



Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Childcare Sufficiency Assessment and Action Plan 2022-27

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1) Introduction

Section 22 of the Childcare Act 2006 places a duty on local authorities to secure, as far as is reasonably practicable, provision of childcare that is sufficient to meet the requirements of parents in their area to enable them to:

- take up, or remain, in work; or
- undertake education or training which could reasonably be expected to assist them to obtain work.

Local authorities are required to undertake a full assessment of the childcare provision in their area taking account of supply and demand and stakeholder views. They must conduct an assessment at least every five years and keep their assessment under review in between the main assessments, as part their annual reporting to Welsh Government.

In determining whether the provision of childcare is sufficient, the local authority must have regard to the needs of parents in their area for:

- the provision of childcare in respect of which the childcare element of working tax credit or universal credit is payable
- the provision of childcare in respect of which employer supported childcare or tax-free childcare is payable
- the provision of childcare for children who have special educational needs or require specialist care due to disability
- the provision of childcare involving the use of the Welsh language
- the provision of childcare which enables them to access their Foundation Phase early education entitlement
- the provision of childcare which enables them to access their entitlement for funded childcare places

This Childcare Sufficiency Assessment has been undertaken using a variety of methodologies to capture information relating to the supply of childcare, the demand for childcare and views about the childcare market in Blaenau Gwent from key stakeholders. Supply data has been largely provided to Local Authorities via the SASS process conducted by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). However, a very small number of local providers did not comply with the requirement to complete the SASS process and so they were followed up with a survey issued by the Early Years Childcare and Play team. A further survey (issued to providers in Spring 2022) sought further information about the impact of Covid-19. Information relating to demand has been collected via a parent survey conducted on a national basis during Autumn 2021, and is also derived from population data, intelligence about the local business market, housing developments and in respect of national programmes. This report has been produced taking account of the Welsh Government “Childcare Act Guidance” and supplementary guidance issued during 2021. The accompanying action plan will seek to address any gaps identified in the childcare sector locally and both the Assessment and Action Plan will be submitted to Welsh Government, along with an Executive Summary report, by 30th June 2022. An update on the action plan and progress

report will be submitted on an annual basis up to 2027 when the next full assessment will be undertaken. The information contained within this assessment and action plan serves multiple purposes: it directs the work of the Early Years, Childcare and Play team in working to address gaps; it links with and supports other key strategic plans including the Local Well-being Plan, the Corporate Plan and the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan 2022-2032. It also provides a source of information to childcare providers or potential childcare providers about the state of the sector locally and any potential opportunities for business expansion, and it provides information to parents/carers or other interested parties about the role the Local Authority plays in supporting sustainability and quality in the local childcare market. Furthermore, it provides information for Welsh Government to consider in the design of key programmes to meet strategic aims.

Whilst the assessment necessarily focusses on supply and demand at a key point in time (in this instance Summer/Autumn 2021) it will also consider factors that have become apparent since, both in relation to the Coronavirus pandemic and national developments in Welsh Government programmes; expansion of Flying Start to all 2- year-olds, the extension of Childcare Offer for parents in education or training, the review of the school day and year.

Data gathering has taken place over the Summer, Autumn and Spring of 2021 and the assessment has been written in the late Spring with a view to it going through the Local Authority's governance process June to September 2022. A 28-day Public Consultation on the draft Assessment will take place during July/August 2022.

Much of the data we have to build a picture of local demographics is from the Census data and currently this is only available from the 2011 Census. The information released for the 2021 Census will be used for the annual updates and progress reports. The report includes a section on the impact of the Covid-19, which are still currently unfolding. The report will include an update on setting numbers, as sadly we have seen settings closed since the SASS data was collected in Summer 2021 and will provide some commentary on challenges faced during the course of the pandemic and challenges expected in future.

The Early Years Development Childcare and Play Partnership will undertake a monitoring role, scrutinising progress and challenging the robustness of the actions to date. The group meet quarterly, and the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment and Action Plan 2022 will be a regular item on the agenda. Annual update reports are also provided to the Social Services Departmental Management Team.

