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# Review of the lessons learned during the Early Years Integration Transformation Programme

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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# Review of the lessons learned during the Early Years Integration Transformation Programme

Authors: Hannah Smith, Sophie Findlay, Anna Folland

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

For further information please contact:

Internal Research Programme

Social Research and Information Division

Welsh Government

Cathays Park

Cardiff

CF10 3NQ

[RhYF.IRP@gov.wales](mailto:RhYF.IRP@gov.wales)

## Table of contents

Glossary.....	5
1. Introduction and background.....	7
1.1. Background to the EYITP .....	7
1.2. EYITP aims, objectives and intended outcomes.....	8
1.3. Research aims and objectives.....	9
1.3.1. Aim one .....	9
1.3.2. Aim two.....	9
1.3.3. Aim three .....	10
2. Methodology.....	11
2.1. Review of background documents.....	11
2.2. Document review.....	11
2.2.1. Sampling of documents, February 2025.....	11
2.2.2. Analysis of documents, March to August 2025.....	12
2.2.3. Methodological considerations for the document review .....	12
2.3. Focus groups with pathfinders.....	13
2.3.1. Conducting the focus groups.....	14
2.3.2. Focus groups analysis.....	14
2.3.3. Methodological considerations for the focus groups.....	14
3. Findings: document review.....	15
3.1. Context.....	15
3.1.1. Unmet needs .....	15
3.1.2. COVID-19 pandemic .....	16
3.1.3. Cost-of-living crisis .....	17
3.1.4. Public sector capacity.....	17
3.1.5. Inconsistent service quality and access.....	17
3.1.6. Integration .....	17
3.1.7. Ways of working .....	18
3.1.8. Engagement with families.....	18
3.2. Intended outcomes .....	19
3.2.1. Improved outcomes for children .....	19
3.2.2. Comprehensive support for parents and carers .....	19
3.2.3. Multi-agency collaboration.....	19

3.2.4.	Continuous workforce development .....	19
3.2.5.	An accessible early years system.....	20
3.2.6.	A responsive early years system .....	20
3.2.7.	A sustainable early years system .....	20
3.2.8.	Improved data capability.....	20
3.2.9.	Alignment of early years priorities.....	20
3.2.10.	Effective governance .....	20
3.3.	Programme development .....	21
3.3.1.	Approaches .....	21
3.3.2.	Tools.....	21
3.4.	Collaboration .....	22
3.4.1.	Planning and governance.....	22
3.4.2.	Service delivery .....	22
3.4.3.	Workforce development.....	23
3.4.4.	Data.....	23
3.4.5.	Collaboration with families.....	23
3.4.6.	Factors supporting collaboration.....	24
3.4.7.	Barriers to collaboration.....	25
3.5.	Governance .....	26
3.5.1.	Descriptions of governance structures .....	26
3.5.2.	Factors supporting effective governance.....	27
3.5.3.	Governance barriers.....	28
3.6.	Staff .....	30
3.6.1.	Capacity building .....	30
3.6.2.	Impact of the funding ending .....	30
3.6.3.	Factors supporting staff .....	31
3.6.4.	Barriers for staff.....	33
3.7.	Funding.....	35
3.7.1.	Core transformation and integration .....	35
3.7.2.	Areas of investment.....	35
3.7.3.	Impact of COVID-19 .....	35
3.7.4.	Impact of the funding ending .....	35
3.7.5.	Funding enablers.....	36
3.7.6.	Funding barriers .....	37

3.8.	Data .....	39
3.8.1.	Activities undertaken .....	39
3.8.2.	Tools.....	39
3.8.3.	Needs identified.....	39
3.8.4.	Data collection and analysis .....	39
3.8.5.	Measuring impact .....	40
3.8.6.	Maximising resources.....	41
3.8.7.	Collaboration .....	41
3.8.8.	Factors supporting data-related activities .....	42
3.8.9.	Barriers to effective data usage .....	43
3.9.	Families .....	44
3.9.1.	Engagement .....	44
3.9.2.	Accessing information .....	44
3.9.3.	Accessing services .....	45
3.9.4.	Service delivery .....	47
3.9.5.	Volunteers .....	47
3.10.	Sustainability .....	48
3.10.1.	Plans to continue integration and transformation work .....	48
3.10.2.	Needs for sustainable working.....	48
3.10.3.	Factors supporting sustainability.....	49
3.10.4.	Barriers to sustainability.....	51
3.11.	Recommendations from pathfinder documents.....	52
3.11.1.	For Welsh Government.....	52
3.11.2.	For practitioners .....	53
3.11.3.	For pathfinder leaders.....	55
4.	Findings: focus groups .....	58
4.1.	During the EYITP .....	58
4.1.1.	Timeliness of services .....	58
4.1.2.	The extent of system integration.....	59
4.1.3.	Whether drawing on elements from other programmes helped to create a responsive system .....	63
4.2.	After the EYITP .....	64
4.2.1.	Extent of continued integration achieved.....	64
4.2.2.	Successful continued integration.....	64

4.2.3.	Factors supporting continued integration.....	66
4.2.4.	Barriers to continued integration.....	67
4.2.5.	Impact of delivering integrated services without funding .....	71
4.3.	The future .....	72
4.3.1.	Funding .....	72
4.3.2.	Commitment and prioritisation .....	74
4.3.3.	Momentum and capacity .....	75
4.3.4.	Definitions and delivery expectations .....	76
4.3.5.	IT or data systems .....	76
4.3.6.	Inequality of provision.....	77
4.3.7.	The views and needs of families.....	77
5.	Conclusions.....	78
5.1.	Reflecting on examples of good practice and lessons learned by pathfinders.....	78
5.1.1.	Improving access and availability of early years services.....	78
5.1.2.	Improvements in service delivery: coordination and timeliness .....	79
5.1.3.	Streamlining referral pathways .....	80
5.1.4.	Improved understanding of local need.....	80
5.2.	Exploring the enablers and barriers to successful system integration .....	81
5.2.1.	Enablers .....	81
5.2.2.	Barriers.....	82
5.2.3.	Monitoring and evaluation requirements.....	83
5.3.	Understanding the extent of system integration achieved .....	84
5.3.1.	Mainstreaming into business as usual.....	84
6.	Recommendations .....	87
	Recommendation 1: Welsh Government to consider the future needs for integration.....	87
	Recommendation 2a: Welsh Government to consider funding-related needs for any version of a future programme .....	87
	Recommendation 2b: Welsh Government to consider monitoring and evaluation related needs for any version of a future programme.....	88
	Recommendation 3: Pathfinders to consider local and regional approaches for future integration.....	88

## **Glossary**

### **ALN**

Additional learning needs

### **CCG**

Children and Communities Grant

### **CFCE**

Children, Families and Childcare Evidence research team, Welsh Government

### **EYIT**

Early Years Integration Transformation branch, Welsh Government

### **EYITP**

Early Years Integration Transformation Programme

### **Families First**

This is a Welsh Government early intervention and prevention programme delivered by local authorities. It is designed to improve outcomes for babies, children, young people and their families by helping them to address problems before they reach crisis point. For more information, see <https://www.gov.wales/get-help-families-first>

### **Flying Start**

This is a Welsh Government programme to help families with children under 4 years old in disadvantaged areas of Wales. For more information, see <https://www.gov.wales/flying-start-programme>

### **Health board region or region**

This describes the geographical area covered by a health board; it can cover multiple local authorities, and in some cases multiple Public Service Boards.

### **Healthy Child Wales**

This is a Welsh Government programme which sets out planned contacts for children aged 0 to 7. For more information, see <https://www.gov.wales/healthy-child-wales-programme-0>

### **Health visitor**

A role within the Healthy Child Wales programme and Flying Start programme.

### **IRP**

Internal Research Programme, Welsh Government

### **Local level (of system integration)**

Smaller-scale level of integration within the early years system, for example occurring in community groups or towns.

### **Pathfinder**

The term describing the Public Service Boards participating in the Early Years Integration Transformation Programme.

### **Pathfinder organisation or organisation**

An organisation (including local authorities and health boards) involved in delivering the work of the Early Years Integration Transformation Programme.

### **PSB**

Public Service Board. PSBs improve joint working across all public services in each local authority area in Wales. Members of PSBs include local authority, local health board and others. For more information, see <https://www.gov.wales/public-services-boards>

### **RIF**

Regional Integration Fund. This is a five-year fund (April 2022 to March 2027), managed through RPBs. For more information, see <https://www.gov.wales/health-and-social-care-regional-integration-fund>

### **RPB**

Regional Partnership Board. RPBs were established to improve the well-being of the population and improve how health and care services are delivered. For more information, see <https://www.gov.wales/regional-partnership-boards-rpbs>

### **System-wide level (of system integration)**

The level of system integration relating to a larger scale geographically (such as regional or national change) or of multiple elements (such as across different sectors).

# 1. Introduction and background

The Internal Research Programme (IRP, Knowledge and Analytical Services, Welsh Government) was approached by the Early Years Integration and Transformation (EYIT) branch to undertake a review of the Early Years Integration Transformation Programme (EYITP). The review aimed to explore themes of good practice and lessons learned across the EYITP, including enablers and barriers to system integration. It also sought to establish the extent to which system integration has become mainstreamed. The IRP conducted the research project between February and October 2025.

## 1.1. Background to the EYITP

In Wales, the early years system is comprised of universal, targeted and specialist services, which are accountable to different bodies. Historically, their work was often undertaken independently of each other, meaning information was not shared and services not coordinated. The lack of joined-up services posed a risk to achieving the Welsh Government goal to ensure all children have the best start in life and reach their full potential ([Prosperity for All \(pdf\)](#), 2016 to 2021). There was therefore a need to ensure delivery bodies recognise and build on the value of a whole system approach.

The EYITP started in 2017 as an opportunity to take a radical look at existing services and structures, with a view to developing a long-term strategic focus to improve outcomes for children. In response to the Welsh Government national strategy for the 2016 to 2021 administration, '[Prosperity for All \(pdf\)](#)', the programme intended to deliver against the commitment to 'build on our current early years programmes and create a more joined-up, responsive system that puts the unique needs of each child at its heart'. For the purposes of the EYITP, early years was defined as the ages from pre-birth to 7.

EYITP delivery began as an intensive co-construction project with Cwm Taf Public Service Board (PSB). At the time, this PSB included the local authorities Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil (Bridgend was included in this PSB from May 2023). This project explored options for reconfiguring the early years system. However, it became clear that developing a single approach to be rolled out across Wales was not possible due to the different landscapes and population needs in each local authority area.

To build on the approach, PSBs were invited to join the programme as 'pathfinders' on a phased basis. Joining the programme was voluntary, and the majority of PSBs in Wales joined. Pathfinders joining on a phased basis meant some within the health board footprint joined later than others, meaning there were differences in how far along pathfinders were on their integration journeys. Pathfinder PSBs were tasked with testing the core components of an integrated early years system and piloting different delivery models and approaches, with a focus on the coordination of services locally and regionally.

The EYITP formally closed at the end of March 2025. Just over £17 million was allocated to the EYITP between the financial years spanning April 2018 to March 2024. Amounts were allocated on a health board footprint, based on regional population figures for children (from birth to seven years).

Pathfinders had designated coordinators funded through the EYITP. These were overseen by a designated project lead. The project leads and coordinators worked alongside other partners in their regional health board areas to facilitate the EYITP.

The EYITP was impacted by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic between 2020 and 2022. Staff in PSBs, local authorities and health boards were redirected to frontline services. [The evaluation of the EYITP \(Andrews et al, 2022\)](#) found that the pandemic had profoundly affected progress towards the programme's aims and objectives. Nonetheless, projects continued and further PSBs joined the programme through funding as part of the Welsh Government's ongoing commitment to [supporting families and vulnerable children](#).

The EYITP was a time limited piloting programme, enabling pathfinders to test innovative approaches to delivering services in a more joined up way, building on what worked well under existing programmes, such as Families First and Flying Start. Given that pathfinders were experimenting with new approaches and unproven concepts, it was vital to ensure all proposals were consistent with overarching Welsh Government policy and did not overlap with existing funding streams. To achieve this, detailed scrutiny of business plans and progress reports was necessary, helping to prevent funding duplication, guarantee policy alignment, and uphold rigorous financial oversight suitable for a pilot initiative.

## **1.2. EYITP aims, objectives and intended outcomes**

The EYITP aimed to:

- create an early years system to deliver services in a co-ordinated, integrated and timely way within existing budgets
- support local partners to re-configure early years services and create an early years system locally, focussing on co-ordination of services, planning, commissioning and identifying and addressing needs
- through this process to identify barriers to integration and ways to remove, reduce or rationalise them

The EYITP objectives were to:

- take a radical look at existing structures and systems to determine whether they are efficient and effective in supporting the early years
- take the most effective elements from all Welsh Government's current early years programmes (including Flying Start, Families First and Healthy Child Wales) and create a more joined-up, responsive system that puts the unique needs of each child at its heart
- deliver extended, coherent support for families, drawing together family support programmes, focused on positive parenting and early intervention
- pilot a co-construction approach to an early years system in pathfinder areas, with local authorities and health boards

The intended outcomes from the [prior evaluation of the programme \(2022\)](#) were:

- improved access and availability of services
- reduced service gaps
- streamlined referral pathways
- increased understanding of need and demand
- scoping, formulating and implementing the broader strategy

An additional intended outcome from internal policy rationale was to upscale good practice regionally and nationally.

### **1.3. Research aims and objectives**

The remit of the research is to produce a thematic analysis of EYITP evaluation documents submitted by pathfinders, and to conduct focus groups with pathfinders.

This project has three research aims. These are listed below with the accompanying objectives.

#### **1.3.1. Aim one**

To reflect on examples of good practice and lessons learned by pathfinders participating in the EYITP. The objectives are to:

- assess whether access and availability of early years services was improved, including whether gaps in service provision reduced
- assess the extent to which services were delivered in a coordinated, integrated and timely manner across the different pathfinder areas
- establish whether referral pathways were streamlined
- determine whether pathfinders developed a better understanding of need in their local areas

#### **1.3.2. Aim two**

To explore enablers and barriers to successful system integration. The objectives are to:

- establish the main themes underpinning system-wide integration
- identify enablers and barriers to integration.
- understand pathfinders' experiences of governance structures and monitoring and evaluation requirements under the EYITP

### **1.3.3. Aim three**

To develop an understanding of how far system integration has been achieved ('mainstreamed'). The objectives are to:

- explore the extent to which the EYITP helped to implement an integrated system
- explore whether work under the EYITP has been mainstreamed into business-as-usual practice, and how this was achieved
- establish whether there are clear governance structures in place to drive forward future integration and transformation
- provide recommendations for how future integration and transformation work can be taken forward

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Review of background documents**

A desk-based review of strategy and policy documents was undertaken to understand the programme. This included background information to the programme, grant guidance, the structure of different pathfinder areas and an overview of pathfinder workstreams.

### **2.2. Document review**

Pathfinders submitted their final evaluation documentation to the EYIT branch from around the funding ending up until January 2025.

#### **2.2.1. Sampling of documents, February 2025**

There were 131 unique documents submitted in total (unique means excluding duplicates where documents were submitted in both English and Welsh). These represented the 7 regional health board areas: Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board, Hywel Dda University Health Board, Powys Teaching Health Board and Swansea Bay University Health Board. The number of unique documents that were submitted varied between regional health board areas, ranging from 1 document to 37 documents.

As the main purpose of the research was to produce a thematic review of the programme, the most appropriate methodological approach determined by the IRP and Children, Families and Childcare Evidence (CFCE) research teams was to take a sample of the documents. This was done in two stages.

In stage one it was agreed that the EYIT branch and CFCE research team would both undertake exercises to identify documents for inclusion. The IRP and CFCE teams advised to exclude any documents that were not evaluative reports as they would not provide appropriate information for the thematic review, such as infographics or presentations. The EYIT branch identified 42 documents for inclusion based on the main areas of learning they considered important for the review to cover. The CFCE research team identified 23 documents for inclusion based on whether they contained information at a sufficient level to answer the research aims and questions. The 23 documents identified by the CFCE research team were also identified by the EYIT branch. This left 19 documents identified by the EYIT branch which were not identified by the CFCE research team.

In sampling stage two, the IRP created a set of inclusion criteria to reconcile these 19 documents. Firstly, documents were excluded if they were an earlier version that was superseded by a later version of the document, or if the content was also included in a summative report. Then if not superseded or repeated, decisions on inclusion were based on whether they addressed the research aims and questions. Each of the 19 documents were assessed against these criteria.

For the research aim ‘to produce a thematic analysis of good practice and lessons learned by pathfinders’, documents were included according to whether:

- they provided findings on good practice and lessons learnt
- the methods were suitable and robust to provide insight into good practice or lessons learnt
- the sample size was sufficient to make findings representative and useful

For the research aim ‘to explore the enablers and barriers to successful system integration’, documents were assessed according to whether:

- they identified enablers and/or barriers
- they explored integration

For the research aim ‘to assess the extent to which system integration has been mainstreamed’, documents were assessed according to whether they provided system level information or findings.

Based on the stage 2 sampling, it was agreed between the EYIT branch and the IRP that 5 of the 19 documents would be included in the thematic review.

Overall, these 5 documents, plus the 23 documents that overlapped in selection between the teams in sampling stage one, meant 28 total documents were included in the document review. Before the IRP reviewed these documents, the EYIT branch removed any personal data.

### **2.2.2. Analysis of documents, March to August 2025**

A thematic analysis approach was taken. MAXQDA (qualitative data analysis software) was used for coding and analysis. The 28 reports were divided between three researchers for coding. The researchers developed an initial coding framework by coding one larger document and one smaller document each. The coding framework was then discussed and agreed by the researchers and applied to all reports. Quality assurance was undertaken at two stages of the coding process where the researchers swapped and reviewed each other’s coding to ensure the codes were being consistently applied. Coded segments were then extracted. Two senior researchers analysed the extracts to produce themes. These were written into a full analysis, found in Chapter 3 of this report.

