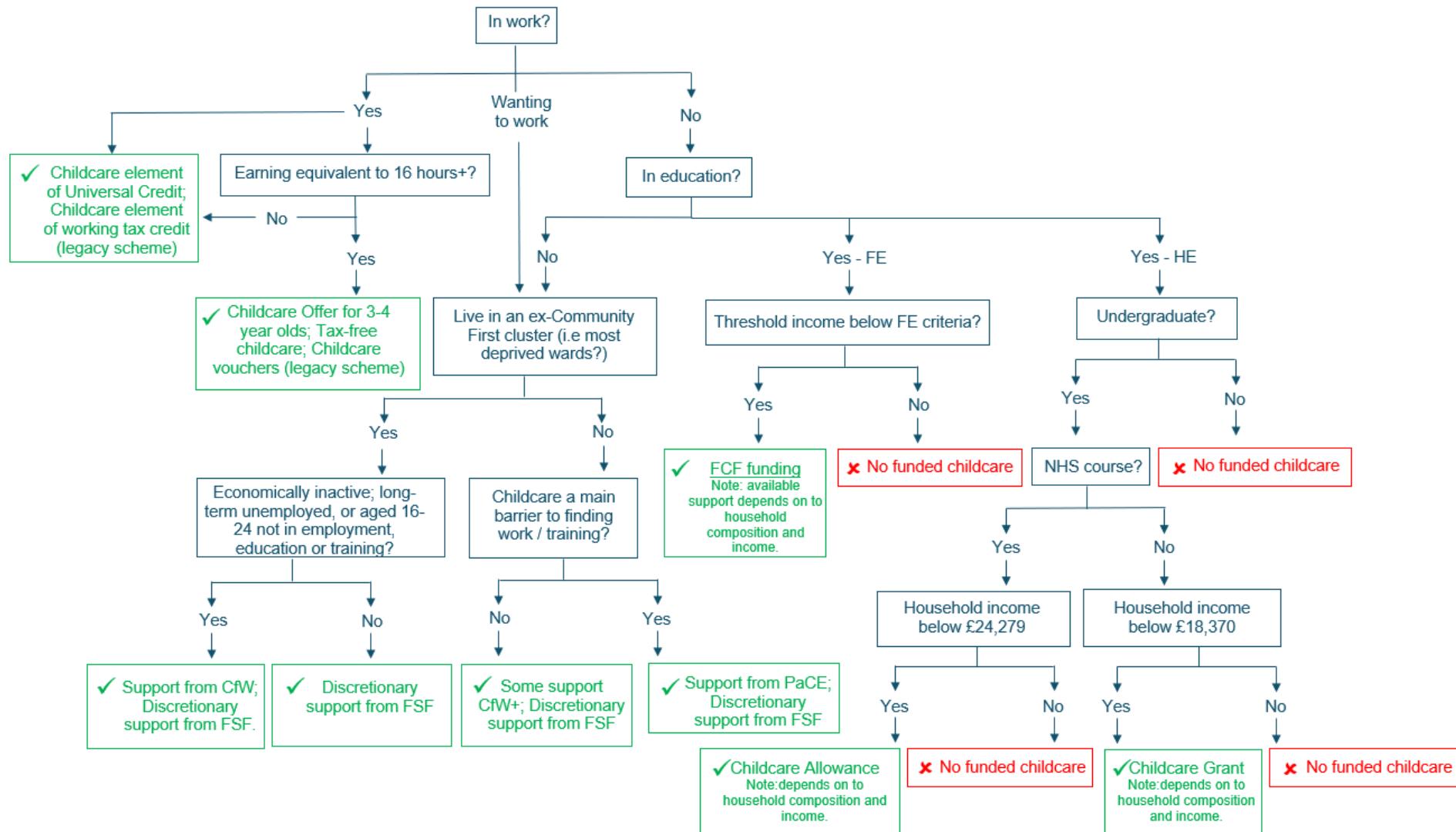
Recommendations:

The Welsh Government should:

- liaise with stakeholders in FHE and employability programmes to ensure there is detailed and clear information on access and eligibility to all sources of childcare funding support, including at a wider UK level.
- work with stakeholders in FHE and employability programmes to explore options for streamlining eligibility criteria, means-tested thresholds, funding caps and methods of support.
- work with partners to simplify application systems to all childcare-related programmes, with particular reference to the CCG.