The Childcare Sufficiency Assessment and Action Plan 2022 has been reported through and approved by the Early Years Development Childcare and Play Partnership, the Social Services Departmental Management Team, Corporate Leadership Team and Executive Committee.

2) Principal Statement

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council values the importance of childcare and the impact that has on economic prosperity. It has continued to build on a rapid expansion of the childcare sector between 2000 and 2014 to improve both the sufficiency and quality of childcare offered to local families. The number of childcare places has fluctuated slightly since 2014 but has remained consistently between 1,000 and 1,300.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council remains committed to supporting and improving quality in childcare and play settings to ensure that the sector contributes to the strategic priority that 'Every Child Has the Best Start in Life'. Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council shares Welsh Government's view that the provision of high quality childcare and early years education plays an important role in tackling poverty and reducing inequalities, as set out in Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan. There is a multitude of evidence that underlines the critical importance of early years experiences to future outcomes of children over a range of areas including health, education and economic prosperity. High quality childcare and early years education can have a positive influence on outcomes for children, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council are committed to continuing to strive for quality and excellence in all of our childcare and early education provision.

Having been one of the first Authorities in Wales to introduce a Quality Assurance scheme, there has been an ongoing push to ensure the schemes being used properly reflect current local needs and environments and acknowledges up to date good practice. Since the last CSA was completed the Early Years, Childcare and Play team (EYCP), along with colleagues from Flying Start have developed a safeguarding annex to be used alongside the assessment tools, reflecting the importance the Council places on childcare settings having skilled practitioners to support early identification/prevention and protect vulnerable children. There has also been development of new in-house Quality Assurance tools (We Play, Learn and Play at Home and Quality Matters) that replaces the Environmental Ratings Scheme used previously, these tools support quality in settings of all types. Colleagues from the Healthy and Sustainable Pre-School Scheme, Early Years Transformation Programme and childcare leaders and practitioners have worked with the Flying Start and EYCP teams to contribute to the development of the latest tool 'Quality Matters', which is to be rolled out during 2022. The Early Years, Childcare and Play (EYCP) team has a dedicated Quality Improvement Officer and a Childcare Strategy Team Leader, whose roles, in working with the providers to raise quality, has delivered results with quality scores improving in recent years. The role complements roles in Flying Start that undertake similar work and there is a close working relationship between both teams to ensure consistency of advice, joint delivery of training and sharing of good practice. The Play Sufficiency

Officer also supports this process by offering expert advice and training on play. There has been a Community Of Practice group established for the last three years where Officers across teams are able to work together, share information and plan training.

Blaenau Gwent CBC has used innovative and creative approaches to encourage the uptake of childcare and promote childcare careers, including childcare roadshows and the production of targeted marketing materials over the years. The EYCP team continues to promote the childcare sector, making increasing use of social media over the last few years to reach a wider audience than possible through more traditional means. The Family Information Service plays an integral role within the team delivering outreach sessions (when permitted) at Job Centre Plus offices and ante-natal clinics and supporting a variety of Local Authority and community events, to promote childcare and other family services. The need to attract more people into childcare and play training has been recognised and we have worked with the local college to develop an introductory course for childcare, 'Steps into Childcare', which have been delivered since 2017. We also deliver introductory play courses in-house. The role of the Childcare Business Development Officer has been critical in recent years, supporting the team with procurement and development of childcare services and supporting the sector to be sustainable through a particularly difficult two years.

Blaenau Gwent has successfully rolled out Flying Start to 13 LSOA's, working with up to 1071 children and their families each year, demonstrating a very positive impact on outcomes for children. The EYCP team works closely with Flying Start colleagues to develop and share good practice and offer continuous professional development opportunities for the whole childcare workforce.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council recognises the provision of childcare is also incredibly important to working parents and parents in training, affording them the opportunity to be economically active and contribute to the area's economic prosperity. We have good links with colleagues in Education, Regeneration and Planning to ensure we work together to identify and where appropriate support/challenge any developments that may have an impact on childcare needs locally.

