
Engagement work: Non-maintained sector update – spring 2021

March 2021

This report is also available in Welsh.



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This report summarises the findings from engagement phone calls made to 267 non-maintained settings between the end of September 2020 and mid-February 2021. It is based on the information discussed during phone calls with setting leaders.

During the autumn term, we only contacted settings in local authorities that fund early education that term. From January 2021, we have contacted settings in all local authorities that offer early education in non-maintained settings. The focus for each discussion was the wellbeing of children and staff and how settings supported learning and re-established provision following lockdown. Proportions relate to the sample of settings with which we have had contact.

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Main findings

Wellbeing of children and staff

Leaders report that, on return to their setting following an extended period at home most children settled well and adapted quickly to new procedures and routines. Most leaders reported that children were excited to see their friends and members of staff again and enjoyed engaging in activities.

Most leaders reported that staff were initially anxious about returning to work, although many were glad to be back once they had settled into a routine. However, since the lockdown in January, a minority of leaders report that staff morale is low. This is because schools were closed to all children apart from vulnerable children and those of key workers, but settings remained open for all children. They worry about their own health and the health of their families and are concerned about the transmission of the new strains of the virus.

Around half of settings that identified vulnerable learners reported that children were not adversely affected by the initial lockdown, with many of these children having access to hub settings. In most local authorities, access to specialist services has generally improved throughout the autumn term and into the spring, although there is still variation in services offering support and advice by visiting the setting and those who offer this solely online. Most settings report that they have not identified or reported any new safeguarding concerns.

Supporting learning

Many settings chose to close at the beginning of the first lockdown period. This was mainly due to the low numbers of children eligible to attend under the Welsh Government guidelines at the time. A few settings remained open as either a local or local authority childcare hub for those children who qualified for the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS). However, a few leaders of settings which had remained open throughout the lockdown period in 2020, reported that they had experienced financial difficulties as a result.

A few settings reopened in July at the same time as schools. Most settings had reopened for the beginning of the autumn term as parents felt that it was safe enough for their children to return. However, the increase in the COVID-19 infection rates at the end of the autumn term had an impact on settings, with a few closing early for the Christmas break. In January 2021, a minority of settings did not reopen for a variety of reasons, including the high incidence of COVID-19 cases in their area and members of staff self-isolating or testing positive for the virus. In a very few cases, leaders decided not to reopen as they felt that it was not safe to do so as schools had remained closed.

Most settings made efforts to support children and parents/carers during lockdown. They used a range of methods to ensure that they maintained regular communication with their families, providing much needed advice and guidance on how to support children at home. In most cases, the working relationship between settings and parents appears to have strengthened over the past year.

Re-establishing provision

Many settings re-opened in June 2020, following the announcement by Welsh Government that it was safe for settings to begin to re-establish education and childcare for all children. The reintroduction of Welsh Government's Childcare Offer in September was a welcome boost for settings.

In accordance with Welsh Government guidelines, settings made important changes to their daily organisation to minimise the risk of transmitting COVID-19. Most settings continued to adapt their plans for grouping children regularly, in line with Welsh Government guidance.

Nearly all settings reported that they had established appropriate infection control protocols and procedures since re-establishing provision. In these settings, the regular cleaning and disinfecting of equipment and resources has become part of their daily routine.

In general, settings reported that the guidance provided by Welsh Government and local authorities on the safe reopening and operation of childcare and education settings was useful. However, the volume of information contained in Welsh guidance, as well as the frequency with which the messages changed in the early stages of the pandemic, was often overwhelming for leaders.

As settings began to reopen in June 2020 following the first lockdown period, a minority reported a reduction in the numbers of children attending. In September, many reported that attendance was nearly back to expected levels for the time of year. In a few areas across Wales, settings reported a decrease in attendance periodically during the autumn term as coronavirus rates increased in a few local authorities. Following the introduction of further lockdown measures by Welsh Government in December, many settings reported a significant reduction in the number of children attending. In a few cases, leaders decided not to reopen in January due to the lack of demand from parents.

Most settings have adapted their provision well to ensure that children have continued to have access to worthwhile learning experiences and activities as part of their entitlement to early education. Although they have had to make necessary adaptations to conform with Welsh Government guidance, most continue to provide a range of experiences that develop children's skills appropriately.

