



Impact of poverty on educational attainment, support, provision and transition for early education

November 2024

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Executive summary

This report considers how effective the support and provision provided by early years education providers is at addressing the adverse effects of poverty and disadvantage on early years children.

It focuses on how well local authorities and school improvement services support these providers in early years pedagogical approaches and how best to support children adversely impacted by poverty and disadvantage. It also considers how well funded non-maintained settings and schools use their [Early Years Pupil Development Grant](#) (EYPDG)¹ funding on sustainable interventions to improve the attainment of children adversely affected by poverty and disadvantage. Finally, the report considers how well the provision for play and learning in settings and schools supports children in their development and the transition between settings and schools. It is based on engagement with a sample of 31 non-maintained settings, nursery, primary and all-age schools. We also considered evidence from 15 local authorities.

We found that there is a variation in how early education is accessed across Wales, depending on how local authorities provide nursery education. This variation results in an inequitable provision across Wales. In practice, this means that parents often have little to no choice of where they can access nursery provision for their child.

There was a variation in the accessibility of early years professional learning for the sector, with non-maintained leaders more likely to have accessed high quality early years professional learning from their local authorities and umbrella organisations² than practitioners in schools. However, many school leaders reported that there was limited professional learning to support effective early years pedagogy offered by local authorities and school improvement services.

During our visits, leaders from non-maintained settings and schools reported on how many families were experiencing the negative impact of poverty and disadvantage at a level far worse than previously seen. As a result, a large proportion of their time and resources was spent trying to address these needs. In nearly all cases, settings and schools took time to get to know the children and their families well. They spent time forging supportive and trusting relationships. Although leaders had not received specific training or information from local authorities on how to best meet the social, emotional and developmental needs of early years children adversely impacted by poverty and disadvantage, they knew and understood the importance of supporting families and the difference this was making to their lives. This often took the form of

¹ The Pupil Development Grant (PDG) is funding given to schools and educational settings (settings). Settings include nurseries, pupil referral units, and home tuition.

PDG, Early Years PDG (EYPDG), and Education other than at school PDG (EOTAS PDG) funding aims to raise the attainment of children and young people from low-income households. PDG-LAC is given for care-experienced or looked-after children (LAC). It does this by reducing the barriers that they often face to achieving their full potential.

The PDG is a key resource for realising the Welsh Government's ambition of high standards and aspirations for all.

² Cwlwm is the umbrella organisation for early years providers in Wales. It brings together the five leading childcare organisations in Wales to deliver a bilingual integrated service that will ensure the best possible outcomes for children and families across Wales. 'Cwlwm' organisations are Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs, Early Years Wales, Mudiad Meithrin (Lead organisation), National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA Cymru) and PACEY Cymru.

practical support such as collaborating with the third sector to provide food items, toys, uniform and practical support with issues such as housing.

The EYPDG provides funding to schools and settings to support children aged three to four years with their communication, well-being and physical development needs. Our review found that, due to the complexities of funding formulas and difficulty of gathering data on this age group, there was an inequity of funding across the non-maintained sectors in Wales. This resulted in local authorities who do not fund early education in the non-maintained sector receiving funding and local authorities with high levels of deprivation receiving limited funding.

Most non-maintained settings receiving delegated EYPDG funding made good use of this money to purchase resources that helped to develop children's communication and well-being needs, such as outdoor equipment and speech and language resources. They attended beneficial training that supported them in their roles, particularly in supporting children's communication skills. In addition, they enriched children's experiences through a range of visits as well as inviting visitors to the setting. However, in those local authorities where the grant money was held centrally, they did not always target training well enough on tackling disadvantage or target the most disadvantaged settings well enough.

In most schools, leaders often used this funding to sustain existing provision. For example, they employed additional adults to provide a suitable adult/pupil ratio in early years classes. In a few examples, these practitioners delivered speech and language and emotional health and well-being interventions. In a minority of schools, leaders were unable to disaggregate their EYPDG funding from their wider PDG funding and therefore could not allocate their funding in a targeted way well enough.

Many leaders provide children and their families with beneficial opportunities to get to know practitioners and the setting or school prior to starting. This includes when children transition from home to a setting or school or between a setting and school.

Recommendations

The Welsh Government should:

- R1 Ensure that EYPDG funding is allocated equitably to local authorities that fund non-maintained settings
- R2 Provide improved guidance on how the funding is distributed and used within settings and schools

Local authorities should:

- R3 Provide specific professional learning and information to schools and settings on how to best meet the social, emotional and personal developmental needs of early years children adversely affected by poverty and deprivation
- R4 Ensure that leaders in schools and settings have a secure understanding of EYPDG funding so that they may target it effectively on addressing the impact of poverty and disadvantage for their early years pupils
- R5 Ensure parity in the early years provision between schools and settings based on a robust understanding of the role of effective environments, enabling adults and engaging experiences

Schools and setting leaders should:

- R6 Evaluate the impact that the EYPDG funding has on the progress of children's skills and development
- R7 Ensure that the provision provided for early years children is developmentally appropriate

Introduction

This thematic report is written in response to a request for advice from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in his remit letter³ to Estyn for 2023-2024.

This thematic review focuses on early years children who are adversely affected by poverty and disadvantage and the impact this has on their early educational attainment. It considers the effectiveness of the support and provision provided by early years education providers, the effectiveness of the transition arrangements for early years children from home to setting and between funded education settings and school. The review considers the most effective practice and where practice is not effective enough. It also evaluates how well local authorities, and school improvement services are supporting and challenging funded non-maintained providers and schools to improve outcomes for children living in poverty.

In total, inspectors visited 13 education funded non-maintained nursery settings⁴ and 17 schools that provided early years education. These included one early years children's centre, 15 primary schools and one all-age school. We visited a sample of non-maintained settings and schools across all of the 22 local authorities. This included visits to English and Welsh-medium settings and schools. For non-maintained settings, we ensured that there was a reasonable balance of settings from different categories of childcare, such as full day care settings and sessional care.

The report draws on evidence from a range of activities that included discussions with leaders in non-maintained settings and schools around their practices and provision, the impact of grant funding specifically aimed at addressing the impact of poverty and disadvantage and the professional learning offer to improve their practice. We also drew on evidence from learning walks⁵ to help us gain an understanding of how the quality of the learning environment was meeting the needs of children, particularly the most vulnerable. We collected information from local authorities and school improvement services and considered how they were supporting and challenging early years education providers and schools to improve outcomes for children living in poverty. These activities gave us a national picture of the quality of support and provision in the early years sector, for those children and their families living in or adversely affected by poverty.

When evaluating the quality of provision provided by settings and schools, we looked at their curriculum offer and how it was delivered. This review looked at how well settings and schools provide children with an authentic and purposeful learning environment that best supports their developmental needs.

When considering the transition arrangements for early years children, we found that there are limited references to transition arrangements in the new curriculum

³ [Estyn annual remit: 2023 to 2024 \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES: https://www.gov.wales/estyn-annual-remit-2023-2024-html](https://www.gov.wales/estyn-annual-remit-2023-2024-html)

⁴ Funded Non-Maintained Nursery settings are childcare providers that provide nursery education.

⁵ Observations of the environment, experiences, and practice

guidance for schools. The guidance states that learners should be involved in the transition process as much as possible, and that learners should be assessed within six weeks of entering a setting to support understanding of learners' journeys and tailor learning and teaching. However, the [Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings](#) provided more detail for leaders to consider, including the varying types of transition that a child may encounter during their day. Although this curriculum guidance was designed for non-maintained nursery settings, it can be used to support the development of effective practice in schools.