### **2.2.3. Methodological considerations for the document review**

For the document review, when reading the findings it should be considered that:

- the purpose of the research is to produce a thematic review, so it is not in scope to comment on specific interventions or projects

- the Betsi Cadwaladr health board region submitted the most documents overall, and comprised 14 of the 28 documents included in the sample, so there may be a skew towards this region in the review
- the Conwy and Denbighshire PSB are not represented in the findings as it was not possible for them to take part in the EYITP

### **2.3. Focus groups with pathfinders**

Contact details for the focus groups were provided to the IRP by the EYIT branch. The sample provided included project coordinators, project leads, and health board representatives who were still in post. The available sample ranged from 1 contact to 9 contacts per health board region. The contacts were invited by email to take part in May 2025. A privacy notice was provided. Where contacts did not reply, a reminder was sent by the EYIT branch.

For some focus groups, initial contacts proposed additional contacts to invite (snowball sampling). The privacy notice was updated to enable this and re-sent to all contacts. This meant for some focus groups, participants were not all project leads or coordinators, but included others involved in EYITP delivery. Additional types of roles included: health visiting, Flying Start representatives, speech and language specialists, strategy, early years managers, grants and finance, and data and monitoring.

The topic guide for the focus groups was developed by IRP researchers, drawing on the research aims and questions. The EYIT branch reviewed the topic guide. The questions covered during the programme, after the programme and views about the future. The broad topics were:

- the impact the programme had on early years services delivered, and the timeliness of services delivered
- the extent to which the programme helped to implement an integrated system
- whether other early years programmes were drawn on and whether doing so helped to create a responsive system
- whether integration had continued after the programme funding ended
- the impact of delivering integrated services without funding
- the anticipated challenges to future system integration
- future needs to support early years system integration, and mitigations to anticipated challenges

### **2.3.1. Conducting the focus groups**

The aim was to hold one focus group per health board region. There were 6 focus groups held in June and July 2025 which ranged from 3 to 10 participants. Focus groups were conducted online through Microsoft Teams and lasted between 1 to 2 hours. Representation included:

- those from four of a total of five local authorities, and the health board, for the Aneurin Bevan region
- those from three of a total of four local authorities, and the health board, for the Betsi Cadwaladr region
- those from all local authorities, and the health board, for the Cardiff and Vale region
- those from all local authorities, and the health board, for the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region
- those from two of a total of three local authorities for the Hywel Dda region
- those from one of a total of two local authorities, and the health board, for the Swansea Bay region

### **2.3.2. Focus groups analysis**

As the focus groups were completed, transcripts were checked and edited. A thematic analysis approach was taken. Microsoft Office was used for coding and analysis. The analysis was divided between two senior researchers. Data from the transcripts were organised according to the topic guide areas. Within each area, the researchers coded the data and used this to form themes. These were written into a full analysis, found in Chapter 4 of this report.

### **2.3.3. Methodological considerations for the focus groups**

For the focus groups, when reading the findings it should be considered that:

- the Powys region was not represented as staff had moved to other roles which meant there was a small sample, and the provided sample was not available
- the focus groups for the regions Aneurin Bevan, Betsi Cadwalader, Hywel Dda and Swansea Bay were missing representation from one local authority
- the health board was not represented in the Hywel Dda region focus group

### **3. Findings: document review**

This chapter presents the findings of the thematic analysis undertaken on a sample of documents submitted by all the pathfinders for the duration of the EYITP.

The findings are categorised by themes identified during the analysis phase: context, intended outcomes, programme development, collaboration, governance, sustainability, staff, funding, data and families. Each of these themes captures documented information from pathfinder organisations relating to the theme in general, as well as barriers and enablers of system change on both a local level (such as in towns or community groups) and system-wide level (such as regional and national). Finally, recommendations that were suggested in pathfinder documentation for improving early years integration and transformation are given.

It is important to note that these findings are drawn solely from commonalities across the pathfinder reports. They are not necessarily results from rigorous research or evaluative study.

#### **3.1. Context**

This section describes the reported context that existed before the EYITP was introduced, highlighting the need for the EYITP.

The EYITP was implemented against a backdrop of economic and societal challenges, which had a profound impact on the ability of pathfinders to implement and deliver their objectives. Recurring contextual factors reported included meeting the needs of children and families, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, public sector capacity, service inconsistencies across Wales, integration and ways of working, and engagement with families.

##### **3.1.1. Unmet needs**

There was a lot of unmet need in communities across Wales at the time the EYITP was introduced, particularly in non-Flying Start areas. These needs remained unmet due to lack of financial and staffing resource in the early years sector. Pathfinder documents reported on some of the negative impacts of this unmet need on early childhood development, for example reduced school readiness, lack of independence from parents, poor concentration levels, and difficulty adapting to the learning environment in school.

The level and depth of unmet need varied between and within health boards and local authorities and were influenced by policy decisions and inconsistencies in service delivery at national and local levels. An example was provided of nursery provision in schools being cut from one local authority area, which caused higher rates of developmental and emotional needs in young children.

### **3.1.2. COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the EYITP. As the pandemic emerged during the programme's implementation phase, priorities shifted towards responding to the immediate public health emergency. As such, some programme implementation was paused for a short period. When implementation resumed, pathfinders were asked to re-visit their plans for implementation for the remainder of the year by Welsh Government. This was perceived to be at 'short notice' by some.

Pathfinder documents reported difficulty establishing the EYITP during this state of (inter)national emergency. Practitioners had to adapt quickly to restrictions, for example by moving from face-to-face to online consultations. The move to online practice affected working relationships and collaboration between staff and organisations.

Demand on services like safeguarding, mental health and domestic abuse increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as health, education and childcare. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staff in the health and social care sector was significant. It exacerbated workforce fatigue and incidents of long-term sickness increased. This caused understaffing in a time of increased demand, so staff were expected to do more with less resource. The COVID-19 pandemic also caused delays in recruitment and project planning, increased waiting lists, and reduced strategic participation from leaders. Some pathfinder organisations reported that the focus on the pandemic drew attention away from the programme.

Lockdowns negatively affected children and families. Many parents who had children during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced anxiety and low confidence. Factors like mental health, sleep, early brain development and speech and language development were all negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Existing needs experienced by children and families became even more complex during the pandemic, which placed more strain on the early years sector.

As restrictions were lifted and society sought to return to normal, the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt acutely in the early years sector. Demand for one-on-one support increased due to the increasing complexities experienced by children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to support was delayed post-pandemic, as the system sought to catch up with the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery.

Staff shortages were felt in the early years sector post-pandemic. Health visitors were brought together from Flying Start and health boards to deal with staff shortages and increased demand. For staff, the pandemic caused ongoing issues for collaborative working and communication. However, pathfinder reports suggest the move to online working allowed staff with heavy workloads to attend more meetings, and generally increased capacity for service delivery.

### **3.1.3. Cost-of-living crisis**

The cost-of-living crisis put financial stress on families. Several parents fed back that they could not afford to pay for groups and activities because of increasing prices elsewhere. The additional pressure of the cost-of-living crisis on families also increased demand for support, which was reported by staff in health and education sectors.

### **3.1.4. Public sector capacity**

Pressures to the NHS and other statutory services have been evident for a long time in Wales and the UK, where demand significantly outweighs supply. Pathfinder documents identified numerous contextual factors specific to public sector capacity limitations, for example public sector budget cuts, lack of provision and services, clinical pressures, long waiting lists, staff shortages, recruitment and retention challenges and unsustainable workloads. An ageing workforce was also cited as an additional pressure on the public sector. Due to these pressures, employee sick days, burnout and mental health issues were on the rise across the sector. Many staff work on temporary contracts, some on zero-hour contracts with low salaries. The ability to share information was restricted by incompatible IT systems, with at least one health board still using paper-based filing systems. This reduced their capacity to work as efficiently as required.

### **3.1.5. Inconsistent service quality and access**

Pathfinder documentation reflected on the complexity of early years services in Wales, shaped by historical arrangements, numerous partnership organisations and networks, and diversity of care from statutory, non-statutory and third sector service deliverers. In general, it was reported that early years service provision could be disparate across Wales. Provision was available in some areas and not others, and the needs of some families remained unmet. Whilst deprivation was a factor in every local authority in Wales, communities are not homogenous and have different needs and priorities. The diversity within regions made it difficult to establish a regional universal vision prior to the EYITP.

A pertinent theme in pathfinder documentation was around lower access to services in rural areas, with services primarily based in cities and large towns. Powys, which is an almost entirely rural area, felt this substantially. Being located on the Wales-England border caused additional complexity, as some families travelled to England to access support.

### **3.1.6. Integration**

Integration between services prior to the EYITP had made progress in some areas, but not all. There was evidence of integrated delivery of support between services such as antenatal and postnatal programmes, which were enabled by aligning resource provision. The variety of policies and legislation implemented by Welsh Government aimed to build a responsive early years system to provide positive outcomes for children. However, early years services and support across children's services, education, health and the third sector were complex and often disjointed.

### **3.1.7. Ways of working**

Many documents highlighted the issue that, prior to the EYITP, teams and professions related to early years tended to work in silo from each other. Siloed working meant that there was a lot of duplication of services, and practitioners were unaware of where the duplication existed. There was no capacity to identify duplication before the EYITP, so the issue could not previously be addressed.

### **3.1.8. Engagement with families**

Family engagement with statutory services prior to the programme was mixed. There were sub-populations that were mistrustful of the statutory sector due to being marginalised, which caused reluctance to engage. Some pathfinder organisations noted that there were efforts to engage marginalised ethnic minority groups and parents struggling with perinatal mental ill health. There was concern amongst some parents and carers that asking for help would result in them being considered a safeguarding risk to their children. Pathfinder documents also noted that fathers had been at the periphery of service development historically, and this led to lower engagement levels from dads. For families living in rural areas, isolation and lack of access to various services had made engaging with early years services challenging.

Another issue highlighted was that parents and carers of disabled and neurodiverse children were more likely to experience mental health issues due to physical and emotional stress, isolation, fatigue and lack of knowledge and information. Research had indicated that parents were most likely to approach other parents for support and information, rather than practitioners. It was speculated that this was due to lack of trust in statutory services, embarrassment, not knowing what provision was available, and perceptions about who such services were designed for. The impact of this was that many families were at crisis point at the time they were engaged with professional services.

## **3.2. Intended outcomes**

The intended outcomes of the EYITP from the perspective of pathfinder organisations, as identified through the document review, were wide-ranging. The intended outcomes are captured as subheadings followed by the descriptions in pathfinder documents.

### **3.2.1. Improved outcomes for children**

All children in Wales are happy, healthy and have the best start in life. They live in resilient and equitable communities. They have access to the services they need, when they need them, including disabled children and children with additional learning needs (ALN). Support provided to children is consistent, sustainable, universal and child centred. Improved rates of school readiness led to better levels of educational attainment and reduced educational inequalities. Comprehensive support for parents means fewer children enter the care system.

### **3.2.2. Comprehensive support for parents and carers**

Parents and carers are engaged with the early years system, able to provide feedback and feel listened to. They have confidence to support their children to be healthy, safe and resilient. Parents and carers feel valued as decision-makers for their children. They are empowered to identify and access support when they need it. There is an increased uptake of community-based resources by parents and carers, and reduced rates of parent and carer isolation. As a result, there is a reduction in the likelihood of family breakdown and conflict.

### **3.2.3. Multi-agency collaboration**

A broad range of services are coproduced, planned and delivered across agencies and disciplines through collaborative working practices. Services make the best use of existing capacity by promoting knowledge, information and skills sharing across professions. There is less siloed working as partnership working is more mainstreamed. Co-working and sharing resources result in improved value-for-money.

### **3.2.4. Continuous workforce development**

The capacity of the workforce is continually enhanced through professional development, shared learning, reflective practice and clear development pathways. The needs of the workforce are identified, clearly articulated and addressed through training. Staff have manageable caseloads and are properly supported through training, supervision and wellbeing support. Staff develop their knowledge, skills, experience and gain qualifications to fulfil their professional potential.

### **3.2.5. An accessible early years system**

Service provision is needs-based and equitable across urban and rural areas of Wales. Traditionally marginalised families are engaged and trusting of professionals in the early years system. Referrals are targeted, appropriate, streamlined and specialist, so that families get the help they need when they need it without having to provide information repeatedly. Information is accessible and available for anyone who needs it across all of Wales. There are no stigma or negative stereotypes around neurodiversity and neurodevelopment, so all children have access to the services they need.

### **3.2.6. A responsive early years system**

The early years system in Wales is responsive to the needs of children and families, including at different life stages including perinatal, postnatal and childhood. A whole-system approach to identifying and addressing need is embedded. Solutions are family-focused, personalised and strengths-based. Staff have the right skills and access to the right tools to provide early (and ongoing) intervention. Families get access to the support they need at the right time for them.

### **3.2.7. A sustainable early years system**

Existing efforts to provide an integrated early years system in Wales are supported to ensure sustainability into the long-term future. Pathfinder organisations have a detailed understanding of their areas so that they can deliver the right services and fill provision gaps to meet local needs. Barriers to integration are identified and addressed. A focus on early prevention and intervention means that children and families are supported before needs escalate. This reduces dependency on and cost to statutory services across Wales in the future. Additionally, staff with the right skills and experience are recruited and retained to build and maintain capacity in the long term.

### **3.2.8. Improved data capability**

Monitoring data is routinely collected. Evidence gaps are identified and plugged. Datasets are comparable across regions, allowing systems-wide analysis of outcomes and impact. IT systems are in place that enable information sharing between professions and organisations. Consistent data collection is facilitated by functional IT systems.

### **3.2.9. Alignment of early years priorities**

Activity under the early years system aligns with and complements existing priorities such as [Healthy Child Wales Programme](#), [Flying Start](#), [Families First](#), the [Childcare Offer](#) and the [NEST Framework](#) (mental health and wellbeing).

### **3.2.10. Effective governance**

Governance structures are in place that facilitate effective decision-making. This ensures an early years system that is sustainable, responsive and accessible to all children and families across Wales.

### 3.3. Programme development

Development refers to ways in which pathfinder organisations planned their programme of work <sup>[Footnote 1]</sup>.

#### 3.3.1. Approaches

Pathfinder documents noted that pathfinder organisations considered other early years initiatives when planning. For example, when deciding specific local areas for their pilots, that these were not already covered by Flying Start so that services would not be duplicated and access to services would be expanded. Documents also described identifying needs in planning. This typically involved what pathfinders described as ‘mapping’, to identify gaps and priority areas. Gaps were identified across various areas such as the services available, staff capacity, workforce training, and data availability. In some cases, pathfinder organisations described consulting with their service users, to gather their feedback regarding provision of services. Also, there were (limited) cases where pathfinder organisations noted consulting the early years workforce to gather evidence about what was working well or less well. Some described identifying their intended outcomes or indicators at the planning stage, to demonstrate what they wanted to achieve and guide progress.

#### 3.3.2. Tools

Pathfinder documents reported using specific tools during programme development, including:

- the ‘[7 lenses maturity matrix \(GOV.UK\)](#)’, which is a practical tool allowing teams to assess transformation and identify areas for improvement
- the ‘[EIF \(now known as Foundations\) Maternity and Early Years Maturity Matrix](#)’, which is a self-assessment tool to support local areas to adopt system-wide approaches to supporting children and families
- the ‘Vanguard’ method, which is delivered via a facilitated programme, for service organisations to be studied and redesigned as systems (as described in the [Evaluation of the Early Years Integration Transformation Programme](#))

Pathfinder documents typically described that these tools were used to understand the system, to then identify priority areas of work. Some also noted these were revisited throughout to understand progress.

In terms of specific resources, some pathfinder organisations described drawing on existing work, for example, ensuring coherence with existing strategies and objectives across the region, or building on previous planning from a different, though related, area of work.

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#### Footnotes

[1] When entering the EYITP, all pathfinders were asked to map their services and identify gaps to inform priorities.

### **3.4. Collaboration**

Collaboration refers to working within and across professions, services and organisations to deliver services and outcomes for children and families under the EYITP. Collaboration was made possible through effective partnership working between early years service providers, statutory bodies, third sector organisations and families. Pathfinder documents outlined various areas in which staff across services and teams collaborated: planning and governance <sup>[Footnote 2]</sup>, service delivery, data and workforce training.

#### **3.4.1. Planning and governance**

Pathfinder documents described collaborating with staff from various early years sector services to map current services or systems, develop approaches, plan and prioritise. In some cases, collaboration at the planning stage was helpful to establish relationships between pathfinder organisations early on. This also assisted with alignment on ways of working together. Collaboration at the planning stage increased understanding of the wider context (for example, across different local authorities in one pathfinder area) and how different parts of the system interact (for example, between local authorities and health boards).

Pathfinder documents noted how priorities or workstreams were developed at a regional level and consistent across the region, drawing out areas of overlap. However, they also described that due to differences across local authorities within the health board region, what was in place at the regional level had flexibility built in to allow for these local differences. In some cases, specific local plans were subsequently developed from a higher-level regional plan.

#### **3.4.2. Service delivery**

Collaboration in service delivery included a range of pathfinder organisations across early years, health, and adjacent services including perinatal, childcare, schools, health visiting and Healthy Child Wales, midwifery, nursing, mental health, speech and language, ALN, psychology, family workers, Flying Start, Families First, local authority Family Information Services, social services, housing services, libraries, and the third sector.

Pathfinder organisations found that the EYITP provided more opportunities for collaboration. These opportunities facilitated building and strengthening relationships and networks, understanding skills and roles of other organisations, improving communication, sharing information, pooling resources and sharing examples of best practice and lessons learned. The opportunity to collaborate with organisations in the third sector was regarded as important due to its strong links with local communities, enhancing the reach of services, and access to and links with other local services.

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#### Footnotes

[2] A condition of EYITP grant funding was to have a collaboration agreement between local authorities and health boards in place.

Collaborative working also supported delivering joined-up services through re-organising or creating new teams to bring different early years and health professionals together. Responsibilities were able to be shared or moved to best meet the contextual needs. In some cases, gaps or inefficiencies in service provision were reported due to gaps in collaboration from where services needed to work together but weren't yet, or where there was inconsistent or ineffective collaboration and communication.

