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Y Dirprwy Weinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Lynne Neagle AM
Chair, Children, Young People and Education
Committee National Assembly for Wales
Ty Hywel
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff CF99 1NA

6 November 2019

Dear Lynne,

Following my recent appearance at the CYPE Committee session focusing on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), the Committee has requested a statement of the Welsh Government's overarching vision for ECEC.

Committee members may have seen the Written Statement released by the First Minister on 24 October to coincide with the public announcement of the Welsh Government's ECEC approach. This can be found at annex 1.

Our ECEC aim is to create a single, high quality, child centred approach to Early Childhood Education and Care across Wales. Our approach recognises the value of both early education and childcare, and will draw the best of both together into one single experience with parents able to access services in Welsh, English or bilingually.

We are building our ECEC vision on the following founding principles:

- All children should have a high quality stimulating learning and care experience in each and every education and care setting they attend, based on international evidence of quality ECEC;
- Provision of support should be flexible and responsive to individual circumstances with a focus on settings best placed to deliver quality ECEC outcomes for children,
- Artificial divides between education and care are to be removed and the focus instead will be on all settings delivering ECEC being of equal value to the child's wellbeing and development.
- Increasing the flexibility of how ECEC is delivered will provide parents with more support and choice in order to support them to access routes into sustainable employment and out of poverty;
- It should be easier for parents and families to navigate the complex and wide range of provision of support available to them (UK and Wales-specific) so they have choice and can access what is available to them;

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

- We must retain and strengthen what we know works well, particularly the highly respected pedagogy of the Foundation Phase, and explore how we build on these strengths that already exist.
- There should be a continuum of learning and provision from 0–16, with ECEC dovetailing into the new curriculum and an increased focus on transition to ensure continuity and progress through the learner journey;
- All professionals working within ECEC should be equally valued with a package of learning and support to reflect this;
- We should explore a single funding model for all ECEC providers reflecting that they are all equally valued.

Further information on our ECEC vision is contained within the text of the speech the First Minister gave at the launch event, which I also provide at annex 2.

I trust the Committee will find this information helpful.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Julie', is positioned above the printed name.

Julie Morgan AC/AM

Y Dirprwy Weinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services



**WRITTEN STATEMENT
BY
THE WELSH GOVERNMENT**

TITLE **Launch of Early Care Education and Care (ECEC) approach**

DATE **24/10/19**

BY **Mark Drakeford, First Minister of Wales**

I am pleased to announce today that Wales is beginning a journey to create a single, high quality, child centred approach to Early Childhood Education and Care in Wales. The approach we will be taking will recognise the value of both early education and childcare, and will draw the best of both together into one single system for children aged nought to five.

Childhood experiences play a significant part in shaping our futures, and are critical to the chances of leading a healthy, prosperous and fulfilling life. We know that already by the age of three, children from poorer backgrounds can be as much as a year behind their more advantaged peers.

The attainment gap widens by the time children enter school. At the beginning of their first year, children from the lowest-income families are already on average 16 months behind those from high-income families. These gaps increase steadily over time and can last a lifetime.

One of my Government's key commitments is make sure every child in Wales has the best possible start in life and to redress this imbalance. Ensuring that every child has access to the same, high quality support in the Early Childhood Education and Care they receive is key to this.

In Wales we already have excellent childcare provision across the early years, and a long established and well regarded early education offer for three and four year olds, in the Foundation Phase. Before we developed the Foundation Phase in Wales we looked very closely to international evidence and best practice – to New Zealand, Italy and to Scandinavia – to guide our approach. The philosophy in each of these countries is about putting each and every child first and this chimed perfectly with our own philosophy guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Our single system approach will be built on these foundations, with the core aim that all children should have a high quality stimulating learning and care experience in any education and care setting they attend, in Welsh, or English, or bilingually. The type of setting they attend is irrelevant if they are being supported and nurtured as they need.

In order to put child development at the heart of what we do, we need to ensure that our principles on quality of provision are clear to all who work with children; that they underpin provision in every setting in Wales and crucially that they help us to stop focusing on what makes settings different and build on what they have in common.

Wales also needs a system that is accessible and flexible for parents, children and providers.

At the moment it can often be difficult for parents to understand what provision their child can access. Although local authorities and their Family Information Service teams perform a key role in providing advice, we know families often find our early years provision confusing and complicated.

Parents tell us they value a choice in the setting they can use to access these services. Yet in some areas, parents are restricted in where they can access early education and childcare. Our aim is to ensure all providers can choose which services they offer, and parents can have a full and open choice of where to access those services.

This is particularly important in the context of provision for children with additional learning needs, or physical disabilities, where the need for specialist support can further restrict the availability of care. We want to make it easier for parents and providers to access the support the need to ensure children with additional needs can access ECEC without any inequalities.

We also want to make sure families can access early education in Welsh, English, or bilingually, according to their needs. In the context of Cymraeg 2050 we need to increase the number of Welsh language and bilingual providers in the early years, to ensure parents can access ECEC in the language of their choice.

