

SOCIAL RESEARCH NUMBER: 50/2023

PUBLICATION DATE: 03/05/2023

Evaluation of Recruit, Recover, and Raise Standards & Early Years Programmes

Executive Summary (Early Education)

1. This executive summary presents the evaluation findings for early education only. For findings for all schools please see the associated RRRS Schools executive summary and the main report.
2. The Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS) Programme was launched in August 2020 to support schools by increasing staff capacity. This additional capacity was designed to provide additional temporary support for priority learners aged 3-16 years to enable them to re-engage with the school system, achieve the progression that they are entitled to, and rebuild confidence and learning capability. £59m was distributed in 2020/21, including £3m in March 2021 for childcare settings. By July 2022 £165.5m has been distributed.
3. To provide further support to learners in early education (the Foundation Phase (ages 3-7 years)) an additional grant of £13m was made available and administered through the Education Improvement Grant (EIG) in the 2021/22 academic year.¹ £10m of this funding was available to schools with classes for Nursery to Year 2 and funded non-maintained nursery settings (childcare settings that are funded, by the local authority, to provide nursery education £3m was available to wider childcare settings, including

¹ Since September 2022, the Foundation Phase has been replaced by the Curriculum for Wales which has a continuum of learning ages 3-16. Early education is used to refer to education for ages 3-7 years throughout.

childminders, that do not provide nursery education but are expected (as outlined in the National Minimum Standards) to understand and apply the pedagogical principles of early education in their provision.

4. The overarching aim of this evaluation was to provide evidence to inform decisions about the ongoing response of the Welsh Government in supporting schools and childcare settings to recover from the disruptive impacts of COVID-19 on early education development.

Recommendations

a.	Continue to focus on addressing need, as defined at a setting level in combination with national level priorities.
b.	Continue to adopt holistic approaches and maximising use of multi-agency approaches to fully meet the needs of 3-7 year olds.
c.	Continue support for early education and childcare outside of schools, including non-funded non-maintained childcare settings, which will lead to more equitable recovery.
d.	Continue to allow flexible delivery at the school and childcare level to address needs in an effective way with the additional capacity available.
e.	Continue to use the clear style of guidance.
f.	Provide settings with more information in advance to enable them to plan longer term.
g.	Specify any training provided by the grants is to increase staff capacity with learners, not just upskill the existing workforce.
h.	Link more closely with other initiatives to increase staff numbers. For example, programmes that support entry into the workforces of the childcare and school sectors.
i.	Actively encourage collaboration and cluster working at the school and childcare levels.
j.	Establish a national tool for consistent measurement of local needs outside of the priority cohorts so that grant allocations can support all needs effectively.
k.	Ensure robust data collection by introducing universal monitoring for schools and childcare settings of the amount of additional capacity, recorded as FTE, number of staff, and area of learning they are deployed to.

Methodology

5. The evaluation of the grants for learners aged 3-7 years in early education was conducted alongside the evaluation of the grants in schools for ages 3-16 years. More detailed information on the methodology is available in section 3.
6. A literature review and fieldwork, consisting mostly of qualitative one-on-one interviews, was carried out over two phases. Early education stakeholders included:
 - 38 headteachers / childcare setting leads
 - 33 other stakeholders including representatives from all local authorities in Wales, Welsh Government, and childcare umbrella organisations

Limitations

7. The findings of this evaluation are derived from mostly qualitative research and as such the sample sizes for some contextual factors are small. Quantitative data is only available in depth for the RRRS grant in schools, and not childcare settings or the EIG administered £13m grant for early education in either childcare settings or schools.