Although the quality of support settings received from their local authority varied during the first lockdown in March 2020, most settings found the support they received overall to be beneficial. In most cases, leaders and practitioners have benefitted from the advice and support they have received from their Early Years Advisory Teacher. In addition, many settings who are affiliated to an umbrella organisation have found their support beneficial.

In Welsh-medium settings where very few children speak Welsh at home, most leaders reported that children's Welsh language development deteriorated during lockdown. Many settings who use a language scheme produced by their umbrella organisation report that it has been highly effective in developing the Welsh language skills of children and staff.

Where children who do not speak Welsh at home have started to attend settings from September 2020, practitioners have continued with their usual immersion practice to develop children's Welsh language skills.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, a minority of settings have either ceased their wraparound provision or reduced the number of collections due to staffing issues or challenges to maintaining 'bubbles'. Where wraparound collection procedures are in place, settings report having completed detailed risk assessments and changing procedures to limit the spread of the virus. Often, these arrangements are more time consuming due to different collection arrangements at schools.

Wellbeing of children and staff

Children's wellbeing

Throughout the pandemic settings tell us that they have worked hard to create a warm, welcoming and safe environment for young children. Leaders report that, on return to their setting following an extended period at home most children settled well and adapted quickly to new procedures and routines. These included arrangements such as parents dropping them off at the door rather than taking them into the setting. In a minority of settings, leaders found that a few children were anxious when their parent was not allowed to enter the building.

Cameo – Illustrated e-books for children

Staff in one setting developed an e-book for children to help alleviate any concerns about returning to the setting. The e-book illustrated how the setting had changed and how they would be welcomed back. This approach helped children to settle back quickly. The e-book was shared with parents on social media and staff in the setting also shared the e-book with the children who were still attending the setting throughout lockdown.

Most leaders reported that children were excited to see their friends and members of staff again and enjoyed joining in activities. A few reported that children found adjusting to the adapted environment and new routines difficult, for example in a small number of cases children reminded others to distance because of the virus. This improved as time progressed and as children got used to socialising again. A few also noted that children were anxious about the staggered start and finish times and were confused about why they had not been collected when others had left earlier.

Cameo – Teddies demonstrate how to keep everyone safe

In a few settings, practitioners used teddies that were familiar to the children to demonstrate wearing masks and aprons to keep everyone else safe. This helped to reassure the children and helped them to understand why staff were wearing face coverings and other personal protective equipment in a child-friendly way.

Since the December lockdown, some settings have experienced a decrease in the number of children attending. In these settings, practitioners have noted that children are asking about their friends who they have not seen for some time and a few worried about where they are.

Staff wellbeing

The wellbeing of staff has been a high priority for leaders in settings. Most reported that staff were initially anxious about returning to work, although many were glad to be back once they had settled into a routine. In these settings leaders have developed arrangements to help staff back into work, such as regular 'check-in' calls, feedback meetings and including staff in the risk assessment process before introducing new routines and procedures. This has alleviated the concerns of most staff. However, since the lockdown in January, a minority of leaders report that staff morale is low. This is because schools were closed to all children apart from vulnerable children and those of key workers, but settings remained open for all children. They perceived that schools closed because it was unsafe for them to remain open. They worry about their own health and the health of their families and are concerned about the transmission of the new strains of the virus.

Cameo – Collaborating with other settings in Cwtch clinics

One setting has established 'Cwtch clinics' via a messaging application to allow leaders from other settings in the local authority to discuss problems and share solutions. Leaders feel that this has been beneficial to them and a useful forum to discuss concerns and share or ask for advice. They tell us that it is good to speak to someone who has first-hand experience of the same issues and an understanding of the needs of the sector.

Cameo – Wellbeing champions

One setting has trained one of its staff to become the setting's 'Wellbeing Champion'. This includes signposting staff to support organisations and to agencies that can provide advice and guidance on different wellbeing issues, such as mental health support.

In many settings, members of staff were placed on furlough during the initial lockdown in March 2020 and periodically since this time. Leaders say that this generally gave staff a sense of job security. When settings reopened, most leaders reported that nearly all staff returned to work. A few settings note that a small number of staff have not returned to their previous roles although this was mainly due to non-Covid related reasons. In a few settings, the reduction in the number of children attending has led to redundancies.

