

Section 1

Sector summaries: Non-school settings for children under five

Context

All local authorities in Wales fund part-time early education for three-year-olds, and occasionally for four-year-olds. Nineteen out of the twenty-two local authorities offer early education in maintained schools and non-maintained settings, which include full day care and sessional care providers. Swansea and Neath Port Talbot local authorities provide early education in schools only, while Powys provides nursery education exclusively in non-maintained settings. Although local authorities who provide early education in non-maintained settings do not maintain the setting, they are responsible for funding early education entitlement and providing support to ensure that the settings provide good quality foundation phase education.

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In January 2019, Estyn and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) began to inspect non-school education settings for children under five together, using a joint inspection framework. We are required to inspect early education, and CIW has the duty to inspect the quality of care at these settings. These joint inspections consider the quality of care provided for all children up to the age of 12 and the education of three and four-year-old children who do not receive education in a maintained school.

The number of settings offering part-time education continues to reduce each year from a high of over 700 in 2010 to 537 by July 2021. This can be attributed to several factors which have had an impact on settings over the past decade. These include local authorities extending the age range of a few maintained primary schools to incorporate nursery pupils or establishing new schools with capacity for these pupils. In some cases, settings have become unsustainable due to a reduced demand for places or, in a few areas, leaders not being able to employ suitably qualified staff.

Most settings that closed temporarily from March 2020 because of the pandemic re-opened for the beginning of the autumn term 2020. A minority did not re-open immediately after the Christmas holidays for a variety of reasons linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As part of our engagement work with the sector, we spoke to leaders in all settings and visited eight providers this year. The focus for each discussion was the wellbeing of children and staff, how settings have supported learning and re-established provision following lockdown, and leadership and management throughout the pandemic.

Wellbeing

Throughout the year, settings worked hard to create a warm, welcoming and safe environment for young children. Leaders identified that the number of children attending sessions returned to pre-pandemic levels, with a few settings having increased their capacity. For example, more parents and carers wanted their child to attend to socialise with other children following lockdown. Most children settled well on return to their setting following an extended period at home and adapted quickly to new procedures and routines. A few leaders identified that the impact of the pandemic on children had varied widely, with some having benefited from time spent at home. These children returned more confident, inquisitive and happy to learn. However, children also suffered adverse effects of being at home during lockdowns, such as a decline in standards of behaviour or physical skills. In addition, a minority of settings noted an increase in the number of children with speech and language difficulties, resulting in them making a greater number of referrals for support. This often had a negative impact on children's wellbeing and behaviour, as they became frustrated with not being able to communicate successfully. Throughout the pandemic, leaders and practitioners continued to work with external agencies and the families of vulnerable children or those requiring additional support. In most cases, specialist support took place remotely, which was not as effective as face-to-face sessions.

Engaging with external services to support children with additional learning needs ALN

The staff at Little Rascals Pre-school, Merthyr Tydfil created a fully inclusive learning environment to support children with ALN from across the local authority. They supported a number of children with a range of needs including those with physical and communication difficulties as well as those with complex learning needs. The setting re-opened in September 2020, but staff continued to support a few children who had to continue to self-isolate or 'shield' during this time. Leaders used Welsh Government Grants to allow the setting's ALN Co-ordinator time to produce individual learning packs for parents to use at home for this group of children. This had a positive effect on parents' and carers' engagement in their child's learning as well as providing important learning opportunities and experiences for the children.

By engaging in ALN early years training modules and bespoke training, leaders and practitioners were able to identify needs early and provide appropriate support. For example, they screened all the children for possible speech and language problems and then liaised with professionals through virtual meetings to provide appropriate intervention programmes and strategies. In addition, they worked with professionals including health visitors, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists to provide early support for those children who have been identified as having ALN and who continue to self-isolate or shield at home.

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Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Following re-opening after national lockdowns, most settings adapted their provision to continue to provide worthwhile learning experiences and activities as part of children's entitlement to early education. Most continued to provide a range of hands-on, play-based experiences that develop children's skills while still conforming with Welsh Government health and safety guidance. They adapted their indoor and outdoor learning environments to improve infection control measures. For example, they often removed soft furnishings from their setting and limited the range of equipment available for the children at any one time. By the end of the spring term, a majority of settings had started reintroducing equipment and furnishings, in line with the guidelines and their own infection control measures. The pace of reintroduction varied considerably across Wales, as each local authority developed its own local guidelines and expectations. Leaders reintroduced these areas as soon as it was safe to do so because they are important for children's learning experiences and the development of their skills. Overall, settings focused less on developing teaching and learning than during usual times because their focus changed to making sure that they were implementing the protective measures. Having reverted to more adult-controlled 'snack time' during lockdowns, settings began to allow children to play a more active role in preparing food from the end of the spring term onwards as it was important to nurture children's independent and social skills as much as possible during these sessions.