What works

8. The international literature review highlighted strengths of targeted support at early education ages.
9. A whole-systems integrated approach is recommended to ensure children can access any form of social services that are available. Concentrating spending on early education and younger learners has been found internationally to be effective in promoting equitable recovery.
10. Effective practice is to fill specific gaps in children's development to allow them to progress with age-appropriate materials, through targeted micro-teaching to individuals and small groups.
11. Across the globe childcare and early education settings tended to close for a smaller proportion of time than primary schools. Despite this, the pandemic catalysed a global rethinking of how digital technology could be used in

education and childcare settings for the youngest learners. When there are challenges to using digital tools, such as access, younger children are more easily left behind than older learners.

12. Staff recruitment and retention in the sector has been a longstanding problem with COVID-19 only growing the scale of the issue.

Approaches in other UK nations

13. England, Northern Ireland, and Scotland faced challenges with the childcare workforce that predated COVID-19 but became even more apparent over the course of the pandemic.
 - England focused support in workforce development and training, and guidance to settings. This included additional funds for qualifications to attract people to the sector and establishing Strong Practice Hubs.
 - Northern Ireland focused on overall sector sustainability, ensuring childcare settings could remain open with the reduced demand, and small group tuition through the Engage Programme.
 - Scotland leveraged existing early years support. The School Attainment Challenge Funds were implemented flexibly with a focus on Speech, Language, and Communication (SLC). In 2021 the Childcare Offer was expanded for two-year-olds.

Theory of Change

14. The Theory of Change (ToC, section 5) for RRRS&EY covers children aged 3-7 years. The overall ToC is sound on a national level with agreement across all stakeholders that the RRRS&EY programmes correctly identify and tackle the needs with appropriate action to achieve useful objectives.

Findings

Relationship with other support packages

15. Whilst there are examples of individual grants working well alongside RRRS&EY (6.1.2) they are not fully coordinated in their roll out and aims in the experiences of childcare and school staff. For childcare settings in

particular, there is often little understanding of RRRS&EY grants, with the support provided believed to have originated with the LA.

Distribution

16. Primary schools have received funding directly, the amounts determined by the allocation criteria (1.2.2). Childcare settings have received the funding via the LA with little consistency across Wales in how this translated into support directly to childcare settings. Three different approaches have been identified. Some LAs allocated all funding for childcare settings directly to the settings. Others have taken a more strategic approach, spending the money on resources such as training that settings can choose from. The third contingent have taken a mixed approach with some funding spent strategically, and the rest going to settings.

Advice and support from LAs

17. In schools the critical decision making was taken by schools themselves. For childcare settings these decisions were taken at the LA level. LA advice and support was more prescriptive to childcare settings than to schools, in line with strategic spending. In later iterations of the RRRS funding, a number of LAs were able to provide childcare settings with FAQs based on previous stages of funding.

Role of partners

18. Schools and childcare settings had mixed experiences with Regional Consortia/partnerships. Some Regional Consortia and education partnerships were heavily involved with LA, schools, and childcare, and able to facilitate the sharing of ideas and best practice. Others found it difficult to elicit support from Regional Consortia/partnerships, particularly with last minute EIG funding. There has likely been a missed opportunity for Regional Consortia/partnerships to add value and increase the effectiveness of the grants.
19. Early Years Wales (EYW) and Children in Wales (CIW) have provided guidelines on how to use the funds in the face of COVID-19. There have been some examples early years umbrella organisations being involved with LA and Regional Consortia/partnerships at an early stage which supported

planning and delivery. Partners were critical of the lead time taken between announcements of funding and their roll out, highlighting the difficulties of recruiting staff in a short timeframe.