During the autumn term, leaders in a few settings report feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information and advice provided by Welsh Government, local authorities and umbrella organisations. Most leaders report a negative impact on their mental health during this period.

Since early in the spring term 2021, leaders report that staff are becoming increasingly worried about losing their jobs due to the financial strains on many settings. They are fearful about the future viability of their settings, especially those that have already considered staff redundancies. These have been due mainly to funding issues and a reduction in the numbers of children attending the setting. This has had a negative impact on the wellbeing of leaders and owners, who are uncertain about the future of their settings.

Support for vulnerable learners

Around half of settings that identified vulnerable learners reported that children were not adversely affected by the initial lockdown, with many of these children having access to hub settings. Many of these settings maintained regular contact with families, such as using virtual platforms, making phone calls or sending emails to offer support where necessary. For example, one setting offered an additional Friday morning session to provide respite for parents who were struggling at home.

Leaders in a few settings felt that the local authority's criteria around access to hubs was inconsistent or unclear. In these cases, settings were often unsure about which children were allowed to attend.

During the autumn term, a minority of settings reported having difficulty accessing specialist services for vulnerable learners, such as therapy sessions and physiotherapy. They feel this had an adverse effect on children's progress. In most local authorities, access to specialist services has generally improved throughout the autumn term and into the spring, although there is still variation in services offering support and advice by visiting the setting and those who offer this solely online.

A few settings have worked with their Early Years Advisory Teachers and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Support Officers virtually to develop activities to support children with speech and language issues. For example, they have completed an assessment of children's needs and planned specific activities with support to help children's learning.

Cameo – Providing practical support for families

In one setting, they provided practical support for vulnerable children and their families. Staff collected household items and prepared food parcels for families, especially the ones struggling financially. Leaders say that families appreciated the support provided to them by the setting during such a difficult time.

Safeguarding

Since the first lockdown period in March 2020, most settings report that they have not identified or reported any new safeguarding concerns. In a very few settings where referrals were made, or where children were already on the child protection register, leaders report difficulty in contacting social workers. They found it challenging to find out information or to receive any feedback about the concerns they raised.

In a very few settings, child protection processes such as core group meetings continued using virtual platforms. In these settings, staff checked in on families on a regular basis and sent individualised learning packs home for children.

Supporting learning

Status of settings during lockdowns

Many settings chose to close at the beginning of the first lockdown period. This was mainly due to the low numbers of children eligible to attend under the Welsh Government guidelines at the time. A few settings remained open as either a local or local authority childcare hub for those children who qualified for the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS). This included vulnerable children or those of key workers. A few leaders reported that they chose to remain open as their communities and families relied on their support during this difficult period. The introduction of the Government's 'Job Retention Support Scheme' allowed leaders to furlough their staff where the demand for childcare places was not sufficient to meet the operational costs. Many settings reported that the later introduction of the 'flexible furlough' scheme allowed them to begin to reopen gradually when it was safe to do so, with staff often working reduced hours to match the demand for places. However, a few leaders of settings which had remained open throughout the lockdown period in 2020 reported that they had experienced financial difficulties as a result. In these settings, leaders felt that they had to use their financial reserves to remain open and to provide a service for their community.

Cameo – Managing closure and reopening

The setting closed its doors on March 24 and reopened in June. The decision to close was difficult, but the trustees decided that it was not sustainable to open for the very few children of key worker or vulnerable children they had at the time. It reopened in June as leaders felt that families in their rural community needed support, especially as many felt isolated and became anxious during the lockdown period. The setting initially opened for a few hours a day to support a small number of children and their families. Attendance slowly increased throughout June and July and the setting was quickly back to full capacity. By the end of August, it was providing full wraparound care including summer holiday provision for primary school pupils with strict safeguards in place.

A few settings reopened in July at the same time as schools. Most settings had reopened for the beginning of the autumn term as parents felt that it was safe enough for their children to return. These settings continued to take advantage of the flexible furlough scheme to help manage finances, especially where their attendance rates were more variable. The reintroduction of Welsh Government's Childcare Offer in September was a welcome boost for settings as they re-established provision. However, the increase in the COVID-19 infection rates at the end of the autumn term had an impact on settings, with a few closing early for the Christmas period.