### **3.4.3. Workforce development**

Pathfinder documents reported that collaboration supported the development and delivery of training for staff. Training courses and plans were sometimes designed and delivered collaboratively across services (such as speech and language specialists delivering training to schools and health visitors, or training between family services and health visitors on ALN). Training was sometimes rolled out to teams, services and organisations across a pathfinder area. There were also examples of training being delivered by external organisations (in the third sector, private sector or academia).

### **3.4.4. Data**

Pathfinder organisations reported collaboration on data workstreams between local authorities, health boards and, in some cases, with an external organisation (in the third sector or academia). This work included mapping of the datasets that capture early years services, early years cohort information, and needs, and introducing Data Sharing Agreements. This helped to identify data availability, accessibility, utility and feasibility of proposed regional approaches.

### **3.4.5. Collaboration with families**

Pathfinder organisations collaborated with families to understand their needs and perspectives on topics such as awareness of services, views on available support, barriers to support, and recommendations for improving support services. Collaboration was done through focus groups, interviews, consultations and surveys.

In some cases, the feedback fed into work undertaken by staff such as creating delivery plans or creating resources (for both delivery staff and families). Families were also involved in service delivery, such as being parent champions, developing support plans, developing content for online resources, and developing the early years vision for the region.

### **3.4.6. Factors supporting collaboration**

#### **3.4.6.1. Established partnerships**

Factors that aided system-wide collaboration included established and effective partnerships between local, regional and national organisations, opportunities to collaborate with Welsh Government, multi-agency input into strategy development and good governance structures. The EYITP provided the time and space for partnerships to develop, which facilitated collaborative working. In turn, the benefits of this included:

- better and more timely identification of support needs
- easier system navigation, more consistency and reduced inappropriate referrals for families
- improvements in service delivery and availability
- knowledge sharing
- monitoring and evaluation
- streamlined communication

#### **3.4.6.2. Dedicated roles to support collaboration**

Specific roles were essential for aiding collaboration. Pathfinder documents described how project coordinators made connections between services, arranged meetings, supported training and had oversight across delivery partners. Strategic roles helped to ensure different areas of a service worked together (such as health and education). Delivery roles helped to drive collaboration through ownership and responsibility of tasks and bringing staff together to deliver work packages.

#### **3.4.6.3. Supportive leadership**

Buy-in and support from senior leaders drove progress towards integration and transformation. Leaders reinforcing the relationship between local authorities and health boards was felt to be a sign that integration was improving.

#### **3.4.6.4. Practicalities**

On a local level, pathfinder organisations drew on practical factors that supported collaborative working, such as introducing regular meetings between specific organisations and expanding attendance at meetings, co-location, and networking opportunities such as conferences and workshops.

### **3.4.7. Barriers to collaboration**

#### **3.4.7.1. Organisational differences**

Organisational factors, such as different cultures, languages, priorities and approaches, changes to leadership and management, lack of buy-in, communication, and information sharing issues, were all reported to affect the ability for staff to work collaboratively.

#### **3.4.7.2. Limited capacity**

Rising pressures on services increases the workload of staff, leaving less time for collaboration. Poor engagement with collaboration and communication tools by some organisations made collaboration difficult and inconsistent. The exclusion of some services or sectors negatively impacted full collaboration under the EYITP. Examples were provided of the third sector feeling marginalised by the statutory sector, which reflects the feedback of some statutory sector organisations being reluctant to rely on third sector organisations due to the instability in their future. A lack of co-location space was another barrier to collaborative working.

#### **3.4.7.3. Lack of appropriate governance structures**

Factors that negatively affected inter-agency working included a lack of clear accountability structures and professional boundaries, and lack of understanding of other professions. In terms of governance, some pathfinder documents reported that inadequate structures and lack of a regionally applied, clear vision impeded collaboration.

#### **3.4.7.4. Complex funding landscape**

Having multiple funding streams sometimes created conflicting remits, which has made collaboration more challenging. Short-term funding mechanisms also compromised the willingness to invest in building relationships for some staff.

## **3.5. Governance**

Governance refers to the structures and processes for leading and managing strategy.

### **3.5.1. Descriptions of governance structures**

Pathfinder organisations created new governance structures for the EYITP that included central EYITP boards, top-level governance or lower-level governance, as described at the following sub-headings.

#### **3.5.1.1. Central board**

It was common for pathfinder organisations to adopt a regional-level EYITP board, with members including coordinators and project leads across local authorities and health boards. Other board representatives were from education, other early years services, third sector, public health, local councils, Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs), and regional delivery groups. The role of the board was to oversee delivery and provide strategic direction. Governance structures adjacent to the central board included topic-specific groups (for example, parenting), which often included members from the central board. These groups drew on governance and membership of other established services (such as Flying Start, midwifery, education and health). In some cases, this also involved local governance arrangements (such as local authority-level boards), which the regional groups were accountable to.

#### **3.5.1.2. Top-level governance**

Top-level governance sat above the central EYITP boards to provide oversight and ensure that early years transformation and integration fed into the broader regional work. The extent of top-level governance varied across pathfinder regions. Some described that the central board reported into existing governance structures; such as specific workstreams, Public Service Board (PSB) sub-groups, or RPBs. In general, these arrangements were perceived as working well. Other regions created a new top-level governance structure, such as a strategic steering group. These were more likely to be perceived as having issues such as lacking direction or strategic decision-making than other governance structures.

#### **3.5.1.3. Lower-level governance**

Lower-level governance structures included topic-specific or workstream groups with membership from service providers, local authorities, health boards and other organisations. In some cases, topic-specific groups were created under the EYITP, but in other cases they were existing groups that the pathfinder organisations identified as important to involve, leveraging the structure.

### **3.5.2. Factors supporting effective governance**

Enabling factors to effective governance included strong leadership, representative membership of governing groups, having a clear purpose, and evidence-based decision making.

#### **3.5.2.1. Strong leadership**

Governance factors related to enabling system-wide change included strong and stable leadership that provided a long-term, clear vision, purpose and clarity around structures, systems and approaches needed for successful transformation. Leaders needed to have a system focus and regional visibility to be effective. Accountability structures between the different levels of governance were important for providing strategic guidance and transparency.

Effective governance was evidenced by successful regional strategy. This involved balancing the tension between varied contexts, services and competing needs in different local authorities in the different pathfinder areas. Effective governance allowed for local flexibility while also providing an over-arching regional direction.

#### **3.5.2.2. Representative membership**

Governance structures needed to be representative of all relevant stakeholder organisations to ensure that leadership had a breadth of perspective. Clarity and shared understanding at the strategic level was seen as important for how this informs implementation of strategy, and so transformation work, across all levels of governance. The ability to leverage existing structures was another enabler for effective governance.

Regional work raised the profile of the early years sector with PSBs, RPBs and elected members. One PSB made commitments and prioritised targeted provision where it was most needed. Pathfinder documents reported that a sign of effective governance structures under the EYITP was increased visibility of early years work amongst local councils, RPBs and PSBs. Well-established links between boards and other governing bodies ensured consistency in service delivery across local authorities and other regional service deliverers. It was suggested that governing bodies should dovetail with existing partnerships to avoid duplication and wasting resource.

#### **3.5.2.3. Clear purpose**

Clarification on membership and purpose was important for effective governance. To facilitate governance procedures and priorities, coordination roles were required. Coordinators provided the capacity to oversee the programme and undertake planning, research and evaluation activities.

#### **3.5.2.4. Evidence-based decision making**

Project management approaches and tools supported effective governance. These included using software (such as Power BI) to collate information and make evidence-based decisions, and the use of regular reporting checkpoints.

### **3.5.3. Governance barriers**

Barriers to effective governance included overly complex governance structures, a lack of accountability by leaders, insufficient strategic direction and leadership, and not enough guidance and support from Welsh Government.

#### **3.5.3.1. Complex governance structures**

Misalignment of organisational objectives, competing priorities and lack of clarity caused complexity in governance structures under the EYITP. For one pathfinder area, a large amount of work had to go into mapping the governance and partnership structures due to their complexity. This mapping exercise was to identify how decision-making should operate amongst governance groups at the local and regional level, alongside other transformation and integration work and priorities. This complexity in governance structures caused system fragmentation in some cases, and partnerships that previously worked well were inhibited to make effective change.

The inability to leverage existing governance structures was another barrier for effective governance within the EYITP. An example provided was a lack of alignment with PSB objectives and not clarifying from the outset how this higher level of governance affects the EYITP work. Not fully understanding the bigger picture, such as how the steering group fit into an already complicated regional governance landscape, affected its ability to make effective decisions. Moreover, concerns were raised that decision-makers were too far removed from service delivery to fully appreciate the needs of families and staff.

A lack of clarity around roles, remit and responsibilities caused challenges in effective governance. Issues with membership also proved a challenge to effective governance. There were cases of health board representatives not joining steering groups until later in the programme or missing representation from professions entirely (examples provided were of midwifery and third sector). Changes in management structures often affected smaller local authorities more than larger ones, due to their reduced ability to absorb the impact of disruption.

#### **3.5.3.2. Lack of accountability**

Pathfinder documents noted gaps in leadership and accountability that impacted the delivery of the EYITP. This was visible through lack of decision-making by steering groups or central board decisions being made without the appropriate members present. There were complaints that central boards did not meet regularly enough to drive progress and engage with service providers. PSBs were also criticised in some regions for their lack of leadership and communication with stakeholders.

For some pathfinder organisations, these gaps in leadership and accountability meant that, at the end of the EYITP funding period, there was failure to maintain enthusiasm for integration and transformation or implement recommendations. This impacted the legacy of the EYITP.

### **3.5.3.3. Insufficient strategic direction and leadership**

A lack of coherent vision or strategy was another governance challenge. In some cases, there appeared to be no regional early years strategy at all. Documentation noted the need to create a regional early years strategy, including ensuring this brings together all the relevant strategies or plans across the local authorities and health board in the different regions.

Specific challenges in creating regional strategies were reported, such as variations in service provision, both within local authorities (for example, variance between urban and rural areas) and across local authorities. This also included imbalances in representation across local authorities in the health board region where it was felt the direction of work or priorities lent itself more to the needs and context of the larger local authorities, due to staff visibility in governance structures and there being more services based there. There was an instance where a lack of strategy across the local authorities in a health board region was due to focusing on using the funding on project work, rather than using the funding as a mechanism for change and integration, with a lack of setting out from the start what wider strategic transformation they aimed to achieve.

On leadership, one pathfinder organisation complained about lack of clarity or consistency pertaining to structures, vision and strategy. Lack of senior leader attendance or drive within governance structures was also reported; in some cases, senior leadership buy-in and direction was felt to reduce over the duration of the programme.

### **3.5.3.4. Governance from Welsh Government**

The most frequently cited issue relating to EYITP governance under Welsh Government was insufficient guidance and support. Pathfinder organisations sometimes felt there was a lack of clarity and guidance on what Welsh Government wanted to achieve: the strategic direction and vision for early years integration. This included a reported lack of ongoing support. Pathfinder organisations also struggled with low engagement from Welsh Government towards the end of the programme (after the COVID-19 pandemic), with fewer meetings to bring pathfinder organisations together.

Pathfinder documents also reported issues with timescales. This included delays in confirming funding. Also, too-short timescales to develop and submit business plans to Welsh Government, which affected the development of strategic objectives.

Issues with the monitoring and reporting requirements set in Welsh Government guidance were raised in pathfinder documents. This included that these requirements and timescales were unclear and lacking enough guidance. Also, the amount and frequency of information was too much. Finally, another governance challenge was a lack of linking the EYITP to other Welsh Government priorities.

Other governance issues wider than the EYITP that pathfinder organisations experienced with Welsh Government were overly complicated governance due to multiple funding streams, and having different indicators set for local authorities and health boards (which functioned as a barrier to regionally integrated working).

## **3.6. Staff**

The theme of 'staff' covered points relating to the workforce, which largely focused on capacity issues such as recruitment, retention, and upskilling. The types of roles that staff undertook as part of the EYITP was also prominent, as was the impact of funding ending.

### **3.6.1. Capacity building**

Recruitment, induction and training were general activities undertaken relating to staff. Successful recruitment increased service provision, particularly where there were specialist skill requirements (for example, working with fathers). It was noted that the demand of integration work required more staff due to increased workloads. Pathfinder organisations adopted various methods to address recruitment challenges. Recruitment processes were often longer than anticipated. Where there were delays in recruiting and inducting new staff, there were no data captured to show how service gaps were being addressed.

Training covered a broad range of activities, including upskilling, mentoring and developing career progression pathways. The EYITP provided an opportunity for already highly skilled professionals to develop new skills that they would not have otherwise been able to gain. Some organisations reported that consistent support was provided as part of the training package, including post-training support. High turnover of staff in the early years sector meant that offering ongoing training and support was essential under the EYITP.

Training was often developed with multi-disciplinary input and collaboration, to ensure training programmes met the needs of the EYITP. In one area, a specific role was developed to identify the training needs of staff. Managers were often responsible for reviewing training to ensure it was relevant and appropriate for their staff members. Some pathfinder organisations reported that underspend in their annual EYITP budgets were invested back into staff training. In one case, EYITP funding was maximised through a dedicated role (tied to a specific local authority) who led, rolled out and delivered the training programme across the region. Training sessions were held in multiple locations across the region to increase accessibility for staff.

### **3.6.2. Impact of the funding ending**

The impact of EYITP funding ending was significant for some staff, particularly if roles were funded by EYITP. Documentation reported that some posts were removed fully while others were absorbed into other programmes (for example, Flying Start). With the removal of posts, there was a loss of knowledge, skills, relationships, coordination and momentum to achieve EYITP goals.

### **3.6.3. Factors supporting staff**

Enabling factors supporting the theme of 'staff' included successful recruitment and retention practices, dedicated roles, opportunities for training and development, partnership working and positive staff morale.

#### **3.6.3.1. Successful recruitment and retention practices**

Documents reported how efficient recruitment benefited the EYITP overall, because the programme could progress with the right people in post and alleviate capacity pressures. They said that the EYITP facilitated recruitment into the early years sector due to its positive reputation. Successful recruitment was enabled by targeted approaches, promoting the programme and ways of working to attract applicants. The popularity of the 'ways of working' under the EYITP supported retention.

When recruiting staff was not possible, organisations described changes in working style that helped with capacity and workload (particularly for health visitors). Adaptations included single referral routes and training other professions to deliver certain assessments.

#### **3.6.3.2. Roles**

A vast range of roles were mentioned in pathfinder documentation as being involved in the EYITP. This included roles that were directly funded by EYITP and those that were involved but not funded. Funded posts included coordinators, community engagement roles, workforce training/development roles, trainers, and specialist data analysts. Non-funded roles that played a significant role in transforming and integrating early years services included health professionals (such as health visitors, speech, language and communication therapists, mental health workers, midwives, registered nurses, public health partners), childcare providers (for example, nursery workers), administrators, data specialists, community workers, training providers and leaders (such as strategic leads, workstream leads, regional leads). Volunteers also contributed to the work under the EYITP.

Many pathfinder documents described the benefits of certain roles either funded through, or working as part of, the EYITP. For example, the coordinators were described as 'pivotal' to the entire lifespan of the programme, from reviewing to planning and service delivery. One strength of the coordinator role was being able to take an objective look at the overall picture and focus on developing the vision for the region. Coordinators worked flexibly, were action-focused, and acted as conduits between services and families, which was crucial to the programme's success. Specific health roles providing services were described positively, including clinical psychologists, community nurses and specialist health visitors. Other roles involved in transformation also included midwifery leads, clinical leads, parental engagement officers, service managers, planning, development and monitoring officers, and council officers.

Other roles that were mentioned as being instrumental in the overall success of the EYITP included workforce focused roles, who identified training needs and contributed to overall upskilling of the early years workforce. Project management roles, such as the Senior Responsible Officer, were important for building and maintaining momentum and engagement throughout the programme and ensuring data was collected consistently.

Posts supporting development and coordination of training were specifically useful for staff professional development.

A significant factor that enabled system-wide transformation and integration was increased understanding amongst professionals and practitioners of each other's roles and capabilities.

#### **3.6.3.3. Opportunities for training and development**

The development in the early years workforce under the EYITP was thought to be a main enabler to its success. This was helped by the significant increase in the training offer, the training offer being relevant to the needs of staff and having dedicated roles to support professional development. Managers were also vital in supporting and enabling staff development.

Pathfinder documents described the broad range of training they provided to the workforce during the EYITP. This included training on the areas of perinatal mental health, speech, language and communication, child development, parent wellbeing, sleep, sensory, and continence. Training being delivered in a coordinated and collaborative way supported staff development across the early years sector. Coordinating training meant ensuring staff across organisations, teams and professions had equal access to the same training, or opportunities to share knowledge.

#### **3.6.3.4. Partnership working**

Staff working together and building partnerships was crucial to EYITP success. There were very experienced staff involved in the programme who shared knowledge and helped to build good working relationships with other professionals. One document reported that third sector partners felt that the programme facilitated the relationship between them and the statutory sector.

#### **3.6.3.5. Morale**

Documentation shows that staff feeling valued was important. Feeling valued was the result of various practices and approaches, including staff understanding how their role fit in the wider system and across teams, feeling like their feedback or ideas are welcomed and considered, and seeing passion or commitment from those in leadership roles (such as coordinators).

#### **3.6.4. Barriers for staff**

Barriers for staff included stability and sustainability issues, recruitment and retention issues, the inability to meet training requirements, capacity issues and demographic challenges.

##### **3.6.4.1. Stability and sustainability issues**

Reports showed that the stability and sustainability of transformation and integration efforts were jeopardised by short-term funding because of what could realistically be achieved in the time of the EYITP. Challenges with recruitment, retention, and capacity created instability in teams by inhibiting the development of long-term professional relationships and communities.

One pathfinder document noted the omission of an early years workforce plan to be a significant barrier to identifying and supporting the professional development needs of staff working on system integration.

A lack of buy-in and capacity from senior management and leaders, combined with a lack of knowledge on main issues 'on the ground', was evident through the absence of momentum and drive to implement transformation and integration in one pathfinder area. Strategic direction abated with specific roles no longer in post. Another barrier was a lack of clarity of the responsibilities and boundaries of certain roles. This included strategic roles and specialist roles.