This review looked at the effectiveness of support and provision arrangements and how they met the needs of all children, particularly those adversely affected by poverty. Flying Start's childcare offer⁶ plays a significant part in the Welsh Government's policy to address the impact of poverty on early years children. Therefore, we could not consider how beneficial the transition arrangements were for early years children without considering the effectiveness of the transition arrangements between Flying Start childcare and funded education in non-maintained settings and schools. Alongside these activities the team considered how well settings and schools support children and their families as they transition from home to setting and setting to school-based provision.

Throughout the process, the team used all the evidence gathered to identify the strengths and areas for improvement.

The intended audience for this report is the Welsh Government, headteachers and staff in schools, leaders and practitioners in funded non-maintained settings, local authorities, and school improvement services. It is also of interest to parents and relevant partners. It is hoped that the report will contribute to professional discussions on both the strengths and areas for development identified.

⁶ Flying Start helps families with children under 4 years old in disadvantaged areas of Wales. Help available includes:

- funded high quality, part-time (12.5 hours a week) childcare for 2–3-year-olds
- an enhanced health visiting service
- access to parenting support
- support for Speech, Language and Communication development

Since April 2023, Phase 2 of the Early Years Expansion programme has been focusing specifically on extending Flying Start childcare to two-year-olds across Wales as part of the Welsh Government's Programme for Government commitment to a phased expansion of early years provision to include all two-year-olds.

Background

The [Joseph Rowntree Foundation \(Davies et al, 2024\)](#) reported on the current situation across different groups of people and regions relating to levels of poverty in the UK. This report gave a comprehensive picture of the current state of poverty across the UK. A summary of the findings identified:

- Poverty has increased to close to pre-pandemic levels; children have consistently had the highest poverty rates.
- Poverty is deepening. Those living in 'very deep poverty'⁷ has increased and now makes up the largest group of people in poverty. This indicates that deep poverty affects a significant segment of those already in poverty.

Some groups of people face particularly high levels of poverty. These include:

- Larger families – families with three or more children
- families whose childcare responsibilities limit their ability to work
- many minority ethnic groups; these households also have higher rates of child poverty, very deep poverty and persistent poverty
- disabled people
- informal carers
- families not in work
- part-time workers and the self-employed
- people in rented accommodation, pushed into poverty by the amount they have to spend on housing
- families claiming income-related benefits

In the 2023 National Parent Survey (Parentkind, 2023), 30% of parents in Wales who responded stated that they were concerned about the cost of sending their child to school.

Wales' poverty rate between 2019/20 and 2021/22 was 22% with child poverty rates at 28% (Davies et al, 2024).

The Welsh Government published its [Child Poverty Strategy for Wales in 2024](#) (Welsh Government, 2024a) with a focus on improving opportunities for children living in poverty. The strategy identified that:

- child poverty can affect the development of a young child
- if children get the right support early, it can help their physical and mental health

Poverty can impact the educational experiences and outcomes of children. It can have harmful effects on their aspirations, educational achievement and opportunities later in life. If children living in poverty get the right support at an early stage, it can

⁷ In the United Kingdom, deep poverty is defined as a household's income being less than 40% of the median household income after housing costs.

Some examples of what it means to be in deep poverty include: Not having enough food, being unable to heat your home, not having a bed, and being unable to pay rent.

help their development and improve their outcomes and their physical and emotional well-being.

The Welsh Government's National Mission⁸ is to achieve high aspirations for all by reducing the impact of poverty on educational attainment and supporting every learner to become healthy, engaged, enterprising and ethical citizens, ready to play a full part in work and life.

The Welsh Government is prioritising the need to address socio-economic inequality. This is strengthened by the [Socio-economic Duty \(Welsh Government, 2020\)](#), which came into force on 31 March 2021 and makes addressing the impact of poverty a statutory duty for local authorities.

There have been several strategies introduced in recent years to help to reduce the impact of poverty, particularly for children in the early years. For example, initiatives such as Flying Start helps families with children under four years old in disadvantaged areas of Wales, including providing funded high quality, part-time (12.5 hours a week) childcare for two to three-year-olds, an enhanced health visiting service, access to parenting support and support for Speech, Language and Communication development. Since April 2023, Phase 2 of the Early Years Expansion programme has been focusing specifically on extending Flying Start childcare to two-year-olds across Wales as part of the Welsh Government's Programme for Government commitment to a phased expansion of early years provision to include all two-year-olds. Other approaches include the Childcare Offer, which provides parents and guardians up to 30 hours of government funded early education and childcare per week provided they meet certain criteria and are in work or undertaking eligible training and education courses. In addition, the Welsh Government launched its vision for [Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care \(ECPLC\)](#) (Welsh Government, 2024b). This is an integrated approach to education and childcare for all children aged 0-5 years. It includes a Quality Framework, which describes the common principles that should guide all settings, schools and practitioners to provide children with a high quality and stimulating learning and care experience, no matter which setting they attend.

Alongside these, the Welsh Government's [Community Focused School Policy](#), (Welsh Government, 2022a) is a key part of the wider policy for tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment. In Estyn's report [Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life \(2020\)](#), we outline the importance of schools working in partnership with families, communities, statutory services and specialist agencies to meet the needs of pupils.

The present review does not measure the full impact of these policies and strategies, but it aims to consider more closely how settings and schools use the support and grant funding available to them, such as the Early Years Pupil Development Grant (EYPDG), to best meet the needs of children and their families living in poverty.

The primary aim of the Welsh Government's Early Years policies and programmes is to support all children to gain the best start in life. The Welsh Government stated in its Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2024 that children living in poverty are at a

⁸ <https://www.gov.wales/our-national-mission>

higher risk of having speech, language and communication needs. Access to high quality play opportunities is critical for the social, emotional and physical development of all children. These are crucial, not only to a child's ability to learn, but also to their socialisation skills and ability to communicate with others.

Research (Sylva et al, 2004) suggests that quality 'Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care' (ECPLC) leads to improvements in children's development in later years, such as enhanced language skills; better educational performance in mathematics and reading; and an increase in positive behaviour and outcomes. It is recognised that children who attend quality early years settings are more independent, concentrate on their play for longer and, on entry to school, are more co-operative and better prepared for the challenges they meet. Children growing up in poverty can face barriers in accessing these opportunities.

Across Wales, all children are entitled to access early education (also known as nursery education) from the term after their third birthday. All local authorities provide a minimum of 10 hours per week of early education. This could be offered in a range of different provisions such as:

- maintained schools
- playgroups
- day nurseries
- cylchoedd meithrin

During term time, this nursery education forms part of the 30 hours childcare hours. Parents and guardians can apply for childcare and early education for up to 30 hours per week. The 30 hours is made up of at least 10 hours of early education and up to 20 hours of childcare. The amount of childcare a parent receives depends on the number of early education hours offered by the local authority. Funded childcare hours can be used during term time, holiday weeks and weekends.

The approach taken by local authorities across Wales on implementing this policy varies substantially, such as when and how children access this provision. The number of hours of funded education offered varies according to where children live and depends on the type of provision where the early education space is offered. Non-maintained settings that receive funding to deliver early education also receive support from their local authority to help them in their delivery of the education offer. Where provision is delivered in non-maintained settings, funding is normally provided for 10 hours per week for up to 38 weeks of the year. This usually means that children access early education sessions each day per week. The local authority provides funding directly to the setting for each child taking up a funded place. However, not all local authorities fund non-maintained settings. In a minority of local authorities, there are no funded places in non-maintained settings between September and December. In addition, Swansea, Neath Port Talbot and Vale of Glamorgan local authorities only offer all three-year-olds a part-time funded place in a maintained school whereas Powys local authority only offers funded places in non-maintained settings.