In January 2021, a minority of settings did not reopen for a variety of reasons, including the high incidence of COVID-19 cases in their area and members of staff self-isolating or testing positive for the virus. In a very few cases, leaders decided not to reopen as they felt that it was not safe to do so as schools had remained closed. The reduced number of children attending some settings following the Christmas break also meant that it was not viable for a very few settings to reopen. In some cases, this was a direct result of schools being closed as they often shared the same building or were located elsewhere on the school site. In a very few circumstances, leaders and staff were aware that many parents within the community had not adhered to the national guidelines over the Christmas period and were afraid that they would put themselves at risk if they reopened the setting in January.

Support for children and parents/carers during lockdown

Most settings made efforts to support children and parents/carers during lockdown. They used a range of methods to ensure that they maintained regular communication with their families, providing much needed advice and guidance on how to support children at home. Most settings reported an increase in the use of social media platforms to communicate regularly with their families, with a few leaders using these to communicate for the first time. Many practitioners used this technology to keep in touch with the children to remind them of the setting environment and the staff, for example by posting videos of themselves reading story books or singing familiar songs and nursery rhymes. In addition, most settings used the social media platforms to provide useful activities for parents to do with their children at home, for example baking biscuits, going on a bug hunt around the garden or growing sunflowers from seed. They also signposted resources and important guidance from other organisations including local authorities, umbrella organisations and Welsh Government. However, in the very early stages of the lockdown, in March 2020, a few settings were unsure as to how much they could support parents if they were furloughed under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. In such cases, the local authority provided support and guidance for parents, although a few did not initially have systems in place to contact parents directly.

Cameo – Operating as a hub

The setting forms part of a partnership of three settings. The manager decided to close two out of the three settings in the area and operate one as a childcare hub for children of key workers and vulnerable learners. This ensured that the setting remained economically viable while at the same time, providing much-needed childcare within the community. Most staff were furloughed, with a few from each setting being asked to work at the hub. This helped to provide continuity for the children. The other two settings re-opened to all children on June 22 in line with the revised Welsh Government guidelines.

A few settings used virtual platforms regularly to communicate directly with children and parents/carers. This allowed parents to ask practitioners for advice and support directly as well as reminding children of the setting and the adults who are familiar to them. For example, practitioners at a setting used a virtual meeting platform to

speak with parents at least twice a week as well as facilitating story time and dance sessions for their children. A few settings used social media and virtual meeting platforms well to help inform parents of the safety measures that they were putting in place to allow children to return when it was safe to do so. For example, staff at a setting prepared a video for parents and children to show them the new safety measures they had introduced as well as the new layout of the room to help keep the children in bubbles. Where settings are aware of parents who do not have internet access, they generally find different ways to communicate important information.

A few settings used digital platforms beneficially to communicate with children during lockdowns. For example, a few Welsh-medium settings used a digital platform to speak to the children in Welsh so that they would benefit from hearing and using the language.

A majority of settings have established new procedures for communicating with prospective parents, such as arranging visits to the setting for parents after children have left or by sharing virtual tours of the settings on social media platforms.

Cameo – Communicating with children and parents

In one setting, the leader established a virtual group for all families with new children due to start in September. They used this group for parents to ask questions about routines and start times etc. Nursery staff introduced themselves to children and their families through the application and included videos of the learning environment. The leader felt that this had worked well as children had missed out on the usual induction and transition activities. All the children of families accessing the group have begun attending the setting.

Cameo – Catching up with children, parents and staff

In one setting, the leader streamed a live session each week using a closed social media group. She used this time to ‘catch-up’ with children and parents and any staff that were not in work. She walked around the setting so that children and families could see the changes that had been made to the environment. Parents used this opportunity to communicate with the staff and as a platform to celebrate their children’s achievements at home, such as sleeping through the night and learning to ride a bike.

The leader also used social media to send weekly challenges to parents, such as arranging a bake-off challenge where families could bake anything they liked and share a photo of the results with the group. Children enjoyed making a range of food including rice crispy cakes, cheesecakes, and pizza. The leader collected these photographs and made them into a scrapbook that children could access on their return to nursery in September.