Our ECEC vision also requires close working with and support for the workforce. A workforce that is already committed to doing the best they can for children, and to supporting and nurturing those in their care. Our ECEC approach will not lower the compulsory school age, or put children into school from birth. Nor will we expect childcare providers to take on the role of teachers. Our ECEC approach will focus on recognising the value, skills and experiences of both, and draw them together.

I also want to make working with our youngest children an aspirational career choice. We will provide current and new members of the workforce with clear career routes and progression pathways, enabling practitioners to develop specialisms that further support children.

Today's announcement sets us on the course for significant and ambitious change. Our approach is not focused on small scale changes but on a transformation over the next ten years.

In the short to medium term, this will start with a key piece of work.

We will develop a Quality Framework that will enshrine our quality principles and set out the requirements for quality across the sector for children aged 0-5. The Quality Framework will be used by practitioners to guide provision, by parents to understand provision and by inspectors to assess provision.

Estyn have been clear on the quality of current provision with 9 in 10 non-maintained settings achieving standards of 'good' or better in 2017/18 in their delivery of the Foundation Phase. This illustrates the strength of our pedagogy in Wales, as well as the strength of our practitioners and the learning environment they create. Learning through play is a vital part of a child's development, and we recognise children are at their most confident when they are engaged in play and playful activities.

The Quality Framework will be the golden thread that links all elements of the system together and provide the focus on child development. It will be key to integrating childcare and early education.

As we move forward with our ECEC approach, we will build on our success and ensure that all settings which provide ECEC for 0-5 year olds work to the same founding principles, the same focus on child development and the same ambition of high quality.

Annex 2

- Good afternoon and welcome to you all.
- Thank you for coming here today, and for joining us on our journey to create a single, high quality, child centred approach to Early Childhood Education and Care across Wales.
- An approach which recognises the value of both early education and childcare, and draws the best of both together into one single experience.
- Our childhood experiences play a significant part in shaping our futures, and are critical to the chances of leading a healthy, prosperous and fulfilling life.
- We know that already by the age of three, children from poorer backgrounds can be as much as a year behind their more advantaged peers.
- The attainment gap widens by the time children enter school. At the beginning of their first year, children from the lowest-income families are already

on average 16 months behind those from high-income families. These gaps increase steadily over time and can last a lifetime.

- One of this Government's key commitments is to redress this imbalance and make sure every child in Wales has the best possible start in life.
- And while there are many factors that contribute to those experiences, one area where we can ensure every child has access to the same, high quality support is in the Early Childhood Education and Care they receive.
- In Wales we already have excellent childcare provision across the early years, and a long established and well regarded early education offer for three and four year olds. We are, and we should be, proud of both of these facts.

- But, that does not mean we should stop striving for more for our children.
- This is why the early years is one of my priority areas. And it is why I am here today, to speak to you about the changes we want to make to the way we provide education and childcare in the early years; to ensure every child flourishes even before compulsory education begins at five.
- All of you here today will be familiar with our excellent and very well-respected approach to early education - the Foundation Phase - which provides high quality early education and child development from the age of three.
- Before we developed the Foundation Phase in Wales we looked very closely to international evidence and best practice – to New Zealand, Italy and to Scandinavia – to guide our approach. The philosophy in each of these countries is about putting each and every child first and this chimed

perfectly with our own philosophy guided by the UNCRRC.

- Indeed, the principles underpinning our early education provision are central to our new curriculum.
- But we also need to recognise that in the early years children's needs are varied. A three year old needs to play and explore, to build trusting relationships with adults and to discover their independence. They need to be nurtured and cared for, so that they can grow and develop to their full potential.
- I want Wales to have a high quality Early Childhood Education and Care system which simultaneously provides children with learning and nurture. A system with a child centred focus and support for those who need a little more help. A system which helps our language and culture to thrive, and increases the number of children able to access

Welsh language or bilingual education services.

- We see early years provision as less about just preparing children for school, and more about a child's holistic development – social, emotional, and cognitive. To give them the best all-round start we can, which in itself strengthens the foundation for lifelong learning.
- Our single system approach will be built on the foundation that all children should have a high quality stimulating learning and care experience in any education and care setting they attend, in Welsh, or English, or bilingually. The type of setting they attend is irrelevant if they are being supported and nurtured as they need.
- There are three key elements to this. Three areas of focus which are integral to the dynamic change we want to see.

- Quality. Access. Workforce.
- These will be our three watch words as we move forward.
- In order to put child development at the heart of what we do, we need to ensure that our principles on **quality** of provision are clear to all who work with children; that they underpin provision in every setting in Wales and crucially that they help us to stop focusing on what makes settings different and build on what they have in common
- Many of these founding principles are already evident in the Foundation Phase pedagogy and within the Curriculum for Wales 2022.
- Estyn have been clear on the quality of current provision with 9 in 10 non-maintained settings achieving standards of 'good' or better in 2017/18 in their delivery of the Foundation Phase .