Across Wales, there is a range of approaches to how settings and schools receive support for curriculum development, teaching and learning pedagogies. Local authorities provide this support in schools through their school improvement service

as part of the wider support package for schools. Generally, non-maintained settings receive their support through local authority employed early years advisory teachers, who may also support Flying Start settings. In a few examples, local authorities use school staff to provide support to settings. In one example, local authorities delegate funding to the regional school improvement service who co-ordinates the support to settings through their early years advisory teams. In addition, that regional school improvement service uses lead settings to provide additional training and in-person support.

In addition to receiving support from local authorities or school improvement services, nearly all non-maintained settings affiliate to voluntary organisations, such as Early Years Wales (EYW), National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA Cymru) or Mudiad Meithrin. These umbrella organisations provide non-maintained setting leaders with advice and guidance on a range of issues. This can include providing insurance, access to policy documents and training in areas such as food hygiene, first aid, Curriculum for Wales and Welsh language development. They also represent settings on issues at a local and national level.

Settings and schools receive funding to help reduce the impact of poverty through the Early Years Pupil Development Grant (EYPDG). This funding aims to raise the attainment of children and young people from low-income households by reducing the barriers that they often face to achieving their full potential. The EYPDG is a key resource for supporting the Welsh Government's ambition of high standards and aspirations for all.

We know that high-quality early education is essential to children's development. The experiences, knowledge and skills needed for lifelong learning, active citizenship and future employment begin in the early years. The [Curriculum for Wales](#) (Welsh Government, 2021) sets out a framework for learning that promotes collaboration and cross-disciplinary planning. It aims to help learners build connections across their learning and combine different experiences, knowledge, and skills. The curriculum for funded non-maintained settings 'aspires to create in children positive dispositions towards learning which, if nurtured, will last a lifetime and provide the firm foundation which all our children need to support them in realising the four purposes of Curriculum for Wales'.

This review considers and reports on the effectiveness of the support provided to non-maintained settings and schools to reduce the impact of poverty on early years children. It evaluates the quality of the provision and the impact this has on their development and skills acquisition. In addition, it evaluates the effectiveness of the transition arrangements from home to setting and between settings and schools. It identifies features of effective provision and practice, highlights where this is less successful, and explores the reasons why.

Support to settings and schools

Support for provision, teaching and learning

We found a wide variance in how early education has been accessed by children across all local authorities in Wales. This variation influences the type and level of support that local authorities and school improvement services offer. For example, non-maintained settings funded by local authorities to offer early education are entitled to additional support to help them ensure the quality of provision and teaching and learning. This support is mostly provided by an early years advisory teacher employed by a local authority or a specialist early years teacher from a local school. In the EAS region⁹, local authorities fund the school improvement service to provide support for settings. In Cardiff, the local authority has established a management board made up from headteachers from local nursery schools to offer this support.

In nearly all the non-maintained settings visited, leaders highly valued the support and guidance given to them by their early years advisory teachers. They provided them with beneficial advice, support and professional development opportunities, for all their staff. In most cases, regular visits allowed them to tailor their support to each setting's individual needs. These visits often included beneficial written reports, which outlined the setting's strengths and areas for development and provided a steer to support self-evaluation and improvement planning.

In most cases, setting leaders had valuable opportunities to attend local network meetings where they received relevant information and benefited from good practice that was shared. This was particularly the case with the implementation of Curriculum for Wales and new assessment arrangements and also with the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs Act.

In most cases, settings appreciated the professional learning opportunities offered to them. In particular, leaders highly appreciated the training they received in the implementation of the curriculum and assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained settings.

Non-maintained settings also access support and guidance from the umbrella organisations¹⁰ to which they are affiliated. During our visits, most setting leaders reported that these organisations provided them with beneficial support through an array of on-line courses and materials, which helped them to keep informed of important issues and developments. Where leaders and practitioners were able to attend local network events and large-scale conferences, they appreciated these professional learning activities that helped them to improve their practice. However, in a minority of cases, leaders did not always receive the support they needed to

⁹ EAS - South East Wales Achievement Service – The school improvement service of the five local authorities on South East Wales; Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport and Torfaen

¹⁰ A body that provides overarching support, coordination, and advocacy for various early years services, professionals, and settings that work with young children (typically from birth to age seven) and their families

improve their practice or develop their leadership skills. This was particularly true in a few local authorities where leaders of Welsh language settings required additional support to improve their own Welsh language skills or those of their staff. In these settings, leaders understood the range of fluency levels of their staff and the need for improvement but were unable to access suitable support. They acknowledged that this was having a negative impact on the Welsh language development of children, particularly those who did not speak Welsh at home.

During the review, school practitioners told us about the professional learning that they were able to access to help them with their roles. They commented on how local authorities and school improvement support partners provided beneficial professional learning on curriculum development to help them gain an understanding of curriculum progression and effective pedagogy. In the best cases, this provided them with a helpful understanding of how to use the curriculum documentation to support them to design a school curriculum that best reflected the principles of effective early years practice. However, overall, most school leaders reported that there was limited bespoke professional learning for the early years. Headteachers shared a common concern about the level of expertise that was available through school improvement services to provide effective early years support and professional learning. For those schools in local authorities who offer the early entitlement to education in both schools and settings, most school leaders reported that they were unable to access the professional learning offer that was available to their counterparts in the non-maintained sector.

In those schools where there was practice worthy of sharing, there were beneficial opportunities for them to share their effective early years practice with schools from across the local authority and at wider conferences. For example, one school presented on how they worked together across multi agency services to benefit children and their families.

Leaders and staff in a few cases arranged beneficial visits to local schools with similar deprivation levels. These opportunities allowed them to reflect on their own practice and share ideas for improvement.

Many leaders from non-maintained settings and maintained schools valued the support they received from multi agency organisations and teams to support the emotional, health and well-being of children and their families. For example, training provided through the 'Healthy Pre-School Scheme' informed leaders about how to provide healthy, cost effective and nutritious food. In the best cases, leaders shared this information with families. These leaders reported that this has had a positive effect on developing parents' knowledge and skills.

In a few local authorities, the local authority provided beneficial support to the schools through a 'Family Link Worker'. This regional role provides families of the school and prospective families with beneficial support on transition, learning readiness¹¹, toileting and behaviour strategies. Alongside this, they signpost families to charities and support such as local food banks and special events such as the Christmas toy

¹¹ The meeting of the individual needs of children and the development of early communication, social and physical skills

appeal. Headteachers highly valued this role and the positive impact this has on the children and families within the school.

In a few schools we visited, they had accessed additional funding through the national [Emotional, Health, Well-being and Resilience framework](#)¹² as part of a pilot to work alongside local teachers to develop a consistent approach to assessment on entry to school. As a result, they devised a shared approach to developing 'Learning Stories' as part of their on-entry assessments. Teachers felt that this gave them a greater understanding of the holistic development of pupils as they moved through the early years provision at the school and how they could best support them in their learning and development.

In many cases, leaders discussed the effective partnerships they had developed with partners such as health visitors and educational psychologists. They made beneficial use of this for additional support and up-to-date information on children and their families. As a result, leaders were able to act swiftly to best meet the children's needs. Effective partnerships with staff such as educational psychologists enabled leaders to access beneficial support and training that helped to upskill their staff's knowledge and understanding of the children within their school on how poverty may have affected their lives. For example, most schools visited had benefited from training on topics such as trauma-informed practice and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). This helped practitioners gain a better understanding why some families struggle to maintain healthy relationships and the effect of trauma on young children. Where settings and schools have adopted a trauma-informed approach, closer attention was given to the way practitioners responded to children and the way that they made sense of their behaviours as a means of communication.

During our visits, a few schools described how they worked collaboratively with other schools to develop support for children and their families. This allowed them to pool resources and deliver workshops and one-to-one support to parents when required.