##### **3.6.4.2. Recruitment and retention issues**

Issues with recruitment and retention were a commonly cited barrier. Some pathfinder organisations reported that recruiting staff is a long process and sometimes they faced delays, which does not align with the short-term nature of the programme. High staff turnover, citing short- and fixed-term contracts, zero hours contracts, and pay were also issues relating to staff.

Pathfinder documents described how issues with recruitment affected delivery. Most commonly, as recruitment took a long time, this delayed delivery and meant that what could be achieved in the timeframe was limited. They also described how issues with retention affected delivery, including lack of engagement from some teams, a loss of knowledge or learning, or a loss of specialist roles leading to gaps in specialist services.

##### **3.6.4.3. Inability to meet all training requirements**

Pathfinder documents also reported issues with training, which, in some cases, were linked to the issues with recruitment and retention as high levels of turnover mean there was demand for upskilling new staff. Other issues with training included difficulties creating training plans which addressed the diversity across workforce needs, staff unable to attend training due to low capacity, and managerial de-prioritisation of training post-EYITP. Creating training plans at the regional level was lacking, as there tended to be a focus on organisational level training plans.

#### **3.6.4.4. Capacity issues**

Limited staff capacity, both in terms of high workload and understaffing, meant projects were not fully able to deliver on EYITP objectives. Staff workloads across many early years' professions were at full capacity already, which meant that there was limited time to plan and deliver additional services. The capacity to co-produce services for children and families was also lacking for this reason. Sometimes, staff felt overwhelmed by the need to deliver the piloting and integration activities in addition to their usual roles.

#### **3.6.4.5. Demographic challenges**

Pathfinder documents noted the impact of an ageing workforce. The ageing workforce featured flexibility around retirement and returning to work later, which was positive for employees, but had some negative (and unintended) consequences. These included a substantial proportion of part-time workers, instability, and inconsistencies around retaining experienced staff, and needing to re-train staff.

Moreover, there was a challenge identified with recruiting Welsh speakers and promoting Welsh language and culture in early years services. There were inconsistencies found nationally and locally in the availability of Welsh language service provision. This issue was more notable in areas where the proportion of the population who speak Welsh is larger, and therefore the demand for Welsh services is higher. In instances where Welsh speakers were recruited, poor retention rates (due to the instability of short-term funded roles) meant the challenge was ongoing.

For regions that shared a border with England, there was an additional challenge identified with the need for cross-border working. This added a layer of complexity to service delivery, requiring knowledge of how English authorities worked and understanding the needs of families living in border areas.

## **3.7. Funding**

### **3.7.1. Core transformation and integration**

The work that local areas did because of the funding enabled wider transformation throughout regions. Whilst the funding was short-term, it still allowed pathfinders to create the core way of working and establish it to continue without funding. EYITP funding facilitated the projects that improved access to services for families. Generally, pathfinder organisations felt that EYITP funding supported service delivery, such as being able to contribute funding for certain practitioner roles or being able to provide groups and activities that families can access for free. Funding also supported collaboration by enabling services to come together and work in partnership.

### **3.7.2. Areas of investment**

Pathfinder documents identified several areas that had been important for investment during the programme, including training, recruitment, marketing and service delivery.

### **3.7.3. Impact of COVID-19**

Financial challenges were caused by external factors. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic meant that implementation was temporarily paused and funding was diverted, as reported in pathfinder documents. This influenced pathfinder organisations' ability to plan and deliver services as intended.

### **3.7.4. Impact of the funding ending**

Pathfinder reports drew on many implications of EYITP funding ending. The most frequently cited impact was on sustainability; pathfinder organisations were concerned about the sustainability of service delivery, data systems, staff retention, momentum for the vision of system integration, and future planning. Several risks were identified, including a risk to collaboration and of returning to pre-programme ways of working (meaning in siloes), upscaling the programme, and a negative impact on families accessing services. In some cases, documents noted services would revert to the pre-EYITP offer, such as being limited to certain geographic areas or core responsibilities only.

Since funding ended, pathfinders have had to be creative in maximising funds, reviewing budgets, and seeking out other funding streams to continue working towards system integration.

### **3.7.5. Funding enablers**

#### **3.7.5.1. Maximising resources**

Pathfinder documents described maximising resources to be able to deliver the best service possible within the limitations of the EYITP. Ways in which pathfinder organisations had saved money or maximised resources included:

- providing training in-house, rather than outsourcing
- bringing funding streams together, for example from health, mental health and academia
- working collaboratively across services within regions to pool budgets
- exploring options to redistribute and realign budgets to deliver services
- streamlining service delivery so that more families and children could access services but without additional costs to pathfinder organisations
- adapting strategy models and plans to address issues caused by financial challenges as they arose

#### **3.7.5.2. Budgeting successes**

Pathfinder documents also described successes relating to training budgets. Delivering training internally or taking a strategic approach to the training offered across the early years workforce provided value for money.

### **3.7.6. Funding barriers**

Funding barriers included the impact of short-term funding, complex and inflexible funding processes, insufficient financial oversight, and the impact of these on both families and organisations.

#### **3.7.6.1. Impact of short-term funding**

By far the most frequently cited challenge to system integration and transformation was short-term funding. The lack of longer-term funding impacted organisations' ability to meet integration and transformation outcomes. Pathfinder organisations thought that only having funding for a short, fixed term sent the message that early years integration is a 'nice to have' rather than a mechanism for real change. Any change that had been achieved under the EYITP was thought to be at risk of being lost with the limited time in which EYITP funding was available due to the pressure on core services. This was a risk to the long-term sustainability and legacy of the EYITP.

The lack of long-term funding was felt to have caused instability in staffing, high turnover and reduced capacity for long-term partnership working. Documents often reported that the short-term funding was not adequate to solve the long-term goal of system integration. This led some to believe that Welsh Government was not taking the task seriously, especially when compared to more 'significant' and longer-term funds.

Having fixed funding to each financial year limited flexibility of pathfinder organisations to do effective long-term resource planning and required them to regularly re-evaluate resource allocation. Having such short timeframes for funding was felt to have added a sense of urgency to spend money, instead of taking the time to really understand where it would best be used.

#### **3.7.6.2. Complex funding processes**

Pathfinder organisations found the general funding process lengthy and complex. The complexity was exacerbated by the existence of multiple funding streams, which pathfinder documents described as 'confusing'. Funding streams and policies cited included: [the Childcare Offer](#), [Flying Start](#), [Families First](#), [Healthy Child Wales](#), [First 1000 Days](#), [Integrated Care Fund](#), [Building a Healthier Wales](#), the [Supporting People Programme \(pdf\)](#), [Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care](#), statutory service funding and voluntary sector projects. Each funding source has its own criteria for qualification, which created complexity for both parents and professionals. Additionally, separate funding streams were reported to cause duplication and affect the quality of support offered to children and families.

#### **3.7.6.3. Inflexible funding processes**

Documents reported that inflexibilities with EYITP funding caused issues, for example not being able to divert funds to the next financial year. In instances where there was underspend in the first year, compromises had to be made in year two such as employing staff on short-term contracts. Service delivery, recruitment, retention and future planning activities were impeded by tight timescales and short-term funding. Pathfinder organisations wanted clearer guidance on funding from Welsh Government to enable long-term planning, to improve staff retention and attract experienced and knowledgeable staff. This was a

particular issue for third sector organisations, who needed longer-term and more funding to be able play a substantial role in the region.

#### **3.7.6.4. Financial oversight**

It was felt that the financial oversight for the EYITP was too onerous and disproportionate to the value of the grant. Many fed back that the way the EYITP funding was handled by Welsh Government caused challenges. For example, funding implementation delays meant that pathfinder organisations had to spend a year's worth of funding in a much shorter timeframe, which significantly affected their ability to progress towards programme goals and recruit and train staff. Delays in confirming funding encouraged risk averse behaviour by some pathfinder organisations, so that project delivery did not begin or continue until funding confirmation was received. Delays in funding decisions also limited the thinking around exit strategies, which negatively impacted the legacy of the EYITP. Pathfinder organisations felt that the expectation from Welsh Government to continue transformation and integration work after the funding ended was unrealistic and undervalued the work pathfinders had achieved so far.

In some instances, the impact of short-term funding and funding ending resulted in lack of engagement from higher management. Subsequently, staff involved in service delivery received less support.

#### **3.7.6.5. Impact on families**

Pathfinder documents expressed concern about meeting the cost of support needed by children and families from existing budgets going forward. They also worried about outcomes for children and families resulting from unidentified need, loss of relationships and reduced trust after the EYITP funding ended. For detail on positive outcomes for families, please refer to section 3.9 'Families'.

#### **3.7.6.6. Impact on organisations**

The impact of the funding ending on service delivery organisations was significant. Organisations were necessitated to evaluate all roles funded under the EYITP in terms of benefit to children and families, and difficult decisions made about which roles would no longer exist.

Some pathfinder organisations felt that announcements by Welsh Government around the funding ending were unexpected, which meant they were unable to prepare and align their work with other Welsh Government workstreams.

## **3.8. Data**

### **3.8.1. Activities undertaken**

Activities relating to data reported by pathfinder documents included service mapping, planning and development, developing assessment tools, monitoring and evaluation, identifying existing data sources, project management, making recommendations and dissemination.

### **3.8.2. Tools**

Tools that were used by pathfinder organisations for data-related activities (such as monitoring and evaluation) included the Vanguard system, the EIF (now known as Foundations) Maternity and Early Years Maturity Matrix, Power BI, Survey Monkey, Prince2, Talk Boost, and theory of change.

### **3.8.3. Needs identified**

Pathfinder documents identified numerous needs relating to data, including data collection, maximising existing resources, measuring impact and collaboration.

### **3.8.4. Data collection and analysis**

Many pathfinder organisations shared the issue of evidence gaps, which affected their ability to allocate resource where it was most needed or apply it to how it was most useful. Some organisations reported that quantitative data was more scarce than qualitative data, which was sourced from widespread participation and feedback.

A need was identified to have more robust data that could demonstrate impact on areas of work like referral pathways, collaboration, children and families' experiences, integration of services and needs and demands. There was some concern that data collection was not established early enough under the EYITP to be able to evidence outcomes, including the collection and use of baseline data. This was felt to be due to the focus on mobilisation in the early stages of implementation. However, some pathfinder organisations did establish intended outcomes from the start, either through outcomes framework or theory of change.

Many data sources were suggested in pathfinder documentation as useful to be able to monitor and evaluate EYITP aims. These include quantitative sources such as:

- the Census
- the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC)
- the Parent and Carer Survey
- postcode data
- birth data
- outpatient referrals data

- the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation

These also include qualitative sources such as:

- parent feedback questionnaires
- staff feedback questionnaires
- workshops
- case notes
- consultations
- data from other services, such as the local authority Family Information Service

### **3.8.5. Measuring impact**

The lack of data to measure impact was an issue raised in multiple pathfinder evaluations. This issue meant that pathfinder organisations were unable to know whether projects and the programme had been successful and how. It was also difficult to establish value-for-money without the relevant information. Documentation revealed that outcomes and impacts needed to be identified by multiple professions and organisations working in collaboration. This needed to be done upfront and kept in focus throughout the programme.

It is important to capture impact to know whether the EYITP made positive changes for children and families. Some felt the short-term nature of the programme made it more difficult to measure impact, as many desired impacts would likely be seen over the longer-term.

Suggested measures about training included:

- the number of staff on training courses
- attendance on courses from different services or sectors
- participation and completion rates
- feedback scores
- skills enhancement metrics
- application of learning in practices
- the number of opportunities for professional development

Suggested measures about families included:

- the number of parents accessing community-based workshops
- the number of themes covered in community-based workshops
- the number of parents accessing 1:1 support
- the number of children diverted from accessing neurodevelopmental pathways
- parental feedback on workshop content and delivery
- parental feedback on advice, guidance and support
- distance travelled when engaging with services
- confidence levels pre- and post- intervention
- the number of contact sessions with early years professionals
- the percentage of children achieving age-expected outcomes, pre- and post-intervention

Suggested measures about services included:

- the percentage of agencies who report improved coordination of service delivery
- an analysis of needs variation across services and areas
- the number of referrals to specialist services
- the percentage of agencies who report improved knowledge and understanding of integration

There were also other areas where measures were suggested. This included recruitment and retention rates for staff related impacts. Cost benefit analyses were suggested to measure value for money. Suggested measures about strategy included long-term impact of strategic goals.

### **3.8.6. Maximising resources**

Pathfinder documents noted that there was a real need to maximise resources by avoiding duplication, removing waste in the system, streamlining and early intervention. These efforts were previously prevented by lack of funds, resources and training, but the EYITP provided an opportunity to focus on these issues.

### **3.8.7. Collaboration**

Pathfinder documents noted that collaboration between pathfinder organisations was needed for effective data monitoring. This included working groups, strategic leads, the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) project, Welsh Government, local authorities, early years service managers, Nesta, data monitoring officers and specialist

data analysts. Some work was undertaken towards achieving collaboration, albeit at different development stages.

### **3.8.8. Factors supporting data-related activities**

Despite the many issues identified with the ability to collect, share, analyse and disseminate data by pathfinder documentation, there was some evidence of good practice. Had more local authorities and health boards been able to adopt these practices, system-wide integration and transformation may have made further progress.

Examples of these practices that were cited in documents included comprehensive data collection, effective dissemination, ease of data accessibility, staff capacity to collect and analyse data, consistency in data reporting, functional IT systems, ability to share data, quality assurance processes being in place and compliance with regulations (such as UK GDPR).

#### **3.8.8.1. Data collection practices**

Pathfinder documents described being able to identify population (family and children) needs and map the availability of services under the EYITP. Information systems used in service delivery enabled staff to store and access comprehensive datasets. Front-line staff were able to input data directly into the relevant system, which could be seen by other professionals working with that family. Having the appropriate procedures and training in place for staff to use these systems was essential.

#### **3.8.8.2. Data sharing practices**

Data sharing between services, particularly local authorities and health boards was positive. These practices were underpinned by privacy notices, data sharing agreements and information sharing protocols. Reported benefits of improvements in information systems and data sharing included better identification of families' needs in the area and families not having to repeat themselves.

#### **3.8.8.3. Monitoring and evaluation enablers**

Successes around monitoring and evaluation included setting measures and monitoring outcomes and impact of interventions. Decision making was supported because of access to informative data and analyses using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

### **3.8.9. Barriers to effective data usage**

Issues around data were vast and varied. They had a substantial impact on pathfinders' ability to evidence success from the EYITP. Frequently cited barriers to system-wide progress were:

- data collection issues, such as no data collected at all, a lack of baseline data, or low response rates
- analysis issues, for example where data was collected but not analysed
- data quality issues, such as inconsistencies in data collection, or evidence gaps
- data protection issues, such as finding GDPR compliance restrictive, or being unable to share data securely
- sampling issues, such as self-selection bias with surveys and feedback forms
- dissemination issues, including data analysis not being disseminated
- systemic issues, such as progress around data being dependent on individuals rather than systematic processes being in place
- IT issues, such as not being able to run system updates, lack of a common data platform, limitations of existing systems to run analysis, difficulty sourcing information, data sharing, inadequate data storing options, or difficult navigation

Many of these issues continued under the EYITP due to being too time consuming or expensive to resolve, for example upgrading IT and introducing new systems. An additional barrier around data was the lack of consideration for evaluation and measuring outcomes from the outset of projects. This meant that evaluation was often done at the end of projects, meaning data was untimely and had limited utility.

## **3.9. Families**

This section draws on the perspectives of pathfinder organisations and families that were included in evaluations and assessments of EYITP projects.

### **3.9.1. Engagement**

The document review found that families who engaged and received support under the EYITP experienced benefits including relationships with professionals, volunteering opportunities, information and signposting, and access to resources.

The EYITP was a supportive mechanism for building relationships between professionals and families. Evaluation documents show that the EYITP enabled professionals to reach a broader and more diverse range of families. Having different types of contact and communication options (examples include online, telephone, face-to-face) was beneficial for building trust, particularly with more traditionally marginalised parent groups. Ease of accessibility to support encouraged parents to engage with services.

Information sharing capabilities allowed staff to build early relationships with families and target support more effectively. Families felt most well-supported when their voice was heard and they input into the services they received. Professionals creating a welcoming, open and non-judgemental environment with families was integral to building strong relationships. Building these relationships between families and professionals was important for participation and engagement; families were more likely to be proactive in seeking support when these relationships already exist.

The EYITP also facilitated relationships between families. Parents who were new to communities found groups to be helpful to settling into an area and getting support. Families valued being able to connect with other families facing similar challenges, and this helped many to develop friendship groups.

Pathfinder organisations reported that some groups were less engaged with services, including families with neurodiversity and mental health needs, and fathers.

### **3.9.2. Accessing information**

Families were often unsure of what services and resources were available to them, had difficulties finding information about what is available, and felt that services and resources should be better publicised. Reports noted that families tended to know what support was available from their peers via word of mouth. However, an issue with relying on peer information was that this can be inaccurate or incomplete information. To help this, in some cases peer support was formalised via parent volunteers (such as parent champions).

The local authority Family Information Services, family workers, and health visitors were also noted as ways families could find out information and advice. However, there still appeared to be issues which created difficulties in finding out information, for example that families were not aware of the Family Information Service. Community organisations were noted as being able to promote support, but outreach was inconsistent across organisations. While reports indicated social media was sometimes used to provide

information, restrictive internal processes impeded the use of social media for some organisations (like local authorities).

There was positive feedback from community groups and family centres where the Welsh language was supported and encouraged. Parents valued feeling supported to actively communicate with their children in Welsh, which developed children's language acquisition skills. This finding applied to both Welsh speaking and non-Welsh speaking parents. However, other areas reported a lack of provision of Welsh resources and services in Welsh speaking communities. Other gaps in specific areas were also noted, for example neurodiversity and ALN support.