- This illustrates the strength of our pedagogy in Wales, as well as the strength of our practitioners and the learning environment they create. Learning through play is a vital part of a child's development, and we recognise children are at their most confident when they are engaged in play and playful activities.
- We must continue to innovate and allow children to build the foundations of their learning through ways that come naturally to them. This is vital to ensuring that all children have a high quality stimulating learning and care experience in each and every education and care setting they attend.
- We also recognise the importance of making the learning journey of children seamless, and so we want an early years system that dovetails to the learning in Curriculum for Wales and provides a true nought to sixteen continuum of learning.

- We also want a system that is **accessible** and flexible. Both for parents, children and providers. A clear aim of ECEC is that provision of support is flexible and responsive to individual circumstances with a focus on settings best placed to deliver quality ECEC outcomes for children.
- This flexibility is key in providing parents with more support and choice in order to support them to access routes into sustainable employment and out of poverty.
- At the moment it can often be difficult for parents to understand what provision their child can access. Although local authorities and their Family Information Service teams do a key job in providing advice, we know families often find our early years provision confusing and complicated.
- We also know that one thing parents really value is a choice in the setting they can use. But all too often that choice is not really there.

- In some areas, where you can access early education is restricted. We want to ensure all providers can choose which services they offer, and parents can have a full and open choice of where to access those services.
- We are already working with local authorities to open up delivery of early education to a wider range of settings, and not restrict it to schools.
- We want to see more innovative solutions, to enable parents to have more choice about where they access both early education and childcare, and we are investing over £80 million to support this drive. This investment will lead to new childcare settings across Wales.
- The issue of access is particularly important in the context of provision for children with additional learning needs, or physical disabilities, where the need for specialist support can further restrict the availability of care. This can also restrict the development needs for children who we know do

better in mixed settings.

- We want to make it easier for parents and providers to access the support the need to ensure children with additional needs can access ECEC without any inequalities.
- We are already reforming the way we support children with Additional Learning Needs, with our transformation programme in place and a new approach coming into force from 2021, helping children and young people from 0-25. Our reforms to ECEC will fully align with this and ensure we can target help at those who need it most as soon as possible.
- In the context of Cymraeg 2050 we need to increase the number of Welsh language and bilingual providers in the early years, to ensure parents can access ECEC in the language of their choice.

- The £80 million pound capital investment includes an investment of over £30 million in Welsh language services.
- We have also committed to increase the number of Cylchoedd Meithrin by 150 over the next decade. The first 12 of these have now been established and we are pressing ahead with our plans to continue with this programme of expansion.
- We will continue to build on all these development to ensure that we strive for a system that is accessible to all children and their families.
- Last but most definitely not least, we need to invest in the early years **workforce**. A workforce that I know is committed to doing the best they can for children, and to supporting and nurturing those in their care.

- We want to ensure that we support the workforce through the changes over the coming years.
- This is not about lowering the compulsory school age, or putting children into school from birth. Nor is it about asking childcare providers to take on the role of teachers. It is about recognising the value, skills and experiences of both, and drawing them together.
- We value the work the sector does in creating high-quality environments to give children the best start. We want to work closely with the sector to ensure we continue to provide the support required to do that.
- The education workforce, both teachers and assistants' are already registered, and are currently being supported by a suite of professional learning packages as we move towards the Curriculum for Wales 2022.

- There is also a huge amount of work underway, as part of our existing 10 year Workforce Development Plan, in the childcare sector.

We have recently launched new qualifications with a focus on child development and we are working towards professional registration of childcare practitioners to ensure we embed existing quality.

- We also want to make working with our youngest children an aspirational career choice. To offer current and new members of the workforce clear career routes and progression pathways, enabling practitioners to develop specialisms that further support children. Longer term we would look to develop routes into ECEC pedagogues, to create early years experts.
- Further work is being undertaken to understand the sector's capacity in terms of Welsh language skills. Our plans are being taken forward in parallel with those to increase Welsh-medium education places, to ensure a holistic approach.

- We want to ensure that all professionals working within ECEC have a package of learning and support to reflect parity of esteem.
- Today's announcement sets us on the course for significant and ambitious change. I recognise that we are not talking about short term, small scale changes but a transformation over the next ten years.
- That transformation isn't starting from scratch. I've been clear on the quality and the strengths we already have in our early years. We will build on these in our transformation of the system. And indeed, we have already begun to do that.
- But there is more to be done and today, as well as announcing the policy direction we are taking with ECEC, I'm also able to announce a key piece of work that will underpin our vision.

- As quality principles are at the heart of our new approach we need to focus on getting them right. We need a set of principles that clearly articulate what quality provision for nought to five year olds looks like in Wales. That makes clear how Wales supports and nurtures our children.
- We will develop a Quality Framework that will enshrine our quality principles and set out the requirements for quality across the sector for children aged nought to five. A Quality Framework that can be used by practitioners to guide provision, by parents to understand provision and by inspectors to assess provision.
- The Quality Framework will be the golden thread that links all elements of the system together and provide the focus on child development. It will be key to integrating childcare and early education.
- I'll finish by being as clear as I can that today is about making a strong commitment to developing a

single system for early education and care in Wales. To acknowledge that we are already doing well, but we want to do better.

- We want to build on our success and ensure that all settings which provide ECEC for nought to five year olds work to the same founding principles, the same focus on child development and the same ambition of high quality.

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