- liaise with education institutions and Student Finance Wales to review whether maximum support caps could be lifted for those most in need of childcare support.
- explore options to provide childcare support for postgraduate students through current HE Childcare Grant structures.
- target further childcare support to asylum seekers, particularly those participating in ESOL courses. This could be achieved through current programmes such as FCF and PaCE.
- work with appropriate stakeholders to reassess thresholds for childcare support and ensure that those currently just over the threshold have the opportunity to access childcare support.
- work with NHS Wales to ensure that students following healthcare degrees receive parity for childcare support.
- work with partners in FHE and employability programmes to develop flexible childcare support for other groups such as part-time and distance learning students and volunteers.
- ensure that monitoring and evaluation systems are robust and allow analysis of return on investment (ROI).
- explore future models to replace EU funding, which allow for continued investment in support that adequately reflect childcare costs.

Annex 1: Flowchart of available childcare funding



Annex 2: Sources of support for students and parents in training or returning to work

Students			
Scheme	Eligibility	Level of Support	Income cap/Means-tested
Childcare Grant (CCG)	Full-time and part-time, undergraduate HE students.	Up to 85% of their childcare costs (up to a maximum of £174.22 a week for one child) depending on household income	Amount depends on household income; means-tested on a sliding scale.
Parents' Learning Allowance (PLA)	Full-time and part-time, undergraduate HE students. Students can only apply for PLA if they have one or more children that are financially dependent on them, regardless of their age.	Maximum of £1,766 per year	Amount depends on household income
NHS Bursary Childcare Allowance	HE healthcare students in receipt of NHS bursary	Up to 85% of childcare costs (up to a net maximum amount of £128.78 per week for one child and £209.95 per week for two or more children).	Means-tested
Childcare element of the Financial Contingency Fund (FCF)	FE learners; usually full-time course	Varies between colleges – CAVC example: £35 a day for three days; Bridgend – up to 80% fees; Gwent 90%, up to a maximum of £40	Yes. Varies between colleges – many match the WG Learning Grant cap of £18370 household income.
Welsh Government Learning Grant (WGLG)	FE learners, course must be eligible for Welsh Government Learning Grant FE support.	Up to £1,500 for a full-time course or up to £750 for a part-time course paid in instalments once a term, depending on learner household income.	Income-assessed grant of up to £1500; household income must be £18,370 or less
Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)	FE learners, 16-18 year-old students staying in education post 16.	Weekly allowance of £30 a week	Income-assessed grant based on household income less than £20,817.

Universal Credit (UK Department for Work and Pensions)	Universal Credit is <i>not</i> usually available for full-time students. Parents may be able to get Universal Credit (and the childcare element of UC) if they are in paid work and studying part time.	Based on circumstances	Depends on earnings and circumstances.
Parents in training or preparing to return to work			
Scheme	Eligibility	Level of Support	Income cap/Means-tested
Parent, Childcare and Employment (PaCE)	Based outside CfW areas. Parents aged 16 to 24 who are not in work, education or training and economically inactive parents aged 25+.	Funding available for childcare up to a maximum of £60 per day for one child and a max of £100 for more than one child.	Not means-tested and no cap on amount of overall support.
Communities for Work and Communities for Work Plus (CfW / CfW+)	CfW based within former Communities First areas. Parents aged 16-24 who are not in employment, education or training and economically inactive or long-term unemployed parents aged 25+ with complex barriers to employment. CfW+ delivered in all 22 local authority areas to individuals in or at risk of poverty who are not eligible for CfW, PaCE or other regional employability provision	Funding available for childcare during job interviews, short courses or placements. Can also fund childcare for first few weeks of a new job.	Initial support is capped at approximately £500 per person with higher awards pending further Welsh Government approval.
Bridges into Work 2	Economically inactive and unemployed people across the counties of Bridgend, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil and Torfaen. Aged 25 +	Some limited funding available to help with childcare during job interviews / training.	Participants signposted to PaCE for more substantial childcare support needs
Journey 2 Work	Long Term Unemployed or Economically Inactive; Aged 25 years or older; The project works in non-Communities First areas of Cardiff, Newport and Monmouthshire	Some limited funding available to help with childcare during job interviews / work placements.	Funds available to support participants needs and can cover childcare; Participants signposted to PaCE for more substantial childcare support needs.
Universal Credit	Parents can claim for childcare costs under Universal Credit if they are in paid work, or have accepted an offer of paid work: parents who have	Parents can claim back up to 85% of the costs of childcare that they have already paid for.	Depends on earnings and circumstances.

	accepted a job offer can claim for childcare costs for the month before they start work		
<u>Flexible Support Fund</u>	The Flexible Support Fund (FSF) is a fund offered at the discretion of Jobcentre Plus advisers to support with extra costs associated with finding a job, including childcare costs.	At discretion of Jobcentre.	At discretion of Jobcentre.