### **3.9.3. Accessing services**

#### **3.9.3.1. Physical access**

Community groups, both pre-existing and ones formed during the EYITP, played a large role in the success of the EYITP at a local level. Several pathfinder organisations reported on the ways in which community groups had benefitted families in their area. One element of this success was that groups were free to attend. This was particularly important in areas with higher rates of poverty, but also for women experiencing financial challenges during maternity leave. Participants of community groups had provided feedback as part of some pathfinder evaluations, and these showed that the groups offered a safe space to access support and learn about child development. These groups were beneficial for not only parents, but also children, who were able to socially interact with other children. In some cases, community groups were also open to extended family.

However, access to services was sometimes inhibited by physical barriers. For example, the location where services were held, low availability of community venues, inconvenient locations, and difficulties finding suitable venues in rural communities affected accessibility of services. Families' ability to travel affected their access to services, particularly in rural areas where dependency on a car or public transport was necessary. The costs associated with travel prevented some families from accessing services. Yet the work done in some communities to improve access to services for children and families living in rural areas was described as 'creative', 'strategic' and 'flexible'. Efforts were made to bring services to some rural communities through pop-ups, community hubs, mobile services and teams of health and parenting professionals working within the community.

Availability of childcare across early years services was inconsistent, for example if parents and carers were attending courses, groups or services. Often, services and groups were offered during weekdays and working hours, so working parents and carers were unable to attend.

The outreach and referral policy adopted in some regions was recognised as appropriately and efficiently supporting care leavers and those leaving safeguarding support. Support was available across the whole area, not just in Flying Start areas as was the case prior to the EYITP. As a result of the EYITP, more children received support at home as well as in educational settings.

### **3.9.3.2. Referrals and navigating services**

Pathfinder evaluation shows that, in some areas, referrals for assessments were timely. Children also benefitted from access to earlier support under the EYITP. Screening and early needs identification has led to interventions being put in place earlier for children.

Some families had challenges navigating the complex landscape of early years services and referrals. Inefficiency in the referral process varied across pathfinder areas. In some cases, families had to self-refer from signposted services. A lack of information about eligibility criteria for services and availability of support meant the onus was placed on families to contact and follow-up with different service providers.

In other areas, referrals were standardised via a single form that was assessed by professionals to identify the family's needs. However, referral forms and assessments were reportedly complex and burdensome for some services (like community support), and this created delays in the referral process. Referral pathways were not always understood by local authority or health board staff, especially where changes had occurred.

### **3.9.3.3. Diagnosis support**

There were also issues reported relating to access to support around diagnoses. Firstly, issues in receiving the diagnosis. In one instance long waiting times for diagnoses meant support is delayed with limited or no access to information or support while waiting, and the system was reported as hard to navigate for parents.

Also, there were issues in receiving support post-diagnosis. Pathfinder organisations reported that receiving a diagnosis may not necessarily mean there are resources or services available. In some cases, next steps were unclear for families. Specific gaps in resources and services included ALN or neurodiversity and speech and language.

#### **3.9.4. Service delivery**

Issues were reported that affected the quality of services delivered, including variability in the support or services offered and received, families interacting with multiple services at any one time, services being too short-term to meet family needs, limited service capacity, poor visibility of services in communities, difficulties contacting service staff, and a lack of innovation (such as relying on outdated practices and tools).

#### **3.9.5. Volunteers**

Some parents became involved in volunteering for early years in their local communities under the EYITP, either as champions or as leaders or facilitators of community groups. Those who undertook volunteering roles experienced increased confidence, communication skills and knowledge, which for some helped gain employment opportunities.

##### **3.9.5.1. Parent champions**

Some pathfinder organisations saw parents become champions who supported local activities, did outreach in the community, provided signposting to other parents and other peer support. Parent champions were also involved in disseminating information to compliment other early years work occurring in the region; this peer-led engagement encouraged other parents and carers to feel more confident in accessing statutory support.

##### **3.9.5.2. Parent-led groups**

Various groups were set up under the EYITP that were either wholly or partly run by parent volunteers. These groups incorporated support for parents of neurodiverse children and ALN, family information services, and outreach services.

### **3.10. Sustainability**

Sustainability in the context of the EYITP refers to the feasibility of integration and transformation work in the long term. This includes beyond the period of programme funding. Common topics reported by pathfinder documentation include plans to continue integration and transformation efforts without EYITP funding, needs for sustainable working, supporting factors and barriers to sustainability.

#### **3.10.1. Plans to continue integration and transformation work**

On continuing the work around integration and transformation without EYITP funding, documents described a range of planned outcomes that included: specific plans to take activity forwards, the intention to take activity forwards, and stopping activity completely. There was a mixture of elements continuing and ending, both within individual pathfinders and between multiple pathfinders.

Examples of work being taken forward included: activities relating to support offered (schools, community groups, parenting), data (systems, information sharing), monitoring population needs, and digital content (websites, communication campaigns). Specific roles were taken forwards, such as family support workers and speech and language specialists.

Activities that pathfinder organisations intended to continue included: support for families (for example, additional Healthy Child Wales contacts, perinatal support, parent champions), work on the topic of speech, language and communication, support for the workforce (for example, training on ALN, recruitment practices, and the retention of roles including coordinators, leads and service facing roles), data (including data gathering, systems, information sharing, and expert job roles) and continuation of governance structures. Pathfinder organisations often recognised the importance of continuing this activity, but there was uncertainty at the time of writing on how this would be possible.

Pathfinder documents also described that some activity would likely stop or was on hold due to the loss of the EYITP funding and staff capacity. Examples of areas impacted included support for families, retention of specific roles in the workforce, workforce training, digital and data system development, and strategy development.

#### **3.10.2. Needs for sustainable working**

For integration and transformation work to be sustainable in the long term, documents noted the need to draw on lessons learned and examples of best practice. Senior level buy-in and decision-making on sustainability measures were felt necessary going forward, particularly without EYITP funding. This included activities to update existing strategies, re-assessing priorities or developing new strategies where necessary to explore feasible and sustainable options with reduced resources.

There was also a need identified for Welsh Government to provide direction to support sustainability in the early years sector. Specific areas identified included for a national approach to improving data systems, an updated strategy on the future of early years integration and transformation, and greater coherence of Welsh Government grants, plans

and strategies that relate to early years. In some cases, pathfinder organisations were reluctant to continue integration and transformation work without this guidance from Welsh Government.

### **3.10.3. Factors supporting sustainability**

Enablers for sustainability in the early years sector included successful engagement strategies, effective governance and leadership, regularly reviewing impact, continued partnership working, investing in staff development and maximising resources.

#### **3.10.3.1. Engagement strategies**

System-wide sustainability was supported by successful engagement strategies between professionals and families. These have helped to overcome some structural inequalities such as deprivation and language barriers. Focusing on system change removed the dependency on individuals. A core way of working was developed and embedded under the EYITP, which removed some dependency on Welsh Government.

#### **3.10.3.2. Governance and leadership**

Pathfinder documents noted the importance of governance in ensuring sustainability. Through effective leadership and partnership, a clear vision and purpose facilitated long-term system change in some areas. RPBs and PSBs were cited as a suitable mechanism to continue driving integration and transformation work across regions. Specific early years boards, groups or meetings originally set up under the EYITP were considered important to continue driving the work forward, particularly at the regional level.

#### **3.10.3.3. Reviewing impact**

Regular review of pathfinder legacy and impact enabled the best working practices to be maintained and recommendations to be taken forward for a sustainable future. A strength of one pathfinder area was testing the viability and sustainability of approaches to allow integration and transformation work to continue.

#### **3.10.3.4. Partnership working**

Cross-profession partnerships produced significant developments in shared knowledge, which positively impacted service delivery in the long-term (for example, reducing inappropriate referrals). There were instances where effective early intervention caused a reduction in escalation to services needed to treat more serious conditions. The knock-on effect of this was better use of resources and saving money over the long term, meaning services are more sustainable. Maintaining relationships that staff had developed during the EYITP would support sustainable integration and transformation into the future. Some pathfinder organisations noted that the dedication and drive of staff had helped to maintain integration and transformation work so far, despite the ongoing challenges to sustainability.

### **3.10.3.5. Investment in staff development**

Sustainable change was also brought about by investment in training and professional development, leading to overall upskilling of staff. Skills, training and development of staff in the early years sector was felt to be essential for sustainable integration and transformation. Examples were provided on how to achieve this with minimal resourcing, including ‘train the trainer’ (where one person completes external training and then passes learning on to others in-house), developing online learning, or continuing to employ workforce training plans that were developed under the EYITP.

### **3.10.3.6. Maximising resource**

To continue with integration and transformation work, pathfinder organisations drew on resources outside the EYITP, such as alternative funding streams or different programmes. To support work around data and digital capabilities, documents cited examples included working with a specific regional digital programme and with a third sector organisation in the policy and research sphere. On service delivery, examples were provided for continuing activity through other early years programmes (such as Flying Start), including moving frontline staff into these programmes.

### **3.10.4. Barriers to sustainability**

Barriers to sustainability included the short-term nature of the EYITP, uncertainty and instability, and engagement issues.

#### **3.10.4.1. Short-termism**

Some pathfinder organisations felt that Welsh Government was trying to solve a long-term, generational problem with an unsustainable, short-term funding solution. Even where good working practices had been embedded to meet current needs, societal issues will change over time. The system needs to be good at predicting and responding quickly to societal change to allow for early intervention, and without ongoing integration work it was feared this would be unachievable.

It was highlighted that transformation and integration is an ambitious and lengthy process that would only be feasible over a long period of time.

#### **3.10.4.2. Uncertainty and instability**

The lack of long-term funding available for the EYITP raised many concerns for pathfinder organisations. Some reported concern in the instability caused by staff turnover, which impeded relationship building between organisations. In addition, the knowledge acquired by these staff members risked being lost with high turnover. There were serious concerns raised by multiple pathfinder documents around the sustainability of the work already undertaken by staff employed specifically to manage integration and transformation (such as coordinators), whose posts would no longer be funded. It was felt that without dedicated staff, the work would not continue because staff at pathfinder organisations do not have the capacity to take on the extra work.

#### **3.10.4.3. Engagement issues**

The short-term, temporary nature of the programme affected the stability and security of early years work and the willingness of potential partners to engage. This was thought to be a particular issue for third sector partners, who needed resources to source funding through bid applications or remodelling services to meet funding requirements. This could mean that services were not best suited to the needs of users, compromising the sustainability of services.

The ending of funding also resulted in cases of reduced engagement from senior management, which in turn affected overall support for continuing integration and transformation work. Many pathfinder organisations felt that EYITP funding came to an end without sufficient notice by Welsh Government. This did not provide pathfinder organisations the time to conduct exit and succession planning, including considering which resources could be used to continue delivery and to obtain approval from senior leaders. Documents described the onward impacts on children and families' expectations of and access to services. The ending of Welsh Government funding was seen to signal a drop in priority of integration and transformation of early years services.

### **3.11. Recommendations from pathfinder documents**

These recommendations are drawn from pathfinder reports included in the sample. Note that these recommendations are from the perspective of pathfinder organisations only.

#### **3.11.1. For Welsh Government**

##### **3.11.1.1. Vision**

- Provide a transparent vision for the future of early years.
- Ensure the vision is clearly communicated to all stakeholders.
- Include stakeholders in developing the vision for the early years sector.

##### **3.11.1.2. Funding**

- Provide clearer guidance on funding to assist with long-term planning.
- Provide funding for the continuation of transformation and integration work across Wales.

##### **3.11.1.3. Alignment with other Welsh Government priorities**

- Provide more information on how early years integration and transformation links to other Welsh Government priorities.
- Provide an early years strategy that brings together Welsh Government policies, strategic priorities, and funding.

##### **3.11.1.4. Reporting**

- Produce a clear and consistent data reporting framework for early years.
- Provide a national data system for capturing data to allow evidence-based decisions to be made.

### **3.11.2. For practitioners**

#### **3.11.2.1. Training**

- Coordinate a consistent regional and local training offer that is available across services and organisations.
- Identify gaps in training offer and seek to fulfil them.
- Allow staff time to attend training, reflect and share best practice linked to professional development.
- Embed shared training at all levels.
- Promote a culture that supports training and professional development.

#### **3.11.2.2. Staffing**

- Undertake work to understand capacity, recruitment, retention and capability in the workforce.
- Ensure there is a robust model of supervision and effective support for staff on practical and wellbeing matters.
- Continue coordination roles and specialist practitioner roles that support the early years transformation and integration work.

#### **3.11.2.3. Referrals**

- Establish clear expectations around referrals from the health sector.
- Ensure effective communication and information sharing between services, to reduce the need for families to repeat information.
- Ensure effective communication to families that reduces duplication and streamlines access routes.

#### **3.11.2.4. Collaboration**

- Continue to support and facilitate effective collaboration across services, professions, organisations and regions.

#### **3.11.2.5. Communication**

- Continue to facilitate signposting and information sharing between professionals.
- Promote the work of the early years system so families are aware of available services.
- Ensure messaging around services is consistent and clear.
- Consider the communication needs of local communities.
- Consider accessibility of communications and provide translations where necessary.

- Develop a communications plan for early years services.

#### **3.11.2.6. Physical space**

- Seek to co-locate where possible.
- Ensure physical spaces are appropriate for what they are being used for.
- Hold services in venues that are convenient for families where possible.

#### **3.11.2.7. Welsh language**

- Ensure there are sufficient Welsh language resources, particularly in areas where Welsh is the main community language.
- Offer fully bilingual services where there is demand.
- Promote Welsh usage in service delivery and community outreach.

#### **3.11.2.8. Population needs**

- Undertake a mapping exercise to understand what needs, support and services are available in the area.
- Enhance parent voice and co-production through greater engagement with families.
- Understand what families want from information and communications.

#### **3.11.2.9. For parents and families**

- Streamline the process for providing information.
- Improve communications to clarify different support offers.
- Extend opening hours of drop-in surgeries and other activities to enable more families to attend.
- Promote events and sessions to improve attendance, including using social media.
- Share timetables of upcoming events.
- Offer a wider variety in type of group offered where possible.
- Improve access to information about parenting children with ALN, promote the ALN community and support relationship-building between parents of children with ALN.
- Provide more tailored support for parents and carers of children undergoing or awaiting neurodevelopmental diagnoses.
- Consider how to make support groups more accessible for families relying on public transport or living in rural locations.
- Extend support offered by Flying Start to all areas.

- Provide support for families without a permanent residence and other housing-related issues.
- Provide more tailored support for parents and carers with complex mental health needs.

### **3.11.3. For pathfinder leaders**

#### **3.11.3.1. Governance**

- Implement a single, unified management structure.
- Ensure there are appropriate accountability structures in place.
- Produce a clear definition of 'governance' that is understood across the region.
- Ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, including decision-making.
- Continue the collaboration with other regional structures with early years in their remit.
- Consider how regional governance links into local governance structures.
- Continue to run regional boards to ensure integration and transformation work continues with clear direction.
- Adopt higher risk appetite when looking to the future, where possible.
- Develop a plan to address barriers to integration (for example, challenging unproductive institutional cultures).
- Advocate the needs of the region to Welsh Government policymakers to help unify the early years vision.
- Review workforce development and create a standardised training plan for all staff in the early years sector.

#### **3.11.3.2. Funding**

- Identify sources of funding that allow the continuation of integration and transformation work, including funding coordination posts.
- Align existing funding streams.
- Collaboratively develop funding bids.

#### **3.11.3.3. Sustainability**

- Maintain the working model of family support services beyond the EYITP.
- Local authorities should develop long-term plans with partners for the region, which includes evidence and delivery gaps to ensure equity of access to services.

- Implement a ‘whole authority approach’ to supporting families by bringing together partners working in departments indirectly linked to early years (such as housing, leisure, transport).
- Continue to reflect on and review system maturity (including the use of the [EIF \(now known as Foundations\) Maternity and Early Years Maturity Matrix](#)) to identify areas of work and progression toward system-wide integration and transformation.
- Develop plans to take forward integration and transformation work without EYITP funding.

#### **3.11.3.4. Capacity building**

- Explore the feasibility of increasing system capacity to make it more centralised.
- Facilitate knowledge sharing opportunities between early years sector professions.

#### **3.11.3.5. Data recommendations**

- Improve core data functions, such as updating systems used for data sharing.
- Identify appropriate data sources.
- Improve capability of systems so that useful and thorough analysis can be undertaken.
- Improve data sharing capabilities, including UK GDPR support.
- Introduce measures to collect data (such as population needs, school readiness, workforce development, service delivery and improvement, staff feedback).
- Undertake a review of IT equipment (such as smart phones, apps, templates and system updates) and implement improvements.
- Implement a system for practitioners to be able to see family history with other services within the area.

#### **3.11.3.6. Further research and evaluation**

- Consider evaluation needs at the outset of projects and programme work, supported by a common evaluation framework and evaluation tools.
- Set outcomes and evaluation frameworks to be able to measure impacts across partners and organisations.
- Regularly update integration strategies to reflect learning and best practice.
- Understand the value of coproduction.
- Disseminate information to increase awareness, capacity and interest.
- Produce analysis of cost savings and value for money.

- Undertake research:
  - focusing specifically on ages 0 to 4 years to build evidence base
  - to understand diagnostic pathways in more detail
  - to understand re-referrals and make improvements to existing processes
  - with families, children and practitioners to understand their perspective of the services and support
  - to understand the benefits of universal versus needs-based and geographical-based provision
  - on outcomes for children and families who use early years services, including longitudinally to assess change over time
  - on developing and using business intelligence
- Adopt approaches to evaluating outcomes from workforce training and development, including for staff and families.
- Explore opportunities for data linking.

## 4. Findings: focus groups

This section presents the findings from the focus groups, which were held on a health board region basis. The focus group participants were asked about the extent of integration achieved both during and after the programme, and what they expect for early years system integration in the future.

### 4.1. During the EYITP

Focus group participants were asked to discuss integration and transformation during the EYITP. Specifically, they were asked about the timeliness of services, the extent of system integration achieved, and drawing on elements of other early years programmes.

#### 4.1.1. Timeliness of services

Participants generally held positive sentiments regarding whether ‘children and families were able to receive support at the right time, the right way and the right place’.