Use of parental engagement worker

In **Ely and Careau Children's Centre in Cardiff**, leaders employ a full-time parental engagement worker to support families in the community. They run regular parent and baby groups to build relationships, model positive parenting and signpost families to other services. In addition, they successfully obtained funding for a community hub manager to work with two other local primary schools and their feeder high school. This role supported the most vulnerable families, through activities such as collecting food from the local food bank and accompanying parents when attending Team Around the Family (TAF) meetings.

¹² This Framework is aimed at the needs of school-age learners and the workforce supporting their learning and well-being needs. It is intended to support schools, in reviewing their own well-being landscape and developing plans to address their weaknesses and build on their strengths. It recognises that the school alone cannot meet all the needs of a complex population of children and young people, and sets out the role of regional bodies, the NHS and others such as the third sector, in supporting the school. It is meant to support and complement the new national Curriculum for Wales and in particular the Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience.

Support for families

During our visits, leaders from both non-maintained settings and schools spoke candidly about the needs of many families and their children, particularly post-pandemic and due to the cost-of-living crisis. Many leaders spoke of how poverty is significantly worse than pre-pandemic levels and more far-reaching than they had initially realised. They are now aware of parents going without food, not having access to clean clothes and, as a result, they saw many families withdrawing and isolating themselves. This had a detrimental effect on parents' ability to cope and therefore their ability to parent positively. Often, this required them to adapt their learning environment and provision to better suit the emerging needs of children, alongside providing specific and targeted support to individual children and their families. Many leaders stated that their roles had changed and there was now a greater need to respond to families impacted by poverty, which took up a considerable amount of time during their working day. Many leaders supported families in liaising with other agencies and services, such as housing, the NHS and social services. They reported that the need for this level of support has increased substantially over the past few years.

In nearly all cases, settings and schools took time to get to know the children and their families well. They developed strong and supportive relationships with families who confided in them when they were experiencing difficulties.

In a majority of settings and schools, leaders were aware of an increasing number of parents experiencing mental health issues. In the school context especially, these issues caused a barrier to parents accessing the school for help and support and, in many cases, had a negative impact on the attendance of children.

In nearly all cases, leaders from non-maintained settings and schools had not received specific training or information from the local authority on how to best meet the social, emotional, personal or developmental needs of early years children adversely affected by poverty. Despite this, they understood the difference supporting families in poverty makes to early years children and they worked hard to source and provide extensive support. In areas of the highest need, some of this support in schools took the form of practical support to families using school-based food banks such as 'Big Bocs Bwyd'. Families had access to this resource through a fair share funding scheme, where they paid for what they could afford or purchased items at a highly reduced price. The schools also provided access to supplies such as nappies, milk, and discounted food for those most in need. Most schools who offered this type of support accessed a substantial amount of support through their links with the third sector. In addition, many schools offered parents the opportunity to swap preloved uniforms in their school run uniform shops. A minority of non-maintained settings and schools also worked with charities to provide bespoke packages at special times of the year such as Christmas. Here, families were given food items and toys for their children to help ease the financial burden, particularly felt at these times of the year.

In the schools we visited where there was a greater need to offer support either due to the number of pupils affected by poverty or to meet the needs of families, many schools employed a Family Engagement Officer (FEO). Practically, the FEO worked to support schools to poverty proof the day, for example looking for cost effective

uniform, signposting families to foodbanks or fuel support, and offering advice and guidance relating to housing issues. Over time, they developed trusting and consistent relationships between the school and their families. This role had a significant impact on children in the early years. In a few effective examples, the FEO ran parent groups such as baby massage and play-based activities. These groups reduced the barriers perceived by parents and developed their confidence and self-worth. These strong relationships helped children settle into school life and helped families feel able to approach the school as and when the need arose.

In a few local authorities in North Wales, schools worked collaboratively with their Flying Start colleagues to provide parents with valuable information and support to help them with their parenting challenges, through the Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities (EPEC) project. Where this was most successful, parents became empowered in their knowledge and ability to become parent group leaders themselves and deliver the training to new parents.

In nearly all cases, non-maintained settings provided parents with beneficial practical support and guidance. Many provided practical parenting help either through delivering workshops or providing booklets with help and advice on themes such as toileting, healthy eating and speech and language support. Many settings provided hungry children with food such as cereal throughout the session as and when needed. However, a minority of leaders expressed concerns that this support will not be as easily accessible to children as they transition to school-based provision.

In nearly all cases, leaders strove to ensure that children had what they needed to participate fully in the setting's activities, for example by providing wellies and wet weather gear for outdoor learning. In nearly all cases, leaders held fundraising events to raise money for off-site experiences and resources within the setting. In a few cases, setting leaders provided personal care packages for parents to see them over the holiday periods. These care packages provided items such as personal care items, suncream and washing items. Leaders prioritised this support to children and their families from their very limited existing budgets and without any additional funding.

In most cases, practitioners in non-maintained and school settings worked in close partnership with parents and carers to best prepare children for moving into nursery provision, particularly when this was with a different provider such as when moving from a non-maintained setting to a school-based provision. They worked in close partnership to ensure that children were well prepared for learning. Often, they shared useful information with parents and carers on how to support the development of speech and language and numeracy skills, alongside signposting to websites to help them support their child's learning. This helped give parents beneficial information to prepare their child for learning readiness.

Many school and setting leaders recognised the challenge that many families faced to prepare children for learning readiness. They recognised the difficult situations that many of their children lived in and wanted to support their families to build stronger connections between their children and the setting. They recognised that sometimes due to the impact of poverty many children had a limited range of life experiences within the home and were unfamiliar with the features of their locality, for example the local beach. A few non-maintained setting leaders created 'home tasks' that aimed to

build a connection between the parents and the activities and play based learning that their children were participating in during their time at the setting. These home activities provided children with valuable experiences to share back at the setting. They promoted participation in play, physical, and creative activities that they could complete in their home and local area and highlighted to parents the learning opportunities found there. The settings provided all the materials needed for the activities so that they were of neutral cost to the families, alongside what to do and where to go. Leaders in these settings reported that these experiences helped them to bridge gaps and build stronger relationships between children and their families.

Building learning relationships

In **Little Lambs Emmanuel Pre School** in Denbighshire and **Little Stars Nursery** Torfaen, leaders recognised the need to work closely with families to prepare children to be ready to learn. They held regular ‘stay and play’ sessions and events where they modelled positive interactions and shared with families top tips and how they could support their child at home. They provided families with home learning tasks at no cost to the family. All materials to undertake the activities were provided by the setting. Activities included walks around their local area to prompt conversation, cooking and gardening activities. These activities provided parents with a valuable insight into activities that were available at the setting and beneficial information around how their child develops and learns.

A few schools visited recognised that many of their parents had difficulties with their own literacy and numeracy skills. Therefore, they were unable at times to provide their children with the appropriate skills and quality interactions that would ensure that they give their children the best start to learning. These schools provided parents with informal support and guidance through community events and access to outside agencies. For example, one school ran a regular coffee morning where families had access to multi agency services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAHMS). Another participated in a project funded by the ‘Multiply project’¹³. This was a four-week programme, which targeted parents of nursery aged pupils who did not achieve Grade C at GCSE in English or mathematics. These sessions were designed to upskill nursery and reception parents, alongside their child, with numeracy and literacy skills and provide them with ideas as to how to best support their child at home. Other schools ran weekly sessions in partnership with speech and language teams for parents and children in nursery. Over a six-week period they modelled effective approaches, including games and resources that could be used to support language acquisition.