A minority of settings produced learning packs for children to use at home. In most cases, these included items such as seeds for growing plants, art materials, mark making activities and other equipment for children to use at home. A few settings also established innovative procedures to help children with their learning, such as

establishing a toy swap between families or by loaning books to them. They created safety and hygiene protocols for the use of any swapped equipment or the sharing of books.

In most cases, the working relationship between settings and parents appears to have strengthened over the past year. Leaders and practitioners have been mindful of not placing too much pressure on parents and carers during this difficult time. In a few examples, practitioners encouraged parents and carers to contact them should they require support or advice, including on how to look after their own wellbeing, as they recognised that families in their area were struggling under the pressures of the coronavirus pandemic.

Cameo – Demonstrating children’s progress

The setting has used a virtual platform to improve the links with the home and to make record keeping and assessments as transparent and open as possible. It has also reduced the workload for staff when creating evidence bases and it demonstrates children’s progress online, in terms of their learning and wellbeing, for parents to see and engage with effectively.

Cameo – Supporting home learning

Every Wednesday the setting posted a garden themed video to support the children’s home learning during the lockdown. These included night-cam footage of hedgehogs feeding, spring flowers beginning to grow and recordings of birdsong. One member of the committee collected snails and videoed them so that children could observe them and see their trails. Other ideas shared with parents include collecting flowers to order them according to size and create patterns. This provided talking points for children and their families as well as helping to reinforce important communication and numeracy skills.

Re-establishing provision

Reopening

Many settings re-opened in June following the announcement by Welsh Government that it was safe for settings to begin to re-establish education and childcare for all children. As a result, nearly all settings report using a risk assessment provided by their umbrella organisation or school risk assessment (if based in a school) to review their provision. A few settings shared videos of these new arrangements with parents through social media. They report this alleviated many concerns before parents sent their children back.

In accordance with Welsh Government guidelines, settings made important changes to their daily organisation to minimise the risk of transmitting COVID-19. Nearly all settings made important changes to their arrangements for dropping off and collecting children, with parents no longer allowed to enter the premises. Most

settings continued to adapt their plans for grouping children regularly, in line with Welsh Government guidance. Where settings have larger numbers of children attending, they generally try to keep children in consistent 'bubbles'. This enables them to keep the setting open if they have any cases of COVID-19 by only requiring staff and children in that bubble to self-isolate. In addition, a majority of settings reported that they were focusing more on their strict cleaning routines to reduce the transfer of the virus, and less on keeping the children in small bubbles. Many settings made full use of their outdoor provision after reopening to help minimise the risk of spreading the infection. These settings invested time and money into improving their outdoor spaces during the initial lockdown in order to use as much of the outdoor space as possible. A few were successful in obtaining grant funding to purchase equipment such as canopies, which allow them to make full use of the outdoors throughout the year.

Nearly all settings reported that they had established appropriate infection control protocols and procedures since re-establishing provision. In these settings, the regular cleaning and disinfecting of equipment and resources has become part of their daily routine. Although many leaders reported initially that this was very time consuming and costly due to the increase in cleaning materials required, it has largely been successful in limiting the spread of infection while not impacting too much on children's learning experiences. For example, practitioners separate resources into boxes to make it easier to clean and air-dry them overnight. A minority of settings have created collections of books that can be stored for 72 hours before using them again. In general, most settings have reduced the amount of equipment available to children at any time and have made reasonable adjustments to activities like the sand pit and water tubs. In our latest communication with settings, many leaders report that enhanced cleaning procedures are now part of the normal routine for practitioners and are less of a burden than when they first reopened.

Nearly all settings report that children adapted well to new routines, for example they now wash their hands regularly throughout the day and know how many can play on various pieces of equipment or gather in learning areas. A majority of sessional settings have stopped providing snacks for children and request that parents and carers provide a packed lunch for them instead. Where settings still offer snacks, practitioners report that the 'snack time' tends to be more adult led than before to minimise the risk of transmitting infection. However, many settings report innovative ways of allowing children to continue to develop their independence during this activity, for example by asking them to collect their own packed lunch box from the trolley or by collecting their drink from the counter.