Providing learning experiences and challenges for children to do at home

Throughout the year, Little Lambs@Emmanuel, Denbighshire, continued to provide useful activities and challenges for children to do at home, which supported their learning development. These included age-appropriate experiences for children to do with their parents, such as helping them to find a flower or to experience what it feels like to wriggle your toes on wet grass. Many activities focused on getting children out and about in the local environment. For example, practitioners shared pictures of local landmarks, such as 'the blue bridge' and asked parents to hunt for them with their child. Families took pictures of the landmarks they found and sent them to the setting to be included in a book. The children enjoyed looking at the pictures and this encouraged them to talk about their experiences. Practitioners used the home challenges to support specific areas of development, for example children's personal and social skills, which they had identified as having regressed over the lockdown period. The activities included a task to complete five 'kindness challenges' during the week, for example drawing a picture for their neighbour, making a card for someone they love and sharing a toy with a friend. Practitioners then made a wall display to celebrate all the kind things that children had been doing. They believe that the home challenges and activities improved parents' engagement in children's learning significantly, which has had a positive impact on attendance.

Helping children to understand the rich diversity of people and families within their local community

Staff at Cylch Meithrin Yr Eglwys Newydd, Cardiff, wanted to make children more aware of the diverse range of families and people within their community. Staff were aware that the children had little experience of life outside their own home during the national lockdown periods. They wanted them to understand that families attending the setting may differ in their composition. For example, some may live with their grandparents or foster parents, and many will live in households with a rich variety of people from different cultures or ethnic backgrounds. To promote these ideas, the leader bought a very large doll's house, which they named 'Tŷ Enfys' (Rainbow House). Every room in the house has a different family in it to match the make-up of the families that attend the setting. This has encouraged the children to understand that everyone can all live happily together 'in the same house'.

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Nearly all settings made increased use of the outdoor learning environment to ensure that children had access to learning experiences in the relative safety of the open air. They made adaptations to this provision to allow more children to use these areas throughout the year, for example by installing canopies and by making better use of the natural environment. Practitioners in a few settings adopted strategies for planning learning experiences that were very much 'in the moment' and responded quickly to children's interests. For example, practitioners adapted their planning to allow children to explore and create their own spider webs in the branches of trees after observing dew covered webs in the grass. Following the changes to national guidelines, during the first half of the summer term, a few settings began planning more visits to the local area to enrich their learning experiences, but only a very few allowed visitors to attend the site. Most leaders reported that the lack of visits and visitors had a negative impact on the quality of their provision.

Using the outdoor learning environment

Leaders at Homestead Day Nursery, Wrexham, have developed a vision for their setting where children are encouraged to explore and discover the outdoors as much as possible. During a period of closure due to the pandemic, leaders took time to refresh parts of the outdoor environment so that, when it re-opened, it was 'business as usual' in the outdoors. Leaders ensured that the outdoor learning environment was more extensive, attractive, and engaging. Large parts of it have been left 'wild' to provide children with opportunities to interact with and learn from the natural world, for example to observe living things and to practise mark making skills by drawing their observations independently. Other parts of the setting have been adapted deliberately to support children's development. These include digging areas, obstacle courses and climbing areas and large outdoor block building areas.

Practitioners used assessment information carefully to shape and guide learning experiences in the outdoors to match the developmental needs of children, for example by selecting additional resources carefully to match their physical needs and, perhaps more importantly, improving their approaches to engaging with children while learning is taking place. Practitioners ensure that they plan learning activities that support the development of a wide range of skills, and that they do not use resources to develop skills in isolation. For example, children develop their communication, problem solving and creative skills in all learning experiences. Leaders have invested considerable time and energy in supporting staff to work in this way so that they maximise children's learning and enjoyment of the outdoors.



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In most settings, practitioners continued to observe and record children's progress appropriately, to plan the next steps in their learning and to share progress with parents through virtual platforms. The use of video conferencing technology to arrange virtual parents' evenings to discuss the children's progress became a useful alternative to face-to-face sessions.

In Welsh-medium settings, where many of the children speak Welsh at home, leaders identified that lockdowns had made little or no difference to children's language skills. Although the Welsh language skills of those from non-Welsh speaking homes regressed when they were away from the setting for sustained periods, most still had a reasonable understanding of the language on return. With use of immersion techniques, songs, rhymes and repetition of sentences during activities, nearly all children regained their confidence to speak in Welsh quickly.

Leadership

The wellbeing of children and staff has been a high priority for leaders throughout the pandemic. On re-opening in September, a number of staff were anxious about returning to work, although many were glad to be back once they had settled into a routine. Leaders in a minority of settings recognised that morale was particularly low at the beginning of the spring term at the time of the second national lockdown. In these settings, staff were mainly concerned about the safety of the children and themselves as schools had to close to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19. The availability of lateral flow tests and the success of the vaccine programme helped to allay staff's fears during the summer term. However, many leaders and practitioners were concerned about the added pressure in preparing for ALN reform and the Curriculum for Wales.