Grant funding

The Pupil Development Grant (PDG) provides funding to schools and educational settings to raise the attainment of children and young people from low-income households, with a particular focus on providing high-quality learning and teaching and developing Community Focused Schools. Alongside this funding, the Early Years Pupil Development Grant (EYPDG) specifically supports children aged three

¹³ Multiply is a new government-funded programme, through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, offering free numeracy courses to adults to build confidence with numbers and gain a qualification.

and four with their emotional and social well-being, communication and physical development in an allocation to local authorities for maintained schools and a separate allocation for non-maintained settings. There is also funding to support the educational attainment of looked-after children and children who have been adopted or are subject to a special guardianship order. The amount of EYPDG funding given to local authorities, schools and settings is based on the number of children aged three to four in a school or non-maintained setting (for example nurseries) who are eligible for free school meals (eFSM) based on the latest school census (PLASC) data. Funding is given on a financial-year basis, based on the number of eligible children.

Due to the complexities of allocating the EYPDG funding and the lack of robust data on children aged three to four years old eligible for education in funded non-maintained settings or schools, the Welsh Government has had to estimate the number of eligible children for their development grant funding formula. As a result, the Welsh Government allocates EYPDG funding to all local authorities in Wales for non-maintained settings even if a local authority does not fund early education in these settings. This approach means that EYPDG funding for non-maintained settings is not always distributed equitably across local authorities that fund early education in non-maintained settings. As a result, a few local authorities appear to be disproportionately disadvantaged even though they have or have had the highest areas of deprivation in Wales and therefore it makes it difficult for them to provide the appropriate levels of support. This means that in these authorities setting leaders are less able to allocate funding towards providing high quality resources and experiences to children to help address the impact of poverty on their lives.

In 2015, the Welsh Government published [“What really works for the Early Years”- guidance for the Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant](#) (now known as the development grant). In this document it stated that:

At the very start of their educational journey, over one-quarter of our learners are failing to get the results of which they are capable, simply because they are from a poor background. The Millennium Cohort Study shows that by the age of five children who are eligible for free school meals (eFSM) can be up to a year behind in some aspects of their literacy, compared to children from more affluent backgrounds. (p. 2)

The Welsh Government recognises that the foundations for progress towards the four purposes of Curriculum for Wales begins in the early years. The aim of the EYPDG is to provide additional support to the youngest learners, who are disadvantaged by poverty. This spending should be prioritised towards supporting and developing children’s emotional and social well-being and physical development and their speech and language skills.

There is a strong emphasis on recognising the importance of the early years’ workforce and the impact of the relationships and quality interactions they create with the children in their care. High-quality interactions and relationships are crucial to improving outcomes for the most disadvantaged children. Children living in poverty tend to fall behind because their language, social and emotional development does not keep pace with that of their peers. ([Family and Childcare Trust ;2003](#))

To counter this disadvantage, early years staff should be skilled practitioners who are knowledgeable about child development and who are able to identify children's needs and respond to them effectively.

Local authorities are expected to ensure that the EYPDG funding will be used to improve outcomes for children and young people from low-income households and those who experience the care system. The aim is to reduce the difference in attainment between these learners and their peers.

Local authorities are responsible for distributing the funding for early years to schools and settings, and there is a mixed approach to how this money is allocated across Wales. Generally, most settings receive their EYPDG allocations directly from local authorities. However, in some cases, this money is held centrally and spent on behalf of the settings by the local authority. In one local authority, a management committee composed of local nursery school headteachers has been established to oversee the use of EYPDG in non-maintained settings.

School allocations are delegated directly from their local authority alongside the school Pupil Development Grant (PDG) allocations. In many cases, schools are aware of their allocation that is to be spent to improve outcomes for early years pupils and are asked to provide plans to support this. However, in a minority of schools, this allocation is combined within the overall allocation of PDG funding and school leaders are unable to identify the amount that is to be used specifically on early years pupils.

During our visits as part of this review, we asked setting leaders and headteachers of schools with nursery classes how they were allocated their grant funding and the impact that this money had on children's learning and development. Overall, it was difficult for leaders to comment on the impact on individual children due to how the grant funding is allocated within local authorities. Therefore, without parents letting leaders know their personal circumstances or leaders having a prior knowledge of families, it is not possible to direct this money to individual children aged three and four years of age. As a result, leaders generally used this money more widely across all three- and four-year-olds in their setting or school.

In the best cases, leaders in non-maintained settings and schools made beneficial use of their EYPDG allocation. They reflected on the priorities within their self-evaluation processes to identify the important areas for improvement that would have the greatest positive outcome for all children and support their learning and development. Many non-maintained leaders used their funds to purchase resources that would facilitate outdoor access in all conditions such as wet weather gear; established woodwork areas to enhance children's fine motor skills, perseverance, and concentration; and invested in various resources to support language development. Additionally, they used the funding to enrich learning experiences by organising visits around their local area, thereby broadening children's understanding of the world. Furthermore, leaders invested in professional learning for their staff, enhancing their knowledge of child development and equipping them to better support children's learning, particularly in speaking, listening, and emotional well-being.

However, in the local authorities where grant money was held centrally for non-maintained settings, we found that they did not always use this money well enough to support leaders to have a bespoke approach to tackling disadvantage in their own communities. In these settings, many leaders often felt that the professional learning and resources provided by the local authority, although useful, did not always focus sharply enough on removing the barriers to learning to meet the individual needs of their children. Consequently, these leaders believed that the use of this money had little impact on the children within their settings. In such cases, leaders are often unaware of how the EYPDG funding is spent within the local authority and have minimal input into its allocation. In a few cases, leaders reported that the funding appeared to be disproportionate across the county. For example, settings in the highest level of deprivation received the same allocation of training and resources as those settings in more affluent areas where the need was not as great. In a few cases, setting leaders used their own funds or other funding streams to provide children and their families with the resources and help that they needed.

Overall, schools and settings received very little guidance and support in the form of professional learning from their local authority or school improvement service with a specific focus on mitigating the impact of poverty on attainment.

In the cases of the schools that we visited, although they all received their EYPDG allocation directly from their local authority, a minority were unable to identify their individual EYPDG allocation. This was due to the manner in which they received their funding, such as being given one lump sum for PDG for the entire school year. In these cases, leaders were unable to identify how much of their allocated EYPDG funding was used in the Early Years.

In most cases, school leaders used the allocated funding to support practitioners in nursery and reception classes to try and ensure that they met or were close to the required adult-to-pupil ratios. Nearly all leaders reported that they had to use this money in this way because the current pupil funding did not cover these costs. Without this funding leaders indicated they would struggle to maintain their current adult-to-child ratios. They highly valued the support that these members of staff provided, noting that they would be unable to deliver quality provision without them. Many leaders voiced growing concerns over their ability to finance this support in the future, especially if funding is reduced. The current needs of children and families is increasing, and although schools strove to meet these needs, the rising costs of delivering such provision presented a significant barrier.

In the cases where support for children and their families was at its strongest, leaders had a clear, inclusive vision to tackle poverty and provide the highest level of support and provision they could, within the available resources. Leaders in these schools prioritised addressing poverty and inequity across their school. Their vision was based on inclusivity and the need to address inequity. They understood the importance of working in partnership with parents and multi-agency teams to achieve the best outcomes for children. Leaders targeted support to the most vulnerable pupils and made effective use of staffing to deliver targeted programmes. For example, they provided beneficial speech and language, and emotional health and well-being support.

Transition

Wats Dyke Primary School, Wrexham, leaders designated a member of the early years team to take on the role of transition lead. This role involved organising transition events and activities for early years parents and prospective parents to ease transition into school. Activities such as regular 'stay and play' sessions, and events around significant occasions, such as Christmas and Easter, give practitioners valuable opportunities to get to know the children and their families better. During these events, parents complete profiles indicating their child's likes and dislikes and how best they can be supported. Leaders noticed that parents were keen to share information if they could see how it helped their child settle into school successfully. As a result of feedback from parents, the school made adaptations to their learning environment, offering calm corners to support children with attachment difficulties.