Nearly all settings report that the cost of PPE has had a severe impact on their running costs. However, the actual use of PPE, such as facemasks and visors, has varied across settings. A majority do not use facemasks or visors during normal daily routines with children and only use them for supporting children with their personal hygiene and preparing snack.

In general, settings reported that the guidance provided by Welsh Government and local authorities on the safe reopening and operation of childcare and education settings was useful. In most cases, the supplementary guidance provided by umbrella organisations helped leaders to better understand key messages and the

implications of any new Welsh Government announcements or publications. This helped them to resolve any conflicting messages that occasionally existed between guidance for settings and those for schools. The volume of information contained in Welsh Government guidance, as well as the frequency with which the messages changed in the early stages of the pandemic, was often overwhelming for leaders.

Cameo – Ensuring effective infection control

A group of settings under the same management developed a comprehensive range of infection control measures throughout the pandemic. On arrival at the setting, staff and children undertake temperature checks and have to wash and sanitise their hands immediately. Parents, carers and staff are asked to wear face masks when dropping their children off or collecting them from the setting. No parents or carers are allowed to enter the premises. Where possible, staff uniforms are washed at the setting and staff change at the setting to reduce the risk of contamination. All staff have been trained in how to clean and sanitise equipment and furniture as they implement the setting's 'clean as you go' policy. Leaders monitor cleanliness standards and ensure that they communicate their high expectations clearly to all staff. Staff are all provided with PPE, which they have to wear when preparing food or when supporting children with personal hygiene. All settings have a designated isolation room for staff and children should they become unwell during a session. The room is equipped with appropriate PPE and strict step-by-step rules to follow to ensure robust isolation practices. As a result of such rigorous infection control procedures, the leader believes that all staff are fully compliant with the setting's protocols and the regular sanitisation, deep cleaning protocols and quarantines are now part of the normal day-to-day practices.

Attendance

As settings began to reopen in June 2020 following the first lockdown period, a minority reported initially a reduction in numbers of children attending. They noted that this was mainly due the fact that parents were anxious about sending their children back or that they no longer required childcare because they were working at home or had been placed on furlough or made redundant. In a few instances, settings limited the numbers of children attending during the first few weeks of reopening to trial their infection control systems and to ensure that they had enough staff available to meet the children to adult ratios.

In September, many settings reported that attendance was nearly back to what they would expect for that time of year. A minority of settings actually increased the numbers of children attending as they accommodated children from settings that had not reopened following the initial lockdown. A few settings established a first-day response system for children who are absent, which they use to monitor whether the child is absent due to displaying COVID-19 symptoms. In a few areas across Wales, settings reported a decrease in attendance periodically during the autumn term as coronavirus rates increased in a few local authorities.

Following the introduction of further lockdown measures by Welsh Government in December, many settings reported a significant reduction in the number of children

attending. Leaders noted that this was primarily due to schools closing and parents deciding to look after their children at home along with their siblings. In a few cases, leaders decided not to reopen in January due to the lack of demand from parents.

Children's activities

Most settings have adapted their provision well to ensure that children have continued to have access to worthwhile learning experiences and activities as part of their entitlement to early education. Although they have had to make necessary adaptations to conform with Welsh Government guidance, most continue to provide a range of experiences that develop children's skills appropriately. For example, settings have continued to focus on developing children's communication skills across a range of activities. Nearly all settings have made good use of the outdoor learning environment to ensure that children have access to beneficial learning experiences in the relative safety of the open air. Settings have made useful adaptations to this provision by installing canopies, outdoor play equipment and by making better use of the natural environment to ensure that continue to use the outdoors throughout the year.

Most settings have adapted their indoor learning environment to help improve their infection control measures. For example, they have often removed soft furnishings from their setting and limited the range of equipment available for the children at any one time. Some settings use antibacterial soap in water and they disinfect sand regularly and this has allowed them to use much of the large equipment as possible. However, the use of sand trays, play dough and other equipment varies a great deal from setting to setting as leaders strike a balance between infection control and the benefits of providing the learning experience.

Most leaders report that practitioners plan for the early education provision in a similar way to how they did prior to the pandemic. In most cases, they have to adapt their planning and provision regularly to meet the needs of the learners, as their learning may have been impacted by the disruption of the past year. Many report that they have had to adopt an 'in the moment' planning approach to be more flexible to allow for the more varied attendance patterns and noticing the specific needs of individual children who have missed time in the setting.