Annex 3: Methodology

Overview of methodology

- 6.29 A mix-methods approach was adopted for the review, which involved desk research mapping the sources of financial support for childcare, gathered from publicly available data online, and stakeholder telephone interviews with national programme leads, FEI, HEI and employment programme administrators to identify additional information or possibly additional interventions aimed at supporting parents within the target group (students, learners and parents returning to work.)

Mapping support available to parents in Wales

- 6.30 Desk research was carried out of potential sources of financial support available for childcare in Wales and the wider UK (if applicable to Welsh citizens). This provided context of the current provision and also provided a gap-analysis in provision available to parents in education, training or returning to employment.

Interviews with key stakeholders of national programme leads

- 6.31 Seven interviews with Welsh Government national programme and support leads were conducted, focussing on gaining additional information relating to programmes that supported the target groups. Interviews also asked project leads to sign post the research team to further information relating to their programme, as well as, if applicable, other similar initiatives that they may be aware of.
- 6.32 Additional questions were also asked to programme leads relating to specific research questions including:
- How beneficial is the support available for childcare to parents seeking to return to work and what specific issues are faced by parents?
 - Are there any groups of individuals who are currently missing out on financial support for childcare which would benefit from any extension to the Childcare Offer?
 - If yes, what interactions or duplications would potentially occur between existing programmes?

Contextual research with parents

- 6.33 Additional research was undertaken making use of online forums exploring issues raised by parents within target groups.
- 6.34 This research has been undertaken using GSR social media research guidance as a starting point. While the GSR guidance is prepared with social media in mind, rather than online platforms per se, the same principles apply, and the research took account the limitations, namely that users of social media are not representative of populations and that ‘whilst interactions can be observed and analysed, important nuances or context may be missing’.
- 6.35 Nevertheless, conducting qualitative research using online forums is a method that can provide a rich resource of primary data. It is often used as a method to research health discussions among the public: for example, one recent study on patients’ use of stroke prevention concluded that the approach ‘may offer additional insights compared with interviews’.^[2]
- 6.36 Three forums were identified as viable and popular forums for parents as part of Arad’s research - Student Room, Money Saving Expert and Mumsnet. The information taken from these forums were analysed and coded separately in an Excel document, with key themes identified as part of the analysis. In the analysis of forum messages any information that could personally identify individuals has been removed before the captured threads’ key themes have been coded and analysed.
- 6.37 Whilst conducting this contextual research, parameters were set in order to filter the information analysed. These parameters included applying an advanced filter during each search, with dates confined between the 1st of September 2019 and the 1st of February 2020. These dates were chosen due to a predominance of posts on the topic of the Covid-19 pandemic after February 2020.
- 6.38 Other parameters used as filtering tools included entering specific key terms into the search bar, these words included ‘child’, ‘care’, ‘childcare’, ‘funding’, ‘student funding’, ‘grant funding’. One forum allowed filtering the conversations and

^[2] Jamison J, Sutton S, Mant J, et al [Online stroke forum as source of data for qualitative research: insights from a comparison with patients' interviews](#) *BMJ Open* 2018;8:e020133. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2017-020133

discussions by the website's pre-defined topics, these included 'back to work,' 'further education', 'higher education' and 'education.'