Participants reported providing support at the ‘right time, the right way and in the right place’ through implementing a needs-led model, compared to a geographic based approach. In doing so, this extended support to families outside Flying Start areas, or outside the Flying Start age range. This needs-led approach was described slightly differently across the regional focus groups. It included planning, such as identifying areas where there was inequity in provision (for example, rural areas). It also included amending processes, such as the way in which the level of support required was identified, the referrals process, or how teams worked together to identify the most appropriate service for families. Also, participants raised that when trialling a needs-led model in a specific local authority only, they collaborated with the other local authorities and the health board to think through how the model could be implemented and discuss learnings.

*“...I think there were projects that definitely did help children and families get support at a time potentially that they would never have had... because of... areas that they might have been living in...because there was quite a lot of focus on kind of non-Flying Start areas to try and have a more equitable offer...”*

Another way participants reported providing support at the ‘right time, the right way and in the right place’ as part of the EYITP was through identifying gaps in services and duplication of services. They responded to this information by putting services in place. Different approaches included bringing partners together and speaking to families to understand their needs.

*“...looking at services that were able to be put in place to support [families] whilst they're on that lengthy waiting list...what we were finding is that...with...an intervention...they may not actually need to remain on the waiting list. So, it helped us really identify smaller packages of support that we could put in place...”*

Other areas discussed included developing antenatal support as part of the projects, so to reach families early on. Regional training (across local authorities in the health board region) was also provided to ensure families received consistent messaging across all areas.

However, some participants did not feel that 'children and families were able to receive support at the right time, the right way and the right place'. This related to the short-term nature of the programme. A common area raised was time taken to recruit staff, which delayed starting the delivery of services. In some cases, participants discussed they had only just started implementation towards the end of the funding. There was limited time for the change to embed, and to ascertain whether families perceived they received timely support.

*"...whether we reach the right children at the right time and the right families, it's difficult to know that because it was only just really getting implemented, and actually we'd have to consult with the families to ask them whether they felt that, and it wasn't at that stage..."*

#### **4.1.2. The extent of system integration**

The most common sentiment was that while participants felt they had taken some steps towards integration, they had not achieved system integration during the EYITP. There were cases where participants felt they were a 'long way' from achieving this.

*"...I don't think we've yet achieved an integrated early years system...I think we're years off. So, I think it's helped us to identify...what we'd like it to look like. I don't think it's helped us to actually make it happen..."*

On the other hand, there was an instance where participants within one region felt the EYITP did help to implement an integrated early years system, though this was locally. This was through local authorities implementing a needs-led approach across their respective areas.

*"I think we did... we implemented the programme across the whole borough...we future-proofed ourselves a little bit in that we felt that we had the right model..."*

However, some participants within this same region were less positive, noting that integration did not work regionally. The model of delivery did not suit all the local authorities within the region, due to differences in how services were structured.

*"...across all of the...local authorities and the health board...the amount of time that was put into identifying the...delivery, of that integrated approach...we still couldn't quite get there at the end of the programme to make that operational on a [region name] perspective...the want for pursuing this integrated model was there, but there was just too many factors and barriers around us to prevent us doing that..."*

#### 4.1.2.1. Challenges for integration

The most common reason for not being able to implement an integrated system was time. Participants reported that as a short-term programme the EYITP did not lend itself to implementing an integrated early years system, which is a long-term task. Moreover, that integration is not necessarily something that is ever achieved, as this is more of a continuous journey and will evolve with the system context.

*“...that's not going to be achieved in the lifetime of the programme, you know the early years system is a complex system...in no way in a three-year programme will we have a system that is fully integrated...”*

Participants also reported how the short-term way the funding was set up, including the uncertainty this created, impacted on what they chose to plan and deliver. In these cases, participants discussed this meant that ‘safe’ projects were chosen rather than taking a transformational approach, or that they made what they intended to do fit to the budget and timeframe as they would not have been able to fully deliver what they would have liked to.

*“...we knew the funding was going to be limited, so actually what we actually wanted to fully deliver, you wouldn't start anyway because it couldn't be delivered.”*

There were cases where comparisons were drawn to the [Better Start programme \(National Lottery Community Fund\)](#) operating in certain locations in England. This was reported as offering a higher level of funding over 10 years, which was deemed more suitable for integration.

Related to the challenge of time, participants also discussed challenges with the way funding was allocated within the short-term programme. This was in terms of not factoring in the time it takes for creating business plans and thinking about priorities, and for recruitment. As these are substantial processes, this challenge reduced the amount of time for starting and embedding the work and meant there was a short window to spend the funding.

*“...some of the areas, I don't think, benefitted as much as we could have done. It could have been a lot stronger if we'd had another 6 to 12 months to really embed the change because the change took so long for us to work on, determine, access, train...”*

Another challenge related to time was restrictions on evidencing work. Participants discussed that there was not enough time to test their work and gather evidence regarding effectiveness or any changes. In one instance, it was reported the time pressure meant there was no baseline or framework put in place at the start to assess progress or changes against. It was also raised that there was no discrete time allocated at the end of the programme to reflect on the outcomes and learning, which meant this activity detracted from delivery.

*“...the time sensitivity around this piece of work I think hasn't done it any favours...without that opportunity to really test things out and show evidence that...a certain model would be beneficial; you're just going to go back to what always has been because you haven't got that concrete evidence to drive the change...”*

Participants also discussed that there was a lack of clarity around what 'integration' is, including the expectations of what 'integration' should look like considering the limited time and budget of the EYITP.

Another challenge for integration included identifying the 'right' people to be involved at the strategic level who could push the work forward. This was reported as taking time. Also, a challenge was getting buy-in at the leadership level, including reports that this was difficult where priorities were different across individual organisations. In some cases, participants described a lack of trickle down from the strategic to operational level. In one instance there was a lack of operational appetite for change as the intended vision or model was not understood.

*"...I found implementing the model one of the hardest things I've ever done...to devise the programme...a lot of leaders weren't present...and then when we came up with our, new way of working, it was quite hard to implement at a local level. There was a lot of challenge corporately..."*

Participants also described that, as across local authorities services are set up differently, there were difficulties in creating a regional programme of work, with one participant summarising *"it is not going to be sort of 'one service delivery'"*. Participants also described how different local authorities were at different stages of delivery, which although could be beneficial for learning (see 'integration successes'), created difficulties for a regional approach.

Finally, reported low capacity in certain services meant they were not able or ready to be involved. In addition, different IT systems across organisations were reported to affect integration as it made it difficult to share information.

#### **4.1.2.2. Integration successes**

Despite the over-arching sentiment that integration of the early years system had not been fully implemented, participants discussed what elements of integration the EYITP did support them in doing.

Participants discussed how relationships and networks developed between services and organisations that may not have happened otherwise. There was also a better understanding of different roles and responsibilities.

Participants also reported that the EYITP provided the opportunity to bring staff together and work with a specific focus. The EYITP was in one instance described as a 'catalyst' for thinking about change. Instances of thinking on a regional basis included what was working and not working, identifying gaps and duplication, developing strategy, and creating shared priorities or workstreams.

*"...it really gave us a springboard to work in a more conjoined manner with...colleagues within [health board] for example...It wasn't just local authority colleagues, there were...wider colleagues...I think it helped us to look at, making sure we weren't duplicating efforts as well..."*

Regional thinking was also evident where certain local authorities were larger in size or had existing progress on a topic or workstream, so took a lead role on a particular piece. This then benefitted the other local authorities within the region, and learning was shared across the region. The sharing of learning also occurred where local authorities started later than others, drawing on what had already been done by earlier joining local authorities.

*“...I think it's strength in numbers and I think the best thing that the Welsh Government did was make it a regional programme. Particularly being... the smallest local authority within our regional footprint... there's no way that [local authority] would have had the expertise or the number of staff within the team, to be able to create... [a tool that another local authority created].”*

Although these next elements also emerged as challenges, they were regarded positively by some. Participants reported that there was effective senior representation across the region. Participants also discussed that the EYITP supported prioritisation of the work within organisations or buy-in from management or leaders. This also included being able to use the regional direction to influence work within individual organisations.

What has been described in the preceding paragraphs was summarised in one instance; that while there are specific examples or pockets of integrated working, this is not ‘whole systems’ integration.

#### **4.1.2.3. Upscaling during the programme**

Participants were asked what areas were rolled out on a local basis or a regional basis. One region discussed their local authorities rolling out on a local basis from a pilot area to the wider local authority. Multiple local authorities reported starting their pilot in a town or village, before developing this across the whole local authority. They reported their approach expanded the age range of services beyond that of Flying Start (such as up to age seven) or expanded offers beyond the Flying Start areas.

Other regions discussed rolling out on a regional basis, so from one organisation to another. Participants discussed examples of specific services that started in one local authority, which were then implemented across other local authorities. Reasons included gaps or low capacity for a specific service in the original local authority, so that was chosen as a place to further rollout the service. Another reason was that the original local authority used their resource to map where services were needed regionally, which indicated the service needed to be expanded across local authorities. Participants noted that when rolled out across the region, the services were adapted.

Participants also discussed that training or specific resources or tools that were developed were rolled out across the region. There were also cases where pathfinders discussed that data work (such as a database or analysis) was developed in one local authority and adopted across others.

Some did not discuss a specific example of a project or offer that was rolled out regionally. They instead discussed that as local authorities did different things, this learning was shared and could be used as ideas to try in another local authority (see ‘Integration successes’).

#### **4.1.3. Whether drawing on elements from other programmes helped to create a responsive system**

Sentiment about elements from other early years programmes helping to create a more responsive system was mostly positive.

Participants discussed drawing on Flying Start in terms of expanding this offer into other geographic areas (either a specific area or across the local authority) or expanding the age range of the offer. They also noted filling additional gaps to provide services across areas beyond what Flying Start offers, such as creating new roles or provision of different service areas. Therefore, responsiveness was described in terms of enhanced reach and range of services.

Participants also reported linking Flying Start with other services to widen the offer of services. For example, joining up Flying Start and Families First parenting elements, or removing the distinction between Flying Start and generic health visiting. There were cases where participants also discussed drawing on the staffing, expertise and knowledge from other programmes to make progress and deliver, including Flying Start, Families First and third-sector partners. Therefore, responsiveness was described in terms of improved collaboration and relationships between different early years programme teams and that this afforded greater capacity.

Another way participants discussed drawing on other programmes was in terms of utilising funding, such as bringing together funding streams. One focus group noted that the EYITP funding needed to be co-ordinated with funding for other early years programmes as it was not sufficient alone, and to provide coherence to avoid duplication.

While so far this sub-section has discussed bringing elements from other programmes into the EYITP, some pathfinders discussed the reverse in terms of sharing resources out to other programmes. This included partly funding some roles in another early years programme (such as Families First) to work within the EYITP projects. Also, developing resources, which were rolled out to those involved in other early years programmes, for example rolling out ALN training to childcare providers, including Flying Start providers.

However, there was also one instance where participants raised that drawing on some elements of other programmes had been a detriment to responsiveness. This is where the model of integrating generic and Flying Start health visitors did not suit the way all organisations in the region were structured. This merging of caseloads has had a negative impact on Flying Start resources and the support families receive as it has reduced the number of Flying Start contacts achieved:

*“...we had serious concerns about it diluting the amount of work and interventions that Flying Start families were currently having...that merge with Flying Start and generic health visiting under the early years programme...we were never satisfied that we had the right capacity and workforce...And we see in the fallout of that now where we're looking at the level of Flying Start contacts where they are much lower than where they used to be prior to the early years transformation programme.”*

## 4.2. After the EYITP

Participants were asked about whether the work around integration continued since the EYITP came to an end. They were asked to talk about the reasons why, including supporting factors or barriers, and governance.

### 4.2.1. Extent of continued integration achieved

Most participants described integration work reducing since programme funding ceased. Where integration work continued post-programme, this was not at the same scale as during the EYITP. Some aspects continued whilst others did not, and the reasons for this varied. Despite headway being made towards integration for some areas or elements, some felt that a whole-systems transformation was still not being achieved. There was also the sense that continuing integration was not possible without EYITP support.

For others, the EYITP enabled them to broaden their scope and deliver a wider range of services for children and families in their area. The EYITP encouraged a shift towards partnership working and away from siloed working. However, some were unable to sustain working at the regional level without EYITP support but managed to maintain good working relationships between the health board and local authorities. Others felt that the programme had allowed integration work to begin where it may not have done otherwise.

### 4.2.2. Successful continued integration

Since the EYITP came to an end, services becoming embedded within whole systems has been a success in some areas.

*“...even though the programme has finished, essentially there hasn't been...any change in our service delivery or...a massive fallout or anything for us in terms of the way we deliver our services. It's continued.”*

However, this was not experienced across the board. One pathfinder started integration work later than other pathfinders, which gave them less time to fully embed services.

The ongoing impact of integration has meant that partners continue to share best practice and peer support, both within and outside their own health board regions. Local authorities reported they maximised shared learning by adopting each other's approaches in ways to meet the needs of their own populations.

Since the programme ended, some participants reported that staff continued to receive access to a broader training offer due to continuing efforts to deliver consistent and cross-profession training.

*“...work and professionals have access to more training...and that's still ongoing and that's one of our key drivers to make sure that that's just part of our training offer for all practitioners working within the early years sector...it's just ensuring that across the region we've all got that consistency of a training model...”*

The EYITP gave an opportunity to identify training needs and consider how to meet these through innovative and varied methods. This change in approach was thought to have allowed more staff to invest time in training and upskilling, which is expected to continue.

On continuing region-wide integration, one area implemented support across the entire health board area, rather than it being split between the local authorities. This meant that support was available for families across the whole region, regardless of where they lived.

Example areas where integration work was continuing included speech, language and communication, early intervention through offering consistent support from antenatal to age one, additional needs and neurodiversity. Some focus group participants felt that the EYITP had helped to focus resources on ways of working that continue to benefit families.

*“[the EYITP] has definitely influenced the kind of thinking around what's needed in terms of parenting delivery and...community and...cluster working...”*

There were also cases of merging caseloads to support integration.

There were examples cited of rolling out projects to other areas within regions. At the time of the focus group, one region reported undertaking research with an external organisation to scope out the feasibility of upscaling. Co-production was named as a tool to being able to upscale project work to the regional level.

Many focus group participants reflected on how the programme provided time and space to build and invest in professional relationships. Trust built over the duration of the EYITP meant that inter-agency relationships were able to be sustained when funding stopped. This period of relationship building meant that partnership working was developed both during and after the programme ended.

*“...the time we've spent with key partners, developing strategies, looking at various priorities, working through different pieces of work has definitely strengthened relationships, and now I feel there's much more of an awareness of everybody's roles and responsibilities and how we actually can work better in partnership rather than individually.”*

For some, service delivery was improved as part of the EYITP legacy. Successful integration increased awareness of services within local communities, which benefitted organisations as well as children and families.

*“...now...we've got more people in the community, more visibility of our core services and I think for us as a health board, potentially that that's been the biggest value. That's where we've seen the integration...more opportunities for integration is [sic] between services...that obviously benefits our partners as well then.”*

### 4.2.3. Factors supporting continued integration

Factors that helped continue integration work after the programme ended were often shared. Continued partnership working and collaboration was felt to be a main supporting factor in system-wide integration for all the regions who participated in this research. Partnerships established under the EYITP allowed future conversations to occur and influence change with the support of senior leadership.

*“...by having the buy-in of senior leadership, it was...giving people permission to work together whereas before...it would happen by chance of people knowing each other...”*

Working in collaboration across professions and regions meant that stakeholders were able to identify common issues. It was felt this strengthened their voice for bringing about positive change.

*“I think it makes people sit up and...you’re saying it all powerfully together. It makes a difference then.”*

Processes were paused in some areas when the EYITP ended, but these have since begun to gain momentum through governance structures like the Regional Partnership Board (RPB).

Some sought funding from other sources once the EYITP ended to be able to continue integration. Sources of funding included the Regional Integration Fund (RIF), Flying Start, and Families First. There were also examples of merging services to be able to maximise resource and capacity and continue integration and delivery.

Another factor common across the regions was improvements in information sharing across regions and professions. This not only helped with service delivery but allowed stakeholders to identify impact and areas for improvement. This had positive outcomes for families and professionals alike.

*“...now we’re linking systems together that we can see families who’ve come into our early intervention system.”*

The EYITP provided stakeholders with a space to think and act innovatively. This enabled efforts towards system-wide integration to be continued after the programme. Likewise, an improved understanding of roles between professions, supportive and enthusiastic leadership and a commitment to maintaining positive working arrangements all supported continued integration.

*“...probably a product of the process has been more shared understanding amongst the...counties involved and health, of each other’s processes, good practice and so forth...”*

In one instance, participants reported the ability to evidence impact and success allowed continued integration work through senior leadership buy-in. Improvements in data helped to reduce duplication and increase capacity, thereby sustaining and maintaining services.

Some participants described that they had planned from the outset to create a legacy for their integration work, knowing that the EYITP was time-limited. This meant that they were able to continue integrating services when the funding period ended.

*“...we were keen to produce assets that would give it that long term impact, so that when the funding was withdrawn, we were left with something, and I think that was really important to the work that we were doing.”*

The EYITP provided an opportunity to consider what was needed to adopt a system-wide, long-term approach to integration, even though this had not yet been achieved.

#### **4.2.4. Barriers to continued integration**

Participants were asked to reflect on preventative factors to continued integration work. These included resource issues, data issues, barriers to collaboration, inability to upscale, and insufficient support from Welsh Government. Due to these factors, some projects were unable to continue, which affected the overall ability to integrate services. The types of projects affected, and reasons why, differed across the regions and the local authorities within.

##### **4.2.4.1. Resources**

Since ending the programme, there have been challenges to maintaining integration efforts because of the time and staffing resource required.

*“The system’s had to become very watered down compared to what we were providing through [the] pathfinder.”*

The main barrier to continued integration was lack of funding. Many could not afford full integration measures and described ‘penny-pinching’ from other services to keep integration work going. Others struggled to source alternative funding at all. The experience of losing EYITP funding was difficult for professionals, particularly as some roles were lost (such as coordinators) that were central to integration work. Discussions around affordability for some roles were still ongoing at the time the focus groups took place, with one organisation considering further redundancies.