3) Partnership Working and Consultation

Cwlwm Partners

The Early Years Childcare and Play team has a good working relationship with all umbrella organisations, with representatives from each sitting on the Early Years Development Childcare and Play Partnership (EYDCPP) to receive and share information about the sector generally and to scrutinise the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment and annual updates reports and action plans.

A standard Local Authority survey was sent to all Umbrella organisations in Autumn 2021. None of the organisations felt able to comment on the range, quality, affordability, flexibility or suitability of the sector in Blaenau Gwent, specifically as they would have to do this for 22 Authorities, however all were able to provide more general responses to questions about their thoughts relating to the state of the market and offer specific improvement suggestions for specific groups, summarised below.

NDNA Cymru noted the impact of Covid-19 and protective measures has had on income for Day Nurseries and highlighted this had created uncertainty about their future. They had concerns about sustainability and the recruitment of qualified staff. They noted that increasing staffing costs are likely to impact onto the prices charged to parents, resulting in concerns about affordability. New settings opening on school sites, potentially displacing existing places in other local settings was suggested as creating a potential financial burden for parents, especially for those with younger children, if Day Nurseries have to increase fees to remain viable. In terms of improvements for key groups there was a strong focus on making sure families were aware of the choices, programmes and financial support available to them. An additional point was made in relation to the need for Additional Learning Needs (ALN) training for staff within the new ALN system.

Early Years Wales noted they had a wide range of members in Blaenau Gwent, which included the full range of childcare provider types. They noted the work they were undertaking to help settings recover after the Covid-19 which included work on sustainability, recruitment, risk assessments and quality. They raised concerns about staff recruitment and retention and the impact this was having on service levels. Early Years Wales stated they would welcome the expansion of Flying Start to assist low-income families. They noted they would like to see clear referral pathways and information made available with regard to support for children with ALN. It was suggested that websites and social media were an important source of information for parents and the range of information available through their online channels was highlighted.

PACEY Cymru highlighted concerns with the general decline in numbers of childminders across Wales and highlighted 2 de-registrations in the first two quarters of 21/22 in Blaenau Gwent, with only one new registration. PACEY Cymru have been focussing their work on promoting

childminding as a career choice and childcare option for families. It is noted that Blaenau Gwent do not fund childminders to provide either Flying Start childcare or Early Education places and it is suggested that this would be of benefit to low-income families, ensuring parity of opportunity across Local Authority areas and better outcomes for children through continuity of care. Work undertaken with various employment organisations was outlined. The introduction of the new ALN system was highlighted as a significant development and a wish was expressed to find out more about implementation at a local level. The potential opportunity and benefits for families with children who have disabilities to use approved Nannies was also noted. The flexibility of childminders to support working families with atypical working hours/patterns for a broad age range of children was raised. Lastly, a point was made in relation to the limits placed by Planning on the numbers of children a childminder can care for, before planning permission is required and the process and costs associated with applying for the relevant permission.

Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids Club noted a lack of Out of School childcare provision in Blaenau Gwent, with a significant number of places being delivered through Day Nurseries, rather than stand-alone clubs, with implications in terms of fees charged. The need to develop Welsh medium Out Of School care was also raised as was the need to explore demand for childcare in schools that were not currently served by Out Of School services. Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids Club suggest that more needs to be done to encourage greater flexibility in services to meet the needs of parents working atypical hours (noting this type of work is often linked with low paid work). They note the benefits of settings becoming registered, to allow families to use Government funding schemes and also suggest that existing schemes be expanded (e.g., Flying Start, Childcare Offer) to increase eligibility. The need to support settings to be inclusive and accessible so that children with complex needs can be cared for, was highlighted. Sustainability is a major concern, and it is suggested that organisations carefully consider raising rental charges and also consideration is given to the impact of initiatives like SHEP, Playworks Holiday Programme and training camps has on registered providers. The need for close collaboration between the childcare sector and education, noting parental preference for onsite childcare, was noted. General issues sometimes experienced by settings located at schools were cited as a hindrance. Issues with recruitment and retention were also highlighted and a call for action to be taken at a local and national level was made, recognition of the professional status of the workforce was seen as part of this.