Telephone interviews with FEI, HEI and employment programme administrators

- 6.39 Telephone consultations and associated data requests to institutions and employment programme administrators were identified as the key method to receive data on numbers of students and parents with dependents and/or childcare responsibilities.
- 6.40 HEI, FEI and other employment programmes were consulted, with student welfare / learner support and student finance support individuals identified as likely to be the most relevant stakeholders to speak to regarding the review.
- 6.41 Interviews were undertaken in the hope of serving two purposes – to explore and understand what data is held on numbers of parents and numbers accessing support, and secondly a discussion with relevant stakeholders to understand what support is available and the issues faced by the target group.
- 6.42 Telephone interviews were organised and undertaken with 47 individuals during 44 interviews from various sectors relating to education, training and returning to work. These interviews included:
- Eight interviews with nine Higher Education Institution representatives including student funding and advice managers, directors, and student support advisors;
 - Seven interviews with seven Further Education Institution representatives including Financial Contingency Fund managers, Learner Services managers, officers and learner wellbeing advisors and campus nursery managers;
 - Eight interviews with Parents, Children and Employment (PaCE) advisors and delivery managers;
 - Eight interviews with Communities for Work and Communities for Work Plus staff including Performance and Quality Managers, Delivery Managers and Participation & Engagement Officers
 - Two interviews with National Union for Students representatives;

- One interview with three representatives from the funding information services team and policy team at Student Finance Wales,
 - One interview with Family Information Services representative;
 - One interview with Bridges into Work programme representative;
 - One interview with Partnership Regional Manager responsible for four community projects.
- 6.43 The main sample was drawn from information retrieved online from HEI, FEI and employment programmes' websites. Initial emails were sent to Student Services general email addresses, with a request that the email be forwarded to the most relevant individuals, and to where possible relevant individuals identified via FEI, HEI institutions and employment programmes' websites. Reminder emails were sent a week following initial contact, with additional individuals included into the email thread in order for information on the review to be sent to relevant stakeholders.

Annex 4: Topic Guides

Topic Guide A: Questions for national programme leads

- Introductions and explanation of the aims of the study plus data protection
- Background questions on role and responsibilities and links to the programme
- What specific issues are faced by parents in the target groups (in education or training or seeking to return to work) identifying and accessing childcare?
E.g. lack of awareness of options, transport, availability locally, finance, eligibility

- How does your programme aim to address these through its design and delivery?

Are there any specific issues or target groups that your programme has focused on? If so, how and why were these identified?

What has been the impact of the programme and how integral is the childcare element of this?

- How does your programme complement other childcare support programmes and wider Welsh Government policies?

e.g. Tackling Poverty, supporting routes into employment

- What data do you collect on those who access support?

What are the key trends in terms of take-up, demographics, levels of funding required, geography etc.? Is this data publicly available / can it be shared with us?

- What have been the benefits for parents from participating in your programme – what evidence do you have for this?
- What monitoring do you undertake on the impact and reach of your programme? How does it influence ongoing design and delivery?

Evaluation etc. Where are the gaps in data collection and monitoring – how can these be addressed?

- Should the current Childcare Offer be extended to those who are not yet in employment but are in education and training?

If yes, what interactions or duplications would potentially occur between existing programmes? What would the expected benefits be for the target groups?

If no, why not and how else could this target groups be better supported?

- Do you have any suggestions for the Arad team regarding other useful research / evaluation and any other national programmes across the UK?

Topic Guide B: Questions for Employability/Work Readiness programme leads

Purpose of interviews

These interviews will contribute to understanding

- (i) what support is available (and to whom; what eligibility criteria; level of financial support etc)
- (ii) the gaps, if any, in financial support for parents.

Note: not all questions will be suitable for all interviewees.

Interviewees:

Employability/Work readiness Programme leads/administrators

Background and role

1. What is your role in (organisation)?
 - Role and responsibilities; reporting line.
 - Can you outline your involvement with providing support for those seeking to enter or return to employment?
 - Can you outline your involvement with providing financial support for childcare as part of this support?

Support available

2. What financial support for childcare is available for work returners/job seekers as part of your programme? (Note – to add to the spreadsheet)
 - a. What form does the support take (subsidy, grant, bursary, discount on a childcare place etc)
 - b. What are the eligibility criteria?
 - c. How is the programme promoted and to whom? Are there any gaps in this promotion e.g. lack of take-up from certain groups?
 - d. How and when does the individual apply for the support?
 - e. Level of support / Maximum support available / Duration
 - f. Numbers accessing last financial year
 - g. Total fund size and source of the funds – what percentage does childcare make up of this?

Context

3. What specific issues/barriers are faced by individuals seeking employment in identifying and accessing childcare?

E.g. geography, access to childcare, lack of awareness of options, transport – public or personal, availability locally, finance, eligibility, specific groups (e.g. those on the cusp of reengaging with employment or already in temporary or contractual work)

4. How does your programme(s) help address these issues by supporting the target groups?

Are there any specific issues or target groups that your programme has focused on? If so, how and why were these identified?