How funding has been used

20. On average, schools have gained a full-time equivalent support staff member, and half a full-time equivalent teacher (6.5.1).²
21. Schools and childcare settings have both used funding to increase the hours worked by existing staff on part-time contracts. For childcare this has more frequently been on an ad-hoc basis through overtime rather than contract extensions. The most common interventions by RRRS in schools has been for literacy and wellbeing, often delivered in a short period of time (e.g. over one term).
22. Where childcare settings have received funding directly the grants have paid for staff generally, and equipment to support specific learning (e.g. Speech, Language and Communication materials). Where LAs have spent the grants strategically, it has paid for external providers (such as drama groups or outdoor learning sessions) that childcare settings can access. Training has also been made available but childcare settings raised concerns that there is little opportunity to put it into practice before the next training sessions begin. Training completed outside of work hours is has also been an issue. With the shorter timeframe of the EIG administered grant compared to RRRS, there is a risk that the grant has been used on resources that are readily available rather than targeted where it could achieve the most impact.
23. It has been difficult to support staff-learner ratios by hiring additional staff as often available people lack the necessary qualifications to meet ratio requirements. In some cases, staff hired without qualifications have undergone the necessary training and this has taken time to complete.

Decision making

24. For schools, and childcare settings who were able to make their own decisions, the lead element has been their own knowledge of their children's

² This figure comes from monitoring data that includes schools with learners older the 3-7 years.

needs. The availability of staff who can deliver against these needs has been a main factor in the form of additional support provided.

25. Collaboration at school and childcare levels has been limited. Some LAs have taken a lead when it comes to coordinating and planning with headteachers and Regional Consortia/partnerships, though LA stakeholders expressed frustration at the 'last-minute' pace of coordination particularly with Regional Consortia/partnerships. Umbrella organisations have been able to provide much more support within childcare settings, with this strategic collaboration in line with WG expectations.

Enablers and barriers for additional capacity

26. Key enablers are the opportunity for extra pay available to experienced staff who work additional hours, and already have relationships with children and other staff. Primary schools have been able to use the grants to retain NQTs beyond their placement periods.

27. Barriers to additional capacity include:

- Competition from other sectors that are better paid or offer more flexibility, with fewer qualification requirements.
- The ability to only offer short-term contracts when paid for by the grants.
- The length of time to complete the hiring process can sometimes be longer than the window available to spend the grant.
- Existing childcare staff numbers reducing through burnout due to workload since March 2020.
- Limited availability of staff who are able to work in the medium of Welsh.
- Childcare and school's further away from urban centres have smaller local populations to recruit from, and smaller grant amounts as they tend to be smaller in size.
- Continued staff absences due to COVID-19.

Impact

28. The core purpose of the grants was to allow childcare settings and schools to the needs of learners aged 3-7 years by providing human resource, training, and (for childcare settings) material resources.
29. The RRRS Programme was delivered with broad alignment between locally identified need and national priority cohorts. There are widespread reports by staff of lower-than-expected SLC, both in school and childcare settings, for both Welsh and English medium settings. Both the RRRS&EY were highlighted by childcare and schools for its important role in addressing SLC issues.
30. Wellbeing support has been the most effective approach. This focus has been a central element in all areas of learning to increase engagement and enable the development of children in early education.
31. Best practice to increase the impact of the funding is to recruit staff with a clear aim to enable increased capacity.

Guidance and compliance

32. Guidance from Welsh Government has been regarded as a very high standard by primary schools and LAs. A key positive to stakeholders is the perceived high degree of flexibility allowed in both how local needs are identified and the strategies deployed by schools and LAs to address them.

The future

33. It is vital to understand that the effects of Covid-19 on learners, and education and childcare settings, will be persistent in the long-term. The experience of disrupted education will remain with children, and the workforce will face continued disruption from Covid-19 absences.
34. The increased staff capacity due to RRRS&EY is entirely reliant on the grant funding. The capacity uplift will end when the programme ends. There is currently no plan amongst schools and childcare settings that stretch beyond the RRRS grant.

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Full Research Report: Andrews, G; Bajjada, T; Howells, J; KilBride, K; Morgan, N; Richardson, M; Wise, C; Bebb, H; Bryer, N; Roberts, M; (2023). Evaluation of Recruit, Recover, and Raise Standards & Early Years Programmes – Final Report. Cardiff: Welsh Government. GSR report number 50/2023.

Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/evaluation-recruit-recover-and-raise-standards-rrrs-programme>

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

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