As part of this review, we asked all 22 local authorities through their termly meetings with Estyn local authority link inspectors how they measured the impact of the EYPDG funding. Local authorities have the responsibility to measure the impact of the grant money allocated to them by the Welsh Government. From the responses that we received, nearly all local authorities used their early years advisory teachers to monitor the impact of the funding in their non-maintained settings. They monitor and evaluate the impact of the professional learning and resources and the difference this makes to children's involvement and engagement. A minority of local authorities use a range of data to allocate funding in a targeted way. For example, they use the Welsh Multiple Deprivation Index (WIMD)¹⁴ and the Welsh Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA)¹⁵ to help them plan strategically for the delegation of the EYPDG grant. They focus on the category of income deprivation and the number of children under four who are in poor or overcrowded housing and allocate funding according to need. Overall, there was limited information shared from local authorities about how they measured the impact of the EYPDG funding in schools. In the best examples, local authorities had a suitable understanding of what schools spent their money on. However, overall, local authorities had insufficient knowledge of how the money was spent on improving children's progress and how schools had adapted their provision and provided targeted professional learning.

Support for ALN

During our visits, leaders across both sectors reported on the increase in numbers of children starting in settings or schools with emerging additional needs. Generally, leaders in non-maintained settings leaders felt suitably supported by the local authority Early Years Additional Learning Needs Officer (EYALNLO). They received

¹⁴ The **Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD)** is the official measure of relative deprivation for small areas in Wales. It ranks areas based on various factors to identify those that experience higher levels of deprivation. WIMD combines data across eight key domains: income, employment, health, education, access to services, community safety, physical environment, and housing. Each domain contributes to an overall deprivation score, allowing policymakers to target resources and interventions to improve outcomes in the most disadvantaged communities.

¹⁵ **Welsh Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs)** are small geographic areas used for statistical purposes in Wales. Each LSOA typically contains a population of around 1,000 to 3,000 people and is designed to be relatively uniform in terms of population size.

regular advice and support, which helped them plan for provision to meet individual children's needs. However, in a few cases setting leaders reported that this support was not always as effective as it could be. The advice offered did not always meet the needs of individual children and was not focused clearly enough on supporting them on their next steps of development. Instead it focused too heavily on 'school readiness'¹⁶. For example, it focused on children's ability to sit and listen, participate in group activities and remain focused on a task. Leaders reported that this had a detrimental impact on children's overall well-being and developmental needs. In settings located within school buildings, many leaders reported that they were well supported by early years staff who provided useful advice and guidance on managing children with ALN.

Overall, schools and settings collected useful information on children such as their interests, likes and dislikes before starting the setting or school. Parents shared this information with practitioners, which helped them make informed decisions and plan support and experiences appropriately. Where practice was most effective, leaders collaborated effectively with multi agency teams such as speech and language to share information and best practices. In these cases, relevant information was shared with parents, settings and school leaders, and this helped them to plan transition arrangements and support effectively.

However, most school leaders expressed frustration with the level of support and funding that was made available in the non-maintained sector and Flying Start childcare providers as they were unable to match this level of support in their school. They found it challenging to communicate this to parents, and to explain that the support their child had previously received could not be replicated when transitioning to their school provision. In a few cases, this meant that the school had implemented a reduced timetable, whereas previously the child had accessed their full provision at the non-maintained setting. In addition, where parents needed to access 'wrap around' care for their child, using their previous non-maintained setting, they found that the additional support they had previously received was no longer available for them at the setting as this additional funding had been allocated to the school.

During our visits, setting and school leaders and staff told us about the significant professional learning they had undertaken to enhance their roles, especially in understanding childhood trauma and its impact, as well as speech and language assessment and support. These learning opportunities had been instrumental in helping practitioners understand their children better and adapting provision and interactions to best meet their needs. In a few cases, leaders adapted their provision to include a separate area for children who may find certain times of the day challenging. This space allowed time and space for children to regulate their emotions in a calm, less sensory stimulating environment with fewer children and higher staff-to-child ratios. This arrangement supported staff in observing behaviours and meeting children's needs more effectively and individually.

¹⁶ School readiness is a measure of how prepared a child is to succeed in school cognitively, socially and emotionally. It is a term largely used by Ofsted (Inspection England).

Support for ALN

Rachel's Playhouse Rhondda Cynon Taf

Leaders created an additional separate space for those children who find transitioning to the setting challenging. This space allowed children time and space to regulate their emotions. The space was designed to be calmer with fewer resources than the rest of the nursery provision. This space gave children time with practitioners with fewer distractions, in small groups and high ratios. This gave practitioners valuable time to observe children's behaviours, likes and dislikes to help them to prepare for the move to the main nursery setting. This transition is well planned, and children are integrated slowly as they develop their confidence and develop trusting relationships with practitioners.

Effectiveness of provision

As previously mentioned in this report, it is notable that leaders reported that more and more children are arriving at settings and schools with significant communication, personal and social needs. For many of these children, this is of a direct impact of living in poverty and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, they have not yet developed the skills to equip them to be ready for learning. Through our visits, the team considered how well settings and schools were addressing these needs through the effectiveness of the learning environment, experiences and their interactions with adults. We used [the Curriculum for funded non-maintained settings and enabling learning](#) document and the 'Three Enablers', Enabling Adults, Effective Environments, and Engaging Experiences, as a basis for our conversations and observations of practice through conducting learning walks. We examined practitioners' understanding of child development and how they ensured the learning environment reflected this understanding.

Many practitioners in non-maintained settings and schools demonstrated a sound understanding of child development. They applied this knowledge to develop a joined-up approach to planning and provision to meet children's needs effectively. They built on valuable information from families about their children, which helped them create an environment and experiences that aligned with the children's developmental stages and emerging interests. Practitioners considered the roles of the environment, adults and experiences as integral parts of their provision appropriately.

A minority of school leaders used the curriculum for non-maintained settings as guidance when designing their own school curriculum. However, in schools where knowledge of child development was less robust, many well-intentioned but misinformed leaders introduced children to formal aspects of learning too soon in an attempt to 'narrow the gap'. This included the early introduction of teaching early reading skills through the instruction of letters and sounds and the formal recording of

number work. This premature focus on formal learning often did not align with the developmental needs of young children.

Effective environments

During our visits, we found that most leaders and practitioners in non-maintained settings and schools had adapted their learning environments to allow children greater opportunities to explore, both indoors and outdoors. Consequently, children experienced a range of activities that helped them develop their skills across the curriculum's developmental pathways effectively. Where practice was most effective, leaders and practitioners had a clear understanding of what they wanted children to learn and the specific skills they wanted children to develop. They allowed ample opportunities for children to pursue their interests and engage in extended periods of uninterrupted play, which supported the development of their problem solving and thinking skills. Leaders in these settings adapted their provision to meet the needs of the children. For example, they provided quiet sensory spaces for children to retreat to or seek sensory stimulation when needed, ensuring that they felt safe and supported.

Overall, the learning environments were thoughtfully arranged to promote engagement and independence. Resources were accessible, inviting children to choose their activities and engage deeply with them. Both indoor and outdoor spaces were used creatively to provide a variety of learning experiences. In many cases, wet weather gear was provided to enable outdoor play in all conditions, which helped to support children's physical skills and develop a connection with nature. The use of real-life resources enhanced the learning environments and engaged children's curiosity well. As a result, children's involvement in these areas tended to be high. Leaders in these settings and schools created well-considered, calm and meaningful areas for children to explore, make choices and develop their skills.

In the settings that provided childcare from babies, most leaders considered carefully the progression of children as they moved through the setting. They provided a consistency of care and environment that built on children's sense of belonging well.

Many schools and settings provided a range of experiences in the outdoors for children to engage with nature. These experiences provided children with valuable opportunities to work collaboratively with large scale equipment and resources and develop an understanding of the seasons.