5. Are there links between your programme team and any other childcare support programmes/employability programmes?
 - a. e.g. providers of subsidised childcare places?
 - b. How do these complement your programme e.g. *can individuals progress from one programme to another or combine support to move further along routes to employment?*
6. What have been the benefits for parents accessing childcare support from your programme – what evidence do you have for this?

Data (if relevant)

7. Do you hold data on the number of parents within the target group (work returners/job seekers with childcare requirements)?

What are the key trends in terms of take up, demographics, levels of funding required, geography etc.? No. of individuals with dependent children on your programme, including those under 25.

Is this data publicly available / can it be shared with us?

8. Does your programme undertake any monitoring on the impact and reach of the childcare support provided? Is this part of wider programme evaluation? If so, does it influence ongoing design and delivery?

Evaluation etc. Where are the gaps in data collection and monitoring – how can these be addressed?

Looking to the future.

9. *Explain current Childcare Offer and criteria.* Are there groups of individuals who are currently missing out on financial support for childcare which would benefit from any extension to the Childcare Offer?

If yes, what interactions or duplications would potentially occur between existing programmes?

Are there issues regarding continued access to UC and other benefits?

What would the expected benefits be for the target groups?

If no, why not and how else could this target groups be better supported?

10. Are you aware of any future challenges that the target groups might face in accessing childcare in future?

Topic Guide C: Questions for Further Education and Higher education institution stakeholders

Purpose of interviews

These interviews will contribute to understanding

- (iii) what support is available (and to whom; what eligibility criteria; level of financial support etc)
- (iv) the gaps, if any, in financial support for parents.

Note: not all questions will be suitable for all interviewees.

Interviewees:

FE and HE institutions'

- Learner welfare team and/or
- Financial support team

Background and role

1. What is your role in [institution name]?
 - Role and responsibilities; reporting line.
 - Can you outline your involvement with providing financial support for learners generally?
 - Can you outline your involvement with providing financial support for childcare?

Support available

2. What financial support is available for learners' childcare in [institution name]? (Note – to add to the spreadsheet)
 - a. What form does the support take (subsidy, grant, bursary, discount on a childcare place etc)
 - b. What are the eligibility criteria?
 - c. How and when does the learner apply for the support?
 - d. Level of support / Maximum support available
 - e. Numbers accessing last financial year
 - f. Total fund size and source of the funds

Context

3. What specific issues/barriers are faced by student parents in identifying and accessing childcare?

E.g. geography, access to childcare, lack of awareness of options, transport – public or personal, availability locally, finance, eligibility, specific groups (e.g. those on the cusp of reengaging with education; those on certain courses)

4. How does your institution help address these issues by supporting the target groups?

Are there any specific issues or target groups that your programme has focused on? If so, how and why were these identified?

5. Are there links between your team/ institution and any external childcare support programmes?

- a. What programmes / what links?
- b. Do any institutional programmes complement other external childcare support programmes?

6. What have been the benefits for parents accessing childcare support from your institution and other similar external programmes – what evidence do you have for this?

7. How effective do you feel the current range of provision is for parents within the target group to gain the support required to access education, training or returning to work?

Data (if relevant)

8. Do you hold data on the number of parents within the target group (applicants / current students with childcare requirements)?

What are the key trends in terms of take up, demographics, levels of funding required, geography etc.? No. of students with dependent children at your institution, number of students under 25 with dependent children, percentage of total Financial Contingency Fund schemes spent on childcare, (and what percentage of FCF was claimed in the last year / similarly with other comparable programmes.

Is this data publicly available / can it be shared with us?

9. Does the institution undertake any monitoring on the impact and reach of the childcare support provided? If so, does it influence ongoing design and delivery?

Evaluation etc. Where are the gaps in data collection and monitoring – how can these be addressed?

10. Do you have any suggestions for the Arad team regarding other useful research / evaluation and any other national programmes across the UK?

Looking to the future.

11. Explain current Childcare Offer and criteria. Are there groups of learners who are currently missing out on financial support for childcare which would benefit from any extension to the Childcare Offer?

If yes, what interactions or duplications would potentially occur between existing programmes? What would the expected benefits be for the target groups?

If no, why not and how else could this target groups be better supported?