*“Nobody’s saying it’s not a valuable service, but if nobody’s got any money to fund it...then what do we release?”*

The short-term nature of the programme meant that some felt they had been unable to achieve long-lasting integration whilst the EYITP was running, let alone when it ended. This was caused by different factors such as lost momentum, limited progression and reduction in partnership working.

*“Unfortunately, the funding ended before we were able to really make best use of [it] because a lot of what we’d put into place was quite in its infancy, and without having the continued funding for it able to progress forwards and to keep the momentum, a lot of the connections and things that we’d been able to establish have petered off...”*

The impact funding removal had on different areas was affected by the size of the region or local authority. In some cases, smaller local authorities struggled with meeting cost demands post-programme due to a lack of financial flexibility:

*“...we either had to pick up those additional costs to the detriment of our programme or see really well-developed early years pathways being removed. So rather than do that, we've had to incorporate those costs that was once with the pilot into our small Flying Start budget. And that just gives an example of: we haven't got that funding flexibility that some of the larger local authorities had, and I definitely think that that was a barrier for us.”*

Although governance structures were still in place for many, governance itself was described as becoming 'diluted'. Bringing leaders together was felt to be harder without dedicated funding.

*“...there isn't the money on the table...and that often gets people around the table. Unfortunately, that's the reality of it. But we know that there is a go-to governance structure...that is still available to us to have these types of conversations...that's really important.”*

Participants experienced issues from struggling to maintain momentum and buy-in with staff and senior leadership without EYITP funding. Many participants also reflected on the negative impact that withdrawal of EYITP funding had on service delivery. Capacity was a major factor in this reduction in service delivery.

*“...during the life of the of the programme...it was almost easier to be more integrated because there was just extra capacity across the entire early years system...whether that was, at a strategic level or whether it was operationally, the extra manpower just allowed for a way of working that we haven't been able to do previously and we haven't been able to do since...”*

The ability to work collaboratively has been impeded by removing EYITP support for some. This suggests that dedicated resource is needed to maintain collaborative working.

*“it's sometimes challenging to work with each other, believe it or not, because...the way our services are set up are quite segregated.”*

More time for the programme would have allowed some stakeholders to develop relationships with the third sector. This would have offered the opportunity to scope out whether third sector partners would have been able to maintain the programme after funding ceased.

Where integration work did continue beyond the EYITP, staff were often working on it alongside their day jobs. The commitment required for effective integration was greater than staff were able to deliver on in some areas. In some cases, this meant that families were more likely to reach crisis point before intervention was made.

*“...had we been able to just maintain the funding for the programme coordinators, that would have had a massive impact in terms of us having the capacity in order for us to continue with a lot of the programmes...”*

The capacity for staff to build and maintain relationships that were developed under the programme was a challenge for some. It was felt that there needed to be a more systematic approach to this work, rather than relying on goodwill and pre-existing relationships.

Training capacity was unachievable without EYITP funding for some. One participant explained that there was the intention to deliver a wider, consistent training offer to all staff, but this could not be realised.

*“...everybody was on the same footing, same page, and we could all have that training together...have shared learning, have different data sets and compare...it didn't transpire eventually.”*

#### **4.2.4.2. Data**

Issues around data continued to be a barrier to integration. Some participants expressed frustration at not being able to fully realise the benefits and opportunities of data tools and skills development before funding ceased. Some participants reported the time it took to update data systems seriously impacted the ability to progress:

*“...even though we are...at least two-and-a-half, if not three-and-a-half years down the line with it, it still feels like it is...in quite early days because...lots of the arrangements around the data sharing, even internally, seem to take an absolute age.”*

Some participants reported that data issues meant they were unable to assess impact. The inability to provide evidence of change meant that commitment to integration dwindled in some areas.

When funding was stopped, data sharing was paused in one region, which was only recently able to be resumed (at the time the focus group was conducted).

#### **4.2.4.3. Collaboration**

Despite improvements in collaborative working during the EYITP, some found that different expectations, processes and priorities between local authorities was a barrier to continued integration.

*“...what we're trying to do now in [local authority] is look at the best parts that we were trying to implement as part of the core programme model across [region] and just [local authority] now, rather than the regional. Because it, we couldn't make it work. So, I'm really looking at that to say: 'right, what does our...integrated model look like on a local authority basis' and working with health to get that set up and agreed to. So, there's clarity, and that clarity then provides the expectations for the whole team on what we're working towards, how we're going to do it and when we're going to achieve it...”*

Communication differences between local authorities also posed as a barrier to understanding each other fully, and therefore delivering consistent services across one region:

*“There are always tensions and there are always misunderstandings and language barriers...We can have very different interpretations in our different organisations...there's always going to be challenges.”*

#### **4.2.4.4. Upscaling**

There were barriers to upscaling project work without EYITP funding. These mostly related to funding and capacity but also included geographical limitations around postcodes, a complex funding landscape, differences between local authority processes and priorities and timing difficulties.

*“...it's not always necessarily a 'one-size-fits-all' solution that would be able to be rolled out.”*

Due to these barriers, one local authority noted that it was important to manage expectations of what could reasonably be achieved in a particular timeframe.

*“...it's just acknowledging that we can't do the whole county straight away.”*

One region cited unsuccessful funding bids as the reason for being unable to upscale projects in the period post-EYITP.

#### **4.2.4.5. Welsh Government support**

Many participants felt that support from Welsh Government was lacking post-programme. This lack of support was cited in the form of lack of alignment with other programmes, lack of governance structures, and lack in guidance in expectations and practical advice for maintaining integration efforts.

*“...we're now kind of looking at governance structures and how we need to strengthen our position within the region to be able to sustain buy in I suppose from different services at a time where people are so stretched, not having a Welsh Government programme to align to, just makes it that more difficult...”*

#### **4.2.5. Impact of delivering integrated services without funding**

The impact of funding withdrawal on children and families was mixed. In some areas, there is less robust support available for new families coming into the system since EYITP funding ceased.

*“[for] new families...the support hasn't been as robust as we have in Flying Start areas for funding reasons, so there has [sic] been families that haven't had the support, and there has been an impact.”*

In others, families still benefit from services that have been maintained and experience better consistency due to a broader regional approach.

*“Families are transient between the programmes because [staff] all work together – teams are galvanised and committed to delivering antenatal to seven [years] now.”*

Yet, the overall consensus was that families were negatively impacted by the EYITP funding ending, as services were reduced in some capacity across most of the pathfinders. The reduced capacity meant that early intervention was not as viable as it had been under the programme. As a result, more families were reaching closer to crisis point before support was offered.

*“...as soon as that funding ended, it stopped us being able to provide a lot of support to those families. We had to really go back to the old Flying Start model with our lessons learned, albeit, about being needs-led, about what matters to the parents, family support plans, all around collaborative communication, but we were very restricted and still are with who we can work with due to funding restrictions.”*

### 4.3. The future

Participants were asked about challenges to future early years system integration, what needs to be in place for future integration and how challenges could be mitigated.

#### 4.3.1. Funding

One set of future challenges and needs participants raised was about funding.

Participants discussed that their organisations have increasing budget pressures. This includes decreasing budgets or funding pots, as well as many competing priorities that also require funding. This can lead to focusing on core business and needs, rather than wider areas that would be 'nice to have'.

Participants also discussed the complex grant and funding landscape. Participants described that there are numerous grants which they must unpick. Moreover, that there is an over-reliance or expectation in pulling from other funding pots, in particular programmes which come under the Children and Communities Grant (CCG). Participants noted how these funds are already stretched, and have not been increased, which means repurposing the funding would lead to cuts elsewhere. Moreover, that there is an over-reliance on piloting activity, without considering how this could be funded on an ongoing basis when funds like CCG are already stretched.

*"... I've got 21 grants under me and just trying to work my way round those at the end of the year and rob Peter to pay Paul so that that family doesn't go without...it's just a job in itself..."*

*"...they see this massive pot for CCG, but it's spread so thinly across such a huge population...doing all kinds of support...and as the thresholds are increasing, it's been asked to go up and stretch out. And I think there's a danger that we pilot test too much and we all get stretched to the point where it's not going to work..."*

Some participants reported that in the future funding needs to be made available in general, including to provide the capacity to be able to push the integration work forwards alongside other priorities and staff workloads.

*"... [we're] just [told] 'right we now want you to redesign the whole of early years, but it should be at a cost neutral'...[it] is not cost neutral...[it's an] archaic way of working when you're asking us to integrate, but... as Welsh Government, you don't give us the real tools to be able to do that..."*

Some participants reported needs regarding what the funding would look like if available again in future.

This included it being a longer-term programme (5 years and 10 years were mentioned) instead of short-term funding, to enable pathfinders to achieve change and the programme intentions. In one case, participants discussed Welsh Government working more collaboratively with pathfinders to understand what timeframe and resource they would need realistically to implement the goals of the programme.

Another need regarding what the funding would look like was thinking about how outcomes are set and monitored. This included a need within pathfinder organisations to set clear outcomes, while Welsh Government giving pathfinder organisations the flexibility to adapt work or plans to achieve these outcomes.

Also regarding outcomes, in one instance it was reported greater use of qualitative data and case studies to show systems change in the pathfinder organisation would be beneficial in future. This is rather than the typical drive from services which relies on outcome measures or targets, which may not reflect or capture lived experience and impact on families.

In nearly all focus groups, participants expressed the desire for Welsh Government to clarify and simplify the grant funding landscape. This would include thinking more holistically about the requirements that are placed on stakeholders when introducing different programmes at different times. Complexity is created for stakeholders when there are multiple programmes with different criteria and terms.

*“...Welsh Government need to think about the time frames for different things... like the Flying Start expansion and the Early Years Integration [and] Transformation [Programme]...these things aren't joined up so that they work effectively together, or that you can consider the impact of one on the other and plan for that. I think it's looking at these things as a whole system rather than introducing one thing...”*

Participants also wanted Welsh Government to consider the existing workloads on and commitments from stakeholders when introducing new programmes. Without additional funding for new programmes, participants felt they cannot keep taking from another fund to plug gaps.

*“...early years shouldn't become a priority at the expense of another area, because there's a reason why we're funding those areas...[we need] Welsh Government to understand that what we can and can't do with our funding elements. And not just making snap decisions on one fund by only looking at that one fund...not having those expectations 'oh if we take that away, it's okay because they've got that. So that'll be able to cover it'. It doesn't, it won't [cover it].”*

Therefore, overall, participants reported a need to 'join up' early years funding.

*“...[Welsh Government] need to stop bringing out new pots of money for different things with different criteria and different terms of reference and terms and conditions...25 years ago, I said 'please amalgamate it into one pot for early years that we can use and direct services where we know the need is rather than excluding people by putting caveats on these different types of grants'...we've got [the] Childcare Offer, Flying Start childcare, Early Years Child Care and Play, Flying Start core, Flying Start outreach, Flying Start expansion...”*

Some participants discussed where any future early years integration funding might sit. This included in relation to governance, such as needing clarity on whether early years fits at the RPB level. This also included considering whether early years integration funding could be made available via the CCG. For example, amending CCG programme guidance and adding funding to enable organisations to focus on integration. It was noted that

programmes under the CCG are already undergoing expansions or updates, which could be an opportunity for change.

*“...we'd be able to go so far with [integration], but we would really need...investment and...how Welsh Government go about making that available...I think through the CCG would be really helpful for local authorities...there needs to be kind of some joined up working and thinking around this agenda...there's 8 programmes within the CCG...where would it fit best, and then that programme guidance would need to flex...I know the Families First guidance is being relooked at now by Welsh Government...that's where I've been kind of thinking in terms of sustainability...”*

#### **4.3.2. Commitment and prioritisation**

Another set of future challenges and needs participants raised regarded commitment and prioritisation.

A common phrase used by participants was ‘fighting battles’, highlighting that there are numerous priorities within their organisations. Therefore, an ongoing challenge is difficulty bringing partners on board to commit to and prioritise this early years approach. In particular, the withdrawal of funding was regarded as making this more difficult, as this signalled a loss of Welsh Government priority to partners. Examples include the health boards and Public Service Boards (PSBs) removing early years from their priorities. Having no strategic direction, policy statement, or programme from Welsh Government regarding early years integration means it is difficult for staff to elicit buy-in within their organisations for progressing this agenda.

*“...By just issuing a statement that...that area was completely closed, it just gave the message that we've piloted this and actually it's not working...That's the... message we're having to fight against now is, yeah, they've [Welsh Government] closed it, but they still want us to work on it...and that's where you're competing priorities then because you've got nothing to hang it on.”*

*“...everybody wants to do everything... but...unfortunately, there are other priorities as well, and it's 'which one of those comes first'... And if you're not getting that buy-in from... the top...things get pushed to one side...”*

##### **4.3.2.1. National**

Therefore, across nearly all focus groups, a future need raised was for a clear commitment and direction from Welsh Government regarding the early years integration agenda. Participants discussed that this needs to come from ‘top down’.

*“...Welsh Government providing the vision that then they don't just want us to focus on - of course they want us to reduce the waiting times... - but it's almost like permission to use our resources in a different way... if we're going to be focusing on early intervention and prevention. It needs to be given the same kind of weight as all the other core business things...better leadership from Welsh Government...would be great on that...”*

*“I think that's what we're missing is that national... direction... I'm not quite sure what's happened in Welsh Government throughout the programme, to prepare for this kind of direction of travel...we're missing...that follow on... And you know have they been integrating in, in Welsh Government the same as we've been trying to do locally and regionally...”*

In some cases, participants reported a need to consider how the early years integration work aligns with other national frameworks or groups. In particular, the [Public Health Wales Early Years Framework for Action \(2025\)](#), or the national events or working groups for the CCG, where partners across health boards and local authorities are coming together. For any national 'top down' drive, there also needs to be learning from local work, and acceptance that there will be regional variations.

#### **4.3.2.2. Regional and local**

Participants also discussed the need for the development of vision, strategy and priorities at a local and regional level. Participants discussed how a national direction would help this and support regional or local engagement from core partners to involve such as the health board, education colleagues, and third sector.

Some were clear that the mechanism by which to take integration forwards in future is through the RPB. Others wanted guidance on what a 'good' governance structure should look like for a cross-sector programme. Some questioned the effectiveness of the previous use of PSBs as a funding mechanism and felt this should be reviewed for any future programme.

*“...the only way we can continue with this integration is by having regional strategic vision... we need a common denominator in order to move this forward because none of us do all of it...there has to be an element of strategic buy-in and there has to be a Regional Partnership Board level in order that it gives permission to people on the ground to keep making those early years system changes...”*

#### **4.3.3. Momentum and capacity**

Participants discussed a loss of momentum and capacity as a future challenge. The loss of staff who worked on the programme due to short-term contracts meant a loss of the relationships built. Participants reported currently relying on 'goodwill' of staff or the passion and drive of individuals who were involved in the programme. This risks the momentum waning further if these staff left. It also relies on people doing work in addition to their 'day jobs'.

*“... in order to continue, we're relying...on goodwill. And people who have been involved in, in the journey to date, whilst they're in post, the passion hopefully would still be there, but when they move on and new people come in, without that overarching strategy and commitment and permission, it's less likely to continue and we're more likely to see it regress.”*

The future needs regarding this challenge include those previously discussed: 'funding' and 'commitment and prioritisation'.

An additional future need was bringing in dedicated staff to do this work, providing capacity within the system. Another future need was around exit strategies. In this one case, it was reported that for any future programme, having a phased-out approach rather than a hard stop could support securing ongoing commitment from partners and therefore momentum.

*“...the momentum's gone...it's going to need a significant investment again to bring this back up...a lot of the really good work that's taken place and a lot of the established relationships that we had across other organisations aren't necessarily going to be there because the people who are not there anymore...”*

#### **4.3.4. Definitions and delivery expectations**

Another set of future challenges and needs participants raised regarded definitions and delivery expectations.

Participants discussed challenges with the term ‘integration’ and what that really means, including that interpretations of the language used differ across professions or services. In response to this challenge, a need reported was for Welsh Government to provide greater clarity and direction on what is meant by ‘an integrated system’ and what this might look like. Moreover, that this should be realistic based on the time and funding available. A future need for the pathfinder organisations would then be to ensure this understanding filters through the organisations from managers to operational staff.

*“...that shared language when we're talking about integration, that we all mean the same thing, and it's not about organisational boundaries or organisational priorities. It is about how we do truly work together and have shared priorities...we would benefit from a Welsh Government perspective... that's the bit of clarity that would help us to have better integration...”*

*“...I think if Welsh Government want to see a more integrated system, there does need to be some direction from them on what that needs to look like, and I don't think they'll ever be completely prescriptive, which I think is a good thing, but I think there does need to be more clarity if they're seeing...quite significant funding streams and programmes coming together...”*

Another challenge reported in one instance was that across different grants and programmes early years has different age ranges, which can create difficulties for integrated delivery. Therefore, a future need was provision of a clear definition for which ages constitute early years.

#### **4.3.5. IT or data systems**

Participants described a future challenge regarding a lack of joined up systems which restricts sharing information between organisations or services, inhibiting partnership working and integration. Participants reported that a future need is to develop an integrated, single system that enables this sharing. Participants felt that for this to happen, it needs a national approach from Welsh Government.

#### **4.3.6. Inequality of provision**

A challenge for future integration discussed by participants was the current system for service delivery being on a geographical or postcode basis rather than a needs basis, driven by Flying Start criteria. This was raised as a challenge because it creates inequality of provision; a “*two-tier system*” as one participant described it, where certain services are only offered based on where people live. This is regarded as barrier to families being referred seamlessly across the early years system. Moreover, this was reported as creating complications for staff in the back end of the system with multiple funding sources and reporting requirements. An additional challenge was that local authorities approach Flying Start outreach differently.

A future need reported was for Welsh Government to shift to a needs-led approach with a national agenda. Participants also discussed that in any approach, identification of need should be consistent across Wales. Suggestions included learning from the different outreach models across local authorities and using the Welsh Levels of Care as a standard tool for identifying need.