Leaders worked diligently to ensure that their settings remained safe for their children and staff. Leaders used guidance and advice from the Welsh Government, local authorities and umbrella organisations that support their work, which allowed them to re-open and operate safely. In addition, the increased use of virtual technology enabled leaders to communicate more effectively with stakeholders as well as with other leaders in their area or local authority. This allowed them to seek advice or clarity on issues such as how to re-open safely and to share practice with others, and helped them to feel less isolated. The number of settings accepting visitors varied considerably during the summer term, as did the number of local authorities engaging in face-to-face visits with leaders. Working virtually sometimes made it difficult for Early Years Advisory Teachers to identify the concerns and meet the needs of practitioners.

A report by the Education Policy Institute and the Nuffield Foundation (Sibieta and Cottell, 2021) noted that the proportion of settings open for business after the announcement that settings could re-open to all children in June and July 2020 rose fastest in Wales out of the four UK home nations. However, nearly all leaders found that managing the financial impact of the pandemic had been challenging, due to the loss of revenue and increased expenditure. For example, costs associated with personal protection equipment and cleaning materials increased.

Working with other settings to discuss and share good provision and practice

The manager at Stepping Stones Pre-School, Monmouthshire, engaged in regular virtual meetings with colleagues from around 20 settings across the local authority. This well-established network of settings met throughout the pandemic to discuss common issues, such as how to make necessary adjustments to provision and practice to keep staff and children safe. The leader also met regularly with other groups organised by the Early Years Advisory Teacher and umbrella organisations. They found these meetings to be helpful, especially when trying to implement local and national guidance for keeping children and staff safe. This helped her to replicate good practice from other settings, as well as providing reassurance that everyone was following appropriate protocols and practices.

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The reduced revenue from annual fundraising campaigns, due to cancelled events, also added to the financial pressure on settings. For a few settings, their financial position was affected negatively as a result of providing childcare under the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS) during the first lockdown. This was highlighted in an independent evaluation commissioned by the Welsh Government of C-CAS that was delivered between April and August 2020, in response to COVID-19 (Glyn *et al.*, 2021).

Many leaders made use of the wide range of extra funding arrangements to support the sustainability of their setting. Nearly all found that the furlough scheme, and the range of Welsh Government grants that were made available to them during the pandemic, helped to manage the financial pressures they experienced. In particular, the flexibility of the furlough scheme allowed them to organise their staffing in response to the number of children attending. The Welsh Government's decision to bring the funding for early education entitlement in line with that for childcare in January 2021 also helped to improve the stability of many settings. Throughout the pandemic, many settings used funding from grants such as the Welsh Government Capital Grant, local authority support grants and funding from national companies and charities to help support the setting as well as making necessary adaptations to their premises. Leaders in a few smaller settings did not apply for these grants for a variety of reasons, including a lack of time or expertise to complete the application forms. A few leaders found the complexity of allocating grant money challenging.

Leaders ensured that practitioners had access to a wide range of professional learning activities during the pandemic, including training on developing outdoor provision, moving towards a new curriculum, ALN and mental health training. Nearly all training opportunities moved to a virtual platform, which was more accessible to practitioners. This new approach allowed practitioners to make better use of their time and enabled them to access support and training when it suited them. However, provision for professional learning varied across local authorities and leaders reported that, although they had accessed training, there had not always been enough time to reflect on its implications or to embed new practices, especially in relation to ALN and the Curriculum for Wales. The 'Research to inform future support needs for delivering early education in the non-maintained sector' (Pritchard *et al.*, 2019) report highlighted the need for a more flexible and coherent approach to support, training and professional development for practitioners.

Most settings did not accept college students or apprentices this year, as leaders were worried about transmission of the virus. This meant that many students did not get the practical experience they need to complete their training. Leaders experienced difficulty recruiting suitably qualified practitioners, particularly in the Welsh-medium sector. As the demand for early education and childcare increased again at the end of the summer term, leaders reported that they were concerned with the lack of suitably trained and qualified workers in the sector.

Effective use of the Early Years Development Grant (EYDG) to support children's wellbeing and language skills

Leaders at Croco-Doco-Dile Playgroup, Llanidloes, Powys used the Early Years Development Grant (EYDG) during the pandemic to meet the needs of the children. The setting identified the need to focus on children's wellbeing and language skills, including the use of the outdoors. Initially, leaders provided home learning packs, which included books to help develop children's literacy and communication skills, and to promote the joy of reading. Leaders invested in their outdoor provision to support language skills, for example purchasing a wooden tepee for reading and fire-pit for outdoor cooking activities. Staff received appropriate support and training to assess and develop children's communication skills, as well as time to share information with parents on how they could help their children to practise their oracy skills at home. In addition, leaders employed additional staff to focus more on children's wellbeing and helping them to settle in and to talk about feelings and emotions. Leaders have shared these initiatives with other leaders and practitioners throughout Powys using virtual technology. The use of the EYDG grant by the setting leaders has had a positive impact to support children's literacy skills and wellbeing, as well as providing parents with useful opportunities and help to support their children at home.