12. Are you aware of any future challenges that the target groups (current student parents, prospective students) might face in accessing childcare within FE / HE?

Annex 5: Privacy Notice for PaCE advisors and Further Education and Higher Education student support services

Evaluation of the suitability of the Childcare Offer for Wales to include parents in training, education and on the cusp of returning to work

The Welsh Government has commissioned *Arad Research* to evaluate the suitability of the current Childcare Offer for Wales to include parents in training, education and on the cusp of returning to work.

As part of this evaluation, *Arad Research* is gathering information through interviews with Welsh Government Programme leads, PaCE advisors and Further Education and Higher Education student support services.

The purpose of these interviews is to gather views on the extent to which parents who are in training, education and on the cusp of returning to work are supported with childcare as part of existing schemes.

The information collected during the evaluation will be included in a report published on the Welsh Government website, and possibly other publications, by *Arad Research* and the Welsh Government.

The Welsh Government is the data controller for the evaluation. However, *Arad Research* will delete any personal data provided during interviews, and anonymise the raw data, before it is shared with the Welsh Government.

Participation is completely voluntary. However, your views and experiences are important in order to help inform Welsh Government policies.

The contact for this evaluation at *Arad Research* is Sioned Lewis.

Telephone: 029 2044 0552

Email: sioned@arad.wales

Evaluation of the eligibility of the Childcare Offer for Wales to include parents in training, education and on the cusp of returning to work

What personal data do we hold and where do we get this information?

Personal data is defined under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as “any information relating to an identifiable person who can be directly or indirectly identified by reference to an identifier”.

In the case of further education or higher education staff, your contact details were obtained from your respective institutions’ websites, or were shared by individuals at those settings following an email sent by Arad to a central email address.

In the case of Welsh Government and DWP staff, your contact details were shared by Welsh Government officials from centrally held directories.

The interviews do not require the collection of any additional personal data. Any personally identifiable information that is provided will be deleted and the findings will be made anonymous.

If you raise a query or complaint and provide personal data requesting a response, the researcher will forward the request only to the relevant official and subsequently delete it from the research data.

What is the lawful basis for using your data?

The lawful basis for processing information in this data collection exercise is our public task; that is, exercising our official authority to undertake the core role and functions of the Welsh Government.

Evaluations such as this are important for the Welsh Government to collect information and actionable evidence about its ability to deliver government priorities.

How secure is your personal data?

Personal information provided to *Arad Research* by the Welsh Government is always stored securely. The data can only be used by a limited number of researchers who are working on the evaluation. Social researchers from *Arad Research* will only use participant contact details to contact them for research purposes.

Arad Research have put in place procedures to deal with any suspected data security breaches. If a suspected breach occurs, *Arad Research* will report this to the Welsh Government who will notify you and any applicable regulator where we are legally required to do so. *Arad Research* have Cyber Essentials certification.

All data gathered through this evaluation will be held in an anonymised format. It will not contain your contact details and any identifiable information will be removed.

Arad Research will use the data to produce a report for the Welsh Government. This report will not include any information that could be used to identify individual participants.

How long do we keep your personal data?

Arad Research will hold personal data during the contract period, and any personal data not already removed will be deleted three months after the end of the contract. *Arad Research* will provide Welsh Government with an anonymised version of the data which will not include information that could identify you.

Individual rights

Under GDPR, you have the following rights in relation to the personal information you provide as part of this evaluation, you have the right to:

- Access a copy of your own data;
- Require us to rectify inaccuracies in that data;
- To object to or restrict processing (in certain circumstances);
- For your data to be ‘erased’ (in certain circumstances); and
- To lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) who is our independent regulator for data protection.

The contact details for the Information Commissioner’s Office are: Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF. Phone: 01625 545 745 or 0303 123 1113. Website: www.ico.gov.uk

Further Information

If you have any further questions about how the data provided as part of this study will be used by the Welsh Government or wish to exercise your rights using the General Data Protection Regulation, please contact:

Roisin O’Brien (Knowledge and Analytical Services, Welsh Government)

Telephone: 0300 025 8528

Email: Roisin.O'Brien@gov.wales

The Welsh Government’s Data Protection Officer can be contacted at:

Welsh Government, Cathays Park, Cardiff, CF10 3NQ

Email: [DataProtectionOfficer@gov.wales](mailto>DataProtectionOfficer@gov.wales).