Many setting leaders and school practitioners considered thoughtfully the effectiveness of the environment on children's mood and ability to focus their attention. They created communication supportive environments that supported children's speech, language and communication skills effectively. Leaders incorporated cosy quiet spaces where children could think and talk together, alongside areas for role play, creative, messy and outdoor play. They reduced the use of colours in the environment to create a calm and productive learning space. Practitioners paid close attention to noise levels, ensuring minimal background noise to help develop children's attention and listening skills.

However, in the cases where the environment was less effective, there were limited resources and play equipment available both indoors and outdoors. This lack of

resources often led to lower levels of engagement and more challenging behaviour among children. There was little opportunity for children to lead their own learning and exploration through long periods of uninterrupted play. In these cases, children spent large periods of their time involved in adult led activities. Opportunities for children to develop mark-making skills, establish a love for books and reading, and gain a practical understanding of number, shape, and measure were also limited. Where such opportunities existed, they often focused too narrowly on letter and number formation through copying and overwriting activities. These environments tended to be overly dominated by tables and chairs, lacking sufficient space for active learning.

Effective learning environment

Caban Kingsland, Anglesey

Leaders have organised and planned their environment to create areas of provision that encourage children to explore and develop their skills holistically. Leaders have placed authentic contexts for learning at the heart of their provision. The home corner offers children rich real-life experiences, such as measuring baby formula to milk, chopping fruit and cutting bread to eat when hungry and playing with a wide range of real-life utensils and gadgets.

Effective learning environment

Monnow Primary School, Newport

The school has created a well-considered environment with a strong emphasis of children learning through play and leading their own learning. Practitioners provide children with extended periods of time to play in the indoor and outdoor environments where they encounter plenty of challenge. For example, resources such as small tools in the woodwork area help children to develop their fine motor skills effectively.

Enabling adults

In the best cases during the review visits, the team observed practitioners who acted as enablers of learning, providing the right balance of guidance and independence. They engaged children in meaningful conversations, asked thought-provoking questions, and encouraged exploration. This approach not only supported language development but also fostered children's critical thinking skills and developed a sense of curiosity. In most settings and schools, practitioners were effective language role models. They used approaches that support children's speech and language skills well. They used the information gathered from their assessments of children's speech and language skills to inform their planning and children's next steps of learning.

Where planning for provision and experiences was most effective, practitioners used the daily observations to identify children's fascinations and incorporate them into meaningful activities. They identified intentional learning by promoting skills in

conjunction with children's interests, ensuring good progress in their learning and development. Practitioners nurtured children's curiosity, followed their lead and made observations to plan next steps effectively. They ensured that planned activities developed a wide range of skills.

Use of observation

Ely and Careau Children's Centre, Cardiff

Practitioners make good use of daily planning meetings to discuss observations and assessments and adapt the provision for the following day. This gives them a good understanding of children's needs and next steps. Practitioners record children's development effectively through 'learning journals'. These are chronological records of a child's developmental journey. They make excellent use of adult observations and assessments, photographs and anecdotes to produce a detailed celebration of children's learning.

Where practitioners used the curriculum for non-maintained settings and the developmental pathways in their provision, they were beginning to develop a more responsive approach to teaching and learning. Practitioners made valuable observations of children's fascinations and learning stages and employed a notice-analyse-respond' model to address children's individual learning needs.

Engaging experiences

In the best examples observed by the team, experiences offered to children were hands-on, purposeful and meaningful. They encouraged children's independence and offered suitable risk and challenge. In many cases, they were rooted in real-life authentic contexts and allowed deep levels of involvement and engagement. They were holistic and allowed children to make connections across all areas of learning. Children were able to return to these experiences regularly to revisit and consolidate their learning. These experiences stirred their imagination and curiosity and stimulated their senses.

Many practitioners and leaders were beginning to consider how they could be more inclusive in their practices. They considered thoughtfully how they could reflect the communities of their children and families in a more authentic way within their provision and experiences they offered. Resources such as books, artefacts and clothing were included in the settings to develop children's sense of belonging. Celebrating festivals and special cultural events provided real-life opportunities for children to share their lives and learn about the lives of others.

In a minority of school early years classes visited, although leaders and practitioners had created a learning environment that reflected the principles of effective early years practice, there were elements of the day that were overly formal in their delivery. For example, there were long periods of group time at the beginning and the end of a session. These sessions tended to have a particular focus on the teaching of letters and sounds and number recognition. In many cases, most children were not developmentally ready for this type of instruction.

In many school nursery classes, although practitioners worked collaboratively within the school to plan experiences and activities, these tended to focus too closely on a chosen theme. These themes did not always take good enough notice of children's prior experiences and their current interests and fascinations. In addition, many practitioners delivered activities and experiences at developmentally too high a level due to their focus on the progression steps of the Curriculum for Wales. As a result, in these cases children did not make the links across areas of learning as well as they could.

Professional learning

Across many non-maintained settings, leaders prioritised professional learning for staff, particularly in areas such as curriculum development, understanding childhood trauma and speech and language support. This professional development was instrumental in enhancing practitioners' ability to support children's learning and well-being effectively. Practitioners reported feeling more confident in their roles and better equipped to meet the diverse needs of the children. However, many school leaders found it more challenging to access or find early years professional learning from their school improvement service to support them in implementing effective pedagogies and practice. In a few cases, the local authorities used settings and schools to provide training for other settings in the area. These included a focus on effective leadership and early years practice. Leaders that had undertaken visits to other settings and schools to observe effective practice reported that this had been instrumental in helping them along their own improvement journey.

Education provision offer

As part of this review the team considered the early years provision available to parents across Wales and its impact, particularly on families adversely affected by poverty. Across Wales, there is a large variation of funding and approaches to the delivery of early years education, including how children access various provisions. There is also variability in the choices available to parents as to where they can access early education. For instance, parents in local authorities in North Wales, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Caerphilly cannot access education funding in non-maintained settings during the autumn term as this provision is only available in schools. Parents in Swansea, Neath Port Talbot and the Vale of Glamorgan can only access early education in schools whereas, in Powys, this is only available in non-maintained settings. The complexities around the access and funding to early education across Wales often create an inequitable offer across the country and confusion for parents, especially in local authority border areas. Additionally, in a few local authorities, spring term admissions are based on when Easter falls rather than a specific date, such as 31 March, leading to annual uncertainty for parents regarding their child's eligibility for funding that term. Leaders reported that this has caused confusion and inconsistencies in funding, making planning staffing a challenge for non-maintained setting leaders.

Across Wales there is a variability around the allocation of school-based education places, which leads to an inequitable offer across Wales. For example, a few local authorities offer the choice of morning or afternoon place, a few offer full-time provision, and in those where part-time provision is provided there is a variation in the hours and days available. This results in parents needing to make decisions

around whether they require 'wrap around' provision and where this can be accessed if they take up the early education offer in a school.

Transition

Transitions are changes that take place in a child's life and require them to adapt to a new set of circumstances, for example the transition from home to childcare or an education setting. Transition should not be a one-off event; if it is successful, it needs to be a process planned over time so that children are guided carefully through these significant changes. These activities should support both the continuity and progression of individual children's development. Leaders should consider how collaboration and partnership working could support the planning for these transitions, particularly for the most vulnerable.

In the case of this review, we focused on the changes that young children experience as they move from home to childcare setting and setting to school. We also considered, where appropriate, the transition from Flying Start childcare provision to early education. In these circumstances, children may move from one setting to another or remain within the same childcare provision. Currently, we do not inspect Flying Start providers and so were unable to assess the effectiveness of the childcare provision, and the impact this had on reducing poverty's adverse effects. However, this review allowed us to evaluate how effectively Flying Start and education providers collaborated to share information about children's development, aiding successful transitions.