*“...to change, we need to go on a needs base, not geographical sort of approach. So, without that change from the Welsh Government, it's quite difficult for us to do it. And obviously we can do sorts of things locally and sort of build those relationships, but without the main funder changing with us, it's quite difficult...”*

*“...Welsh Levels of Care...I think it's really short sighted that Welsh Government don't use that... knowledge...because we could...move forward massively, and fund it correctly, and we'd resolve a lot of our early years issues by doing that... you could then make sure that children and families are getting that, that consistent integrated offer...”*

#### **4.3.7. The views and needs of families**

A future need at the local and regional level was to continue work started during the EYITP around incorporating the views of families into service design and delivery. Participants discussed that to continue working in a co-productive manner with families, gathering their views needs to be embedded into people’s roles and operational processes. There also needs to be senior level buy-in. In one case, a local authority noted shared learning, logging these needs in a data library where they can be accessed by their staff to inform services.

## 5. Conclusions

This section draws together the findings of the document review and the focus groups. It addresses the research aims, which were to:

- reflect on examples of good practice and lessons learned by pathfinders participating in the EYITP
- explore enablers and barriers to successful system integration
- develop an understanding of how far system integration has been achieved

### 5.1. Reflecting on examples of good practice and lessons learned by pathfinders

#### 5.1.1. Improving access and availability of early years services

It was generally reported that access for children and families to early years services on a local level was improved under the EYITP. This was largely due to community groups having free attendance and providing a safe space.

Some barriers to access included:

- access to information about the services and resources available and a lack of publicising
- physical access, such as unsuitable venues, and travel infrastructure or costs
- inconsistent childcare provision to enable parents and carers to attend
- services held during working hours

Mitigations included improving accessibility by introducing pop-ups, hubs, mobile services, professionals working in communities, and extending the hours of services. Reports noted that some groups were less engaged with services, including families with neurodiversity and mental health needs, and fathers.

More regionally, the EYITP helped to reduce inequality of access caused by Flying Start by taking a needs-led approach and rolling out services to more areas, or across the entire region. This shift away from a 'postcode lottery' improved service accessibility in general. Pathfinders also reported identifying gaps or duplication within their services and put services in place in response to this information.

However, in some cases certain local authorities within a region saw reduced access to services where the new delivery model did not work for the way they were set up, such as a reduction in Flying Start contacts delivered due to merging caseloads. Moreover, when funding ended, this affected services as there was less robust support available, and services were reduced in some capacity.

### **5.1.2. Improvements in service delivery: coordination and timeliness**

Reporting outlined various areas in which staff across services and teams collaborated: planning and governance, service delivery, data and workforce training.

The role of project coordinators helped to improve coordination of services during the EYITP through building relationships between professions and organisations, bridging the gap between services and families, and providing the capacity for overseeing projects and the programme across pathfinders.

Since the EYITP has ended, coordination has been more difficult due to staff losses. Without dedicated funding, most pathfinders lost their project coordinators and thus a lot of the coordination work has reduced or ended without anyone to take it forward. Where it has been possible for some coordination work to continue post-programme, this has not been to the same degree as with EYITP resource.

Coordination of services was also evident where participants in focus groups discussed drawing on elements of other early years programmes. This included building the Flying Start offer into other areas or filling service gaps to expand the offer. This also included joining up of certain elements of programmes, such as in the contacts delivered to families. Participants also reported drawing on the capacity and expertise of staff from existing programmes, as well as pulling together funding streams. In some cases, resources such as training or staff funding were shared from the EYITP into other existing programmes.

'Upscaling' discussed in focus groups also indicates coordination. This included expanding services offered under Flying Start, starting in a pilot area, then to a whole local authority. This also included upscaling from one organisation to others in the region. Certain organisations rolled out projects or services first either as they had the capacity to map where services were needed or had a greater identified need. Training and resources were also shared regionally.

Overall, the timeliness of service delivery was felt to have improved under the EYITP. The focus on a need-led approach (instead of geographic-based), and identification of service gaps and duplications, meant that more families were provided with support in the right time, way and place.

However, feedback shows that improvements to timeliness of support for families would have been possible through more time allowed for the programme and integration. Recruitment delays impacted service implementation in some instances, meaning the momentum of projects and embedding of services came later. It was felt that this time limitation also reduced partners' ability to assess whether families were receiving the right support at the right time, and in the right way.

### **5.1.3. Streamlining referral pathways**

There was evidence of referral pathways becoming more streamlined under the EYITP due to factors such as earlier identification and intervention. Referrals became standardised in some areas, which reduced the burden on staff and families alike. Improvements in partnership working between professions meant fewer inappropriate referrals, helping to streamline the process.

However, the complexity of the early years landscape meant some families had difficulty navigating referrals and services. Reporting indicates that sometimes families had to seek out support themselves with service providers because of a dearth of information around the services available. There were also cases of referral assessments still being complex, which caused delays in the overall process. Referral pathways were not always fully understood by partners, which meant they were not streamlined.

### **5.1.4. Improved understanding of local need**

The EYITP provided an opportunity for partners to develop a needs-led approach to service delivery. This was generally successful during the EYITP, although this has reduced since EYITP funding ended. Some pathfinders have returned to the Flying Start model as opposed to needs-led service delivery as developed during the EYITP.

Examples of ways in which a better understanding of local population need was developed included mapping exercises, data collection and analysis, sharing learning and service adaptation. Findings also indicated speaking with families to gather their views on services. These activities meant that services could be re-prioritised, gaps and duplication identified, and commitments to adapting services could be made (where possible) to meet local needs. It is important to note that this was not always possible due to competing needs in different local authority areas and limited resource. However, improved collaboration and governance meant that flexibility became more embedded in early years services over time in many cases.

In focus groups, participants described the importance of continuing to incorporate service user needs in service design and delivery in future. This would be supported by it becoming 'business as usual' in roles, and having senior level buy-in.

## **5.2. Exploring the enablers and barriers to successful system integration**

The data provided themes (collaboration, governance, sustainability, staff, funding and data) whereby integration and transformation of early years services had occurred. Enablers and barriers to integration were identified through both the document review and focus group analysis under each of these themes, which are summarised here.

### **5.2.1. Enablers**

Factors supporting collaboration included: establishing partnerships, having dedicated roles to support collaboration and partnership working, supportive leadership and practical factors (such as holding regular meetings, co-location and networking). Relationships developed across services or organisations that may not have otherwise, and that understanding of other's roles and responsibilities improved. The EYITP provided opportunity – a 'catalyst' – to bring partners together and work on a regional basis. Learning was shared across the region where different approaches were launched or where organisations joined later in the process. Relationships built during the EYITP were reported as continuing and supporting future conversations, as well as there being a commitment to maintaining working arrangements in some cases.

Enablers to effective governance under the EYITP included strong leadership, representative membership of governing bodies and groups, having a clear purpose and evidence-based decision-making. The EYITP supported prioritisation or buy-in from senior leaders. Having regional direction supported influencing power within individual organisations.

Staff were enabled to work towards integration and transformation effectively with successful recruitment and retention measures in place, ample opportunities for training and development and working in partnership with other professionals. Having roles dedicated to service and system integration (such as project coordinators) allowed positive change to occur, as well as efforts made by clinical and administrative staff who assisted in transforming services. Staff worked more effectively when morale was high; feeling valued was important, as was having supportive and enthusiastic leadership.

Factors supporting the best use of EYITP funding included maximising resources and successful budgeting.

Improving data collection and sharing practices helped to support early years integration and transformation. Implementing measures to evaluate the programme supported effective decision making.

### 5.2.2. Barriers

Barriers to collaboration included differences between organisations such as organisational culture, language, priorities and approaches, leadership, limitations in information-sharing. In some cases, differences in how services are set up across local authorities were reported as creating difficulties for a regional programme of work. Barriers also included limited capacity and increasing pressures and demand on services, a lack of appropriate governance and the complexity of the funding landscape (with different programmes creating conflicting remits and short-term funding mechanisms reducing the incentive to invest in professional relationships).

Barriers to effective governance were identified as complex governance structures, a lack of accountability from governing bodies and groups, insufficient strategic direction and buy-in, and difficulties identifying the 'right' people to be involved strategically. There were also challenges relating to programme governance with Welsh Government during the EYITP. This included a lack of clarity and guidance on what Welsh Government wanted to achieve, including integration in the context of EYITP timescales and budget, and a lack of ongoing support. This also included issues with timescales like funding delays and not being given enough time to submit business plans to Welsh Government. Monitoring and evaluation requirements for the EYITP were also reported as unclear, or that they were onerous

Issues with stability and sustainability, recruitment and retention, and capacity all affected staff ability to work towards integration. There were also challenges to meeting the training needs of all staff, particularly when turnover was high thus increasing the demand for training. Staff were sometimes unable to attend training due to lack of capacity.

Wider demographic factors affected the workforce, for example, an ageing workforce and challenges in being able to recruit Welsh speakers to deliver services for Welsh-speaking families.

Many funding barriers were identified in the document review and focus groups. The main funding barrier was that there was not enough money to continue integration work. The impact of short-term funding was far-reaching; including conveying a message that system integration was not a real priority, thereby risking the legacy of the programme. There was concern that the needs of children and families would not be met due to a lack of funding. The impact of this on outcomes for children and families worried pathfinders.

During the programme, complex and lengthy funding processes caused confusion. It was also felt that the way funding was handled by Welsh Government was unproductive. Reporting included a lack of effective communication from Welsh Government around funding, with delays in receiving funding and decisions being made. Also, the inflexibility of funding being fixed to each financial year and not able to be diverted meant that organisations were restricted to when they could spend funds. Combined, the delays and inflexible structure affected service delivery on the ground, including waiting to start service delivery, short delivery timescales, staff recruitment and training, and progress towards programme goals.

Barriers to using data effectively included issues with data collection, analysis, data quality, data protection, sampling, dissemination and IT issues. Many of these problems were too resource intensive to resolve during the EYITP.

### **5.2.3. Monitoring and evaluation requirements**

There was not a lot of information available on what the monitoring and evaluation requirements were like from a pathfinder perspective. Rather, reports tended to describe what activity had been undertaken and identify enablers and barriers to evaluating projects and demonstrate impact. Reflections on ability to evaluate were sometimes raised in focus groups.

Data issues (around collection, analysis, and dissemination) meant that many evidence gaps remained over the duration of the programme. This meant that the ability to allocate resource where it was most needed was limited.

Concerns around establishing early data monitoring and evaluation processes were raised due to the time needed to implement these processes coupled with limited overall time for the EYITP and service delivery. This then affected the ability to do evaluation. In some cases, there was a lack of consideration of the data required for evaluation from the outset of projects, or collection of a baseline, meaning that evaluation was done retrospectively and was less useful. Also, an issue was no discrete time at the end of the EYITP to reflect on outcomes and learning which detracted from delivery. Some impacts were reported as hard to capture as they would not be seen until the longer-term.

There were instances of monitoring and evaluation activity being supported by established partnerships. As described in reports, the project coordinator role supported data collection and evaluation, which was considered important to the success of the programme.

In future, a need was reported to set clearer outcomes with Welsh Government with flexibility in how these are achieved and how they are measured. Also, for a less strict reliance within pathfinder organisations on service targets, which may not reflect families' lived experience and impacts.

### **5.3. Understanding the extent of system integration achieved**

The EYITP was largely regarded as helping take steps towards integration, but that system integration was not achieved during the lifetime of the programme. It appears there are specific pockets of integrated working, rather than the whole system being integrated.

Elements of integration that the EYITP did support included developing relationships and networks and bringing services together to think on a regional basis about needs and changes. Also, in being able to trial different projects across organisations and share this learning across the region.

Some pathfinders also felt the EYITP supported integration in terms of senior buy-in and prioritisation of the work in their organisations. Others however cited senior buy-in as a challenge due to lack of alignment of organisational priorities, appetite for change, as well as challenges identifying who should be involved strategically.

The EYITP approach being too short term is another factor that affected the extent of system integration. The programme did not factor in the time it takes for planning and recruitment which then shortened the window for implementation even more. It also did not leave time for evidencing work. Some projects chosen were not transformational as a result.

Reporting also indicated that clarity is needed on what is really meant by an integrated system in this context, which would have helped to guide work. Notably, some reported regional standardisation of services is not always suitable due to differences across local authorities and that integration should allow for this variance.

#### **5.3.1. Mainstreaming into business as usual**

From the reports included in the document review, pathfinders noted the work they intended to take forwards which included (non-exhaustive):

- support for families, including at particular stages (such as perinatal), on particular topics (such as parenting or speech, language and communication), or through particular mechanisms (such as schools, parent champions, and community groups)
- data activity, such as systems and information sharing
- workforce activity, such as training and recruitment/retention of roles
- digital content development, such as communications and websites
- understanding population needs

However, in these reports included in the document review there was a general uncertainty at the time of writing as to how this work would be progressed. As such, insight can be drawn from the focus groups which highlighted examples of work that has been continued into regular practice.

In one case, the entire delivery model developed during the programme had remained embedded. However, this was not experienced across the board. In the other cases, the ways in which EYITP work had a legacy in regular practice included:

- the approach or way of working used to plan services
- certain support available to families based on needs (such as speech, language and communication, additional needs, and the antenatal period)
- sharing learning and best practice within and outside regions
- continued access to a consistent regional training offer that meets workforce needs

Factors that helped continue integration included continuation of relationships and partnership working established during the EYITP, including understanding of others' roles. Dedication and drive of staff was also noted. Supporting factors also included support and commitment from leadership, and visibility or strength of staff voices which meant change was supported at this senior level. There were also reports of continuation through approaches to information sharing being maintained, including the systems developed. Finally, some were able to secure alternative funding which enabled continued integration work. There were also reports of moving staff into other early years programmes.

Despite these positive examples, overall participants reported in focus groups that integration work had reduced since the end of the EYITP. Some felt continued integration was not possible without EYITP support.

One example of an area not continued in regular practice included governance structures. The importance of governance in sustainability was reported, particularly for maintaining the boards, groups or meetings set up under the EYITP, and to continue to use existing structures as a mechanism to drive integration work. From the focus groups however, it appears some structures were not maintained, or where still in place were described as 'diluted'. Challenges included bringing people together and getting partners and leaders to prioritise integration without dedicated funding and strategic direction from Welsh Government. Some reported that they are actively working on local and regional governance, including developing strategy and priorities. This work was noted as important for getting buy-in or engagement from partners and leaders. National direction would help this. Some were clear that the Regional Partnership Board structure is the appropriate mechanism for taking forwards future early years integration. Others were unsure where early years integration fits and wanted clarity, as well as guidance on what 'good' governance looks like for a cross-sector programme. Some felt that if a future programme was in place, the use of Public Service Boards should be reviewed as the effectiveness of this funding mechanism was questioned.

Other areas not continued into regular practice included less collaborative working and a weakening of the relationships developed, less working at a regional level, and that regionally consistent training could not be rolled out.

The focus groups also highlighted where children and families had been impacted since the EYITP ended due to a reduction in support in some capacity. This demonstrates that certain projects or services were not continued into business as usual.

Factors that impeded integration work being continued into regular practice included:

- inability to secure alternative funding and difficulties stretching funding from other sources/pots, which was exacerbated for smaller organisations who have less flexibility
- capacity constraints of staff, both in service delivery/operational roles and strategically
- loss of certain roles/staff after EYITP funding ended, and their knowledge
- low buy-in or reduced engagement from senior leadership
- conflicting priorities and processes across the region
- data and information sharing systems that are not fit for purpose
- difficulties evidencing the impact of the EYITP work, which affects commitment

## 6. Recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Welsh Government to consider the future needs for integration**

The findings highlighted needs for Welsh Government to put certain funding, strategies, agendas and guidance in place. These include:

- to think more holistically about different early years programmes introduced, provide coherence, and simplify and join up the funding landscape
- to have a clear strategy providing commitment and direction regarding the early years integration agenda, including considering how it fits with other national frameworks and groups
- to develop guidance that clarifies and provides direction on what is meant by ‘an integrated system’, which allows for within-region variations in service delivery
- to develop guidance that sets a consistent age range for ‘early years’
- to develop guidance regarding effective governance mechanisms for early years integration
- to consider an approach or strategy regarding an integrated system for data and information sharing
- to consider an approach or strategy regarding needs-based provision as opposed to being on a geographical basis

These should be reviewed and discussed with necessary colleagues, with a plan in place to take forwards where appropriate and feasible.

### **Recommendation 2a: Welsh Government to consider funding-related needs for any version of a future programme**

The findings highlighted needs regarding funding processes if there were to be a future version of the EYITP, which include:

- having funding available in the future
- if funding is available in future, having a longer timeframe, timeframes that allow for planning and recruitment as well as evaluation, and a clear exit strategy
- flexibility to adapt work to achieve outcomes and in managing spending
- reflecting on the use of Public Service Boards as the funding mechanism

### **Recommendation 2b: Welsh Government to consider monitoring and evaluation related needs for any version of a future programme**

The research highlights that Welsh Government should consider the approach to monitoring and evaluation if there were to be a future version of the EYITP.

Findings suggest as part of any funding there is a need for having clear outcomes set and flexibility in outcomes measurement.

It is recommended that research support should be sought at the outset to help develop monitoring and evaluation plans. Outcomes and measures should be set with pathfinders from the outset, so that the necessary information can be gathered at baseline and then as work progresses. This would help to ensure that information on the areas of interest is available when the evaluation stage is reached. Moreover, using research support to set up evaluation so there is greater consistency in reporting across pathfinders would be beneficial.

### **Recommendation 3: Pathfinders to consider local and regional approaches for future integration**

The findings highlight areas to develop regionally and locally, with input and support from any national direction, guidance and funding as per recommendation 1. The areas to develop include:

- governance arrangements and strategies, with awareness and understanding of strategy and shared language at all levels of the organisations
- use of lessons learnt from the EYITP
- use of insights and feedback from families or service users
- engagement and buy-in from senior level and wider partners
- dedicated staff capacity
- re-building, or maintaining, relationships and collaborations across services and organisations
- developing information sharing procedures and systems