Mudiad Meithrin note a lack of Welsh medium provision in Blaenau Gwent and the desire for every child in every part of Wales to have access to play, learn and grow through the medium of Welsh. The need to experience full Welsh language immersion for best outcomes was highlighted. An offer to work with the Local Authority to set up Welsh language immersion playgroup sessions in their settings (following on from a successful pilot) was made. Promoting the benefits of Welsh medium childcare and education was raised, as was ensuring eligible families take up their offer of Flying Start. The ambition for access to Welsh medium childcare for children with disabilities was for it to be

easy and frictionless. Ensuring access to information to information about childcare options and Childcare Offer was a need for working families. It was suggested providers seek to extend their hours to fit in with parental needs and that Welsh speaking childminders needed to be recruited. Several recommendations were made with regards to improvements to the information contained on the Local Authority website.

Schools

A survey was sent to all 21 primary schools in Blaenau Gwent but there was a very limited response, with only 3 surveys being returned. Those schools all had childcare settings on site and felt this was beneficial and all were aware of other childcare services operating locally. One Head wanted more information about the Childcare Offer and two Heads were unsure if Childcare Offer benefitted working parents. There was a mixed view on the sufficiency of local childcare and the difficulty with take-up rates/sustainability/recruitment for after-school clubs was noted. In addition to registered childcare providers on site, one school was offering space to a parent and toddler group.

All schools in Blaenau Gwent have nursery provision and all offer free Breakfast Club. Broadly speaking there is good support from schools for local childcare provision, with 11 out of the 21 primary schools having childcare located on site. There were concerns raised with Education during 2021 regarding more schools starting to offer full-time Foundation Phase nursery places and the impact this would have on local childcare providers and that situation is being monitored.

Employers and Employment Organisations

Surveys were shared with both employers and employment organisations via the Blaenau Gwent Multi-Agency Forum. Unfortunately, only one response was provided.

The Childcare Business Development Officer sits on the Forum and regularly shares relevant information with the EYCP team regarding employment and training developments discussed at the Forum. Our plans with regards to childcare training, expansion, tender opportunities and updates on Childcare Offer are also fed into this group.

Direct outreach work via the Family Information Service (FIS) with Job Centre plus was stopped during Covid-19, however, has been restarted from April 2022. Previously FIS has met with individuals and groups of job seekers to support with guidance around childcare, funding sources and childcare careers. It is planned this activity will resume and offer additional insights into barriers faced by parents looking for work.

Local Safeguarding Board

EYCP team Officers have undergone training via the Gwent Safeguarding Board to enable them to deliver an Introduction to Safeguarding for Children and Adults to childcare and play practitioners in Blaenau Gwent. They also have the opportunity to attend information exchanges and good practice events. There are strong links with both the Safeguarding Manager in Children's services, who has attended Childcare Network meetings to provide information to practitioners, and the Safeguarding in Education Manager who has supported the teams in the development of and quality assurance of our in-house safeguarding assessment tool.

Children

Children attending After School Club provision and the School's Grand Council were specifically targeted to complete a survey regarding their views on childcare. The survey was also shared more widely on social media with parents encouraged to ask their child to participate. Despite best efforts, only 9 children completed the survey. A focus group was convened to consult with Children Looked After and their carers, but only one carer and two children attended, out of eight families invited. Unfortunately, they had no experience of childcare to share their views on that, but were able to share views on how they played that have been incorporated into the Play Sufficiency Assessment.

Four of the children used registered childcare either after-school or in the holidays, 3 were cared for by grandparents and one was solely cared for by the parent/guardian. 4 of the children said they would attend an after-school club at comprehensive, but all were under 8 years old. 6 of the 8 felt there was not enough to do in the holidays.