Cameo – Increasing time spent outdoors

In one setting, the children have been spending an increased amount of time outside. They have been making mud pies and potions and have used large-scale construction with enthusiasm making bridges over a mud pond they dug themselves. Children have developed their play independently by adding dinosaurs, diggers and cars. The leader believes that this has had a positive impact on the development of the children's skills including their thinking and problem-solving, personal and social, numeracy and communication skills. They also use a greater range of mathematical language when taking part in these activities, for example by using words such as higher and lower, over and under when they discuss their work with each other and with other adults. Their physical skills have developed strongly as they are engaging in challenging balancing activities when they cross the mud on balance beams. The leader believes that the use of the outdoor space in this way has had a very positive impact on

children's engagement, and that they are thoroughly enjoying these highly engaging learning experiences.

Support from local authorities

Although the quality of support settings received from their local authority varied during the first lockdown in March 2020, most settings found the support they received overall to be beneficial. In most cases, leaders and practitioners have benefitted from the advice and support they have received from their Early Years Advisory Teacher. In these authorities, they have kept in regular contact with settings, and provided advice and support on learning activities. The increased use of digital equipment to hold virtual meetings with settings has been extremely valuable, and nearly all leaders report that they have benefited a great deal from discussing issues with their Early Years Advisory Teacher and their colleagues. In addition, most local authorities and regional consortia provided appropriate on-line and virtual professional development opportunities for leaders and practitioners. For example, practitioners benefited from training on first aid, speech, language and communication skills as well as how to use the outdoor learning environment to develop children's skills.

Most local authorities provided leaders and practitioners with regular useful learning activities, advice and support for families as well as signposting other learning resources, which could be shared with parents and carers. However, in a few local authorities, leaders of Welsh-medium settings reported that they did not always receive appropriate help and advice to help them support their families during the lockdown period.

Support from umbrella organisations

Many settings who are affiliated to an umbrella organisation have found their support beneficial. This support has ranged from practical guidance around operational matters, including policies and risk assessments to activities that support learning. However, a few settings reported that they received no support or guidance from their umbrella organisation.

Welsh-medium settings

In Welsh-medium settings where very few children speak Welsh at home, most leaders reported that children's Welsh language development deteriorated during lockdown. In these settings, practitioners are returning to basics such as introducing colours, numbers, and days of the week. Many settings who use a language scheme produced by their umbrella organisation report that it has been highly effective in developing the Welsh language skills of children and staff.

In a few settings, practitioners report that online activities during the initial lockdown, such as Mudiad Meithrin's 'Clwb Cylch' and other activities provided by the setting have enabled children to at least maintain their Welsh language skills. In these settings, practitioners note that parental support and enthusiasm in participating with songs and language patterns at home has also benefited children's Welsh language development.

Where children who do not speak Welsh at home have started to attend settings from September 2020, practitioners have continued with their usual immersion practice to develop children's Welsh language skills.

Wraparound arrangements

During the autumn term, many settings restarted offering wraparound provision, such as breakfast club and offering lunch to children at the setting. They have used the Welsh Government guidance to adapt their procedures appropriately.

Many settings, who offer a wraparound service to collect children from schools also restarted this provision. During the autumn term, a few settings reported that communication with schools was poor especially around the complexities of collecting and dropping off children at staggered times. A few settings were proactive in writing to schools to share information around wraparound procedures, although not all schools responded to this communication, which placed an extra burden on settings. During the spring term, a minority of settings contacted reported an improvement in drop off and collection arrangements. In these schools, headteachers and staff often arranged separate collection points in a quieter part of the building or school yard for settings to collect children.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, a minority of settings have either ceased their wraparound provision or reduced the number of collections due to staffing issues or challenges to maintaining 'bubbles'. Where wraparound collection procedures are in place, settings report having completed detailed risk assessments and changing procedures to limit the spread of the virus, for example by installing screens between the driver and children on a minibus and ensuring children apply hand sanitiser before boarding transport. Often, these arrangements are more time consuming due to different collection arrangements at schools.