We also considered the consistency of provision between funded non-maintained settings and school. Consistent and familiar practices and provision are important factors in supporting children as they move from one provider to another.

Many leaders reported that, following the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents have been more anxious around leaving their children. Therefore, leaders have had to reconsider their previous practices to better support these parents and their individual needs.

In many cases, events such as pre-start open evenings and home visits provided schools with valuable information about children and their families. This information helped them to plan experiences and the environment to best meet their needs.

This helped children settle in quickly and form strong relationships with staff. Many settings and a few schools held regular 'stay and play' sessions for children and their families prior to starting school or the setting. These activities helped to break down barriers and provided parents with a sense of reassurance.

Most school leaders offered children and their parents beneficial opportunities to visit the school before starting. These often took the form of information events where the routines of the day were shared alongside useful tips and hints for parents to help children adjust. Many schools provided opportunities for prospective children to visit and become familiar with the building and their classroom. These events included

classroom visits, staying for lunch, watching school plays and participating in sporting events on the school grounds. These activities helped build children's confidence and foster a positive relationship with the school environment and staff.

As part of the suite of activities that schools undertook to get to know the prospective children and their families prior to entry to school, many teachers visited their feeder non-maintained setting. This helped familiarise the children with staff members and gave them a glimpse of what their day might be like at the school. Nearly all settings provided school practitioners with beneficial information about children and their development, attainment and individual needs. This ensured that schools had the necessary information to support children appropriately. In a few cases, setting and school practitioners held meetings to discuss individual children and their needs. During these meetings, they shared beneficial information, such as assessments and observations of children's play, friendships and relationships. These meetings helped school practitioners gain a comprehensive understanding of the children who would be attending their school. However, in a few cases, schools did not use this information as well as they could and focused too heavily on children's early literacy and number skills and personal care routines, such as whether they were toilet trained.

In schools where childcare settings provided a wraparound service and collected children from the local school, there was often a strong relationship between staff. In many cases, practitioners had opportunities to share beneficial information during handovers, which helped them to better understand the children and maintain a consistent approach.

However, in settings where children transferred to multiple schools in the local area, developing effective transition arrangements was more challenging, due to the small number of children attending each school. In these circumstances school practitioners did not always visit the setting to meet the children but received documentation sent by setting leaders to help the transition process. In a few cases, school practitioners telephoned the setting to talk to leaders or the child's key worker, in an effort to get to know the children better.

Overall, in the schools that we visited, there were strong and effective practices in place to support those children with additional learning needs as they moved into the school setting. Leaders worked with parents, multi-agency teams and non-maintained setting staff to share relevant information and documentation. Where this was most successful, practitioners worked collaboratively to ensure a consistency of provision and shared successful strategies that best met the individual needs of children.

In around half of the settings we visited, Flying Start childcare provision was offered in the same setting as early education, or they were situated within the school grounds. In these cases, transitions were smoother as practitioners knew the children well. Where schools were situated in Flying Start areas, many practitioners developed close relationships with their Flying Start colleagues and local Flying Start health visitor. Termly meetings were held to discuss children's development and behaviours. These meetings provided valuable information, helping providers maintain consistent provision and prepare for the cohort of children and their needs effectively. However, this was not replicated for those settings and schools in non-

Flying Start areas. In non-Flying Start areas, leaders reported difficulty in accessing health visitor support and information on children's development prior to starting and during their time at the setting/school.

However, most non-maintained and school practitioners reported that the assessment information they received from their Flying Start colleagues was not as useful as it could be. These assessments were largely tick-box exercises and did not provide a holistic picture of the child. They did not reflect the developmental pathways of the ECPLC, Quality Framework or the Curriculum for Wales. As a result, early education providers paid little attention to these assessments, instead relying on information gathered through discussions and children's profiles to plan their provision and support.

Methods and evidence base

This report draws on evidence from visits to a sample of non-maintained settings and schools across all 22 local authorities. We visited 13 funded non-maintained nursery settings and 17 maintained settings that provided funded nursery education. These included one early year's children's centre, 15 primary schools and one all age school. Of the settings and schools, we visited, eight were Welsh medium. For non-maintained settings, we ensured that there was a balance of settings from different categories of childcare, such as full day care settings and sessional care.

Schools and settings were selected based on their size, type, geographical location, and socio-economic context. All discussions were face-to-face and took place during the summer term 2024. During these visits we met with non-maintained setting leaders, school leaders and early years teachers and staff.

We also drew on evidence from learning walks to help us gain an understanding of how the quality of the learning environment was meeting the needs of children, particularly the most vulnerable. We also collected information from local authorities and school improvement services and considered how they are supporting and challenging early years education providers and schools to improve outcomes for children living in poverty. We also undertook a survey of parents who attended the Urdd Eisteddfod in May 2024. Due to the low response rate, we have not included the responses in this thematic report.

We would like to thank the children, pupils, setting and school staff, and local authority officers who supported this thematic review.

Name	Sector	Local Authority
Blaen y Maes Primary School	Primary	Swansea
Bridgend College Day Nursery	Non-Maintained	Bridgend
Caban Kingsland	Non-Maintained	Ynys Mon
Cefn Forest Primary School	Primary	Caerphilly
Clych Meithrin Casmael	Non-Maintained	Pembrokeshire
Coedffranc Primary School	Primary	Neath Port Talbot
Cwm Glas Primary School	Primary	Swansea
Derw Bach Pre School	Non-Maintained	Powys
Ely and Careau Children's Centre	Children's Centre	Cardiff
Glenboi Primary School	Primary	Rhondda Cynon Taf
Heolgerrig Primary School	Primary	Merthyr
Knighton Children's Centre	Non-Maintained	Powys
Little Lambs Emmanuel	Non-Maintained	Denbighshire

Little Stars Nursery	Non-Maintained	Torfaen
Meithrinfa Camau Bach	Non- Maintained	Ceredigion
Millbrook Primary School	Primary	Cardiff
Monnow Primary School	Primary	Newport
Mount Street Infants School	Infants School	Powys
Myrtle House Nursery	Non-Maintained	Carmarthenshire
Once Upon a Time Nursery	Non-Maintained	Rhondda Cynon Taf
Rachel's Playhouse	Non-Maintained	Rhondda Cynon Taf
School Lane Pre School	Non-Maintained	Conwy
Wats Dyke CP School	Primary	Wrexham
Westwood Primary School	Primary	Fintshire
YGG Tyle'r Ynn	Primary	Neath Port Talbot
Ysgol Bontnewydd	Primary	Gwynedd
Ysgol Borthyn	Primary	Denbighshire
Ysgol Gymraeg Nant Caerau	Primary	Cardiff
Ysgol Maesincla	Primary	Gwynedd
Ysgol Parc y Tywyn	Primary	Carmarthenshire

Glossary

EYPDG	Early Years Pupil Development Grant
Funded Non-Maintained Nursery settings	Childcare providers that provide early education for a minimum of 10 hours per week
Flying Start	<p>Welsh Government policy, which includes childcare for children aged two to three years in a quality childcare setting. Children can attend for 2.5 hours a day for five days a week during term time. Flying Start helps families with children under four years old in disadvantaged areas of Wales.</p> <p>Help available includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • funded high quality, part-time (12.5 hours a week) childcare for two to three-year-olds • an enhanced health visiting service • access to parenting support • support for Speech, Language and Communication development <p>Since April 2023, Phase 2 of the Early Years Expansion programme has been focusing specifically on extending Flying Start childcare to two-year-olds across Wales as part of the Welsh Government’s Programme for Government commitment to a phased expansion of early years provision to include all two-year-olds.</p>
ECPLC	Early Childhood, Play, Learning and Care
CAHMS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Care

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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