When asked how they would like to spend their holidays the children told us:

'Going nice places with my friends'

'Hanging out with friends'

'On days out'

'Sports – swimming, gymnastics, football, karate, climbing session, day trips, walks. I really enjoyed the free sessions that ran during the last Summer holidays'

'With family and friends going to places that are fun and of interest'

'Youth Club and Tik Tok'

'Play Outside'

I really enjoyed the free sessions that ran during last Summer holidays especially the martial arts sessions, Eden Centre and swimming'

Welsh Education Strategic Plan

There are clear and strong links with between the Early Years Childcare and Play Team and Education. The Early Years Childcare and Play Manager sits on the Welsh Education Forum and various subgroups of that Forum.

There is a strong commitment in the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan 2022 – 2032 on strengthening Welsh in Education and in the Early Years in Blaenau Gwent. Actions identified, relative to childcare, include:

- Increasing the capacity within existing childcare and early years (Welsh medium sector) by at least 2 settings in order to feed school-based nursery and Welsh medium Statutory education provision
- The development of an effective promotion and engagement strategy, which highlights the benefits of being bi-lingual, dispels myths and creates opportunities for increased participation
- Committing to a workforce development plan in partnership with EAS, and Coleg Gwent, along with other key partners

The WESP document details the childcare sector contribution in recent years to Outcome 1 'More nursery children/three-year-olds receive their Education through the medium of Welsh'. They include:

- Developments already underway to extend the number of childcare places available in Welsh in the Ebbw Fawr and Sirhowy areas.
- Approval for a Welsh medium setting in South Ebbw Fach to become a registered early education provider to meet the concerns of parents in that catchment regarding 3-year-olds using school transport.
- Work undertaken by the Family Information Service in the promotion of Welsh language resources is ongoing.
- Mudiad Meithrin have opened a new Ti a Fi in Sirhowy and a Cylch Meithrin has been registered, although not yet open due to recruitment issues.
- English medium Day Nursery in Ebbw Fawr has piloted delivering daily Cylch Meithrin sessions, supported by Croesi'r Bont.
- Success of Cymraeg for Kids programme

The Blaenau Gwent Welsh in Education Forum will continue to progress expansion of Welsh medium education and childcare in Blaenau Gwent. The Forum is very proactive and has strong representation from key stakeholders from Early Years through to Adult Education members.

Local Well-being Assessment

The Gwent Local Well-being Assessment has been recently published. Underpinning that are the well-being assessments for each of the four Community Planning Area within Blaenau Gwent, along with the eighteen for each Community Planning Area in the other Gwent Local Authorities. There is recognition in the assessment that *'Childcare is not just a service for parents who work; it is a valuable service for children too. Research indicates that childcare can provide immediate and long-term benefits to children from the poorest backgrounds if they receive high quality provision in their early years, improving prospects future generations'*.

The assessment notes the impact poverty has on our local population and, at 45%, Blaenau Gwent has the largest proportion of Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the top 20% most deprived LSOAs in Wales, as defined by the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation. The Assessments indicate that there are a reasonable range of types of provision across most community planning areas. However, Welsh medium childcare and provision for children with special and educational needs and disabilities is generally low across Gwent. Being a stay-at home parent or receiving support from family or friends who look after children were the most common reasons for parents in Gwent not using formal childcare.

In terms of the Childcare and Early Education Sector the assessment notes:

- Coronavirus has had a disruptive effect on education. School attendance has been affected and led to periods of remote learning for pupils. We don't yet know what the long-term impact on learning will be.
- Children and young people need to have the best start in life is clear and we know that much of the inequality and poor life circumstances experienced in our communities is preventable or its impact can be reduced.
- Cost and availability of childcare can be a barrier to working parents being able to work and Childcare Sufficiency Assessments tell us that:
 - The cost of childcare is a barrier for many families across Gwent.
 - More flexible opening times/wrap-around childcare arrangements are needed to assist parents on irregular shift patterns.
 - Both these factors are contributing to increased economic inactivity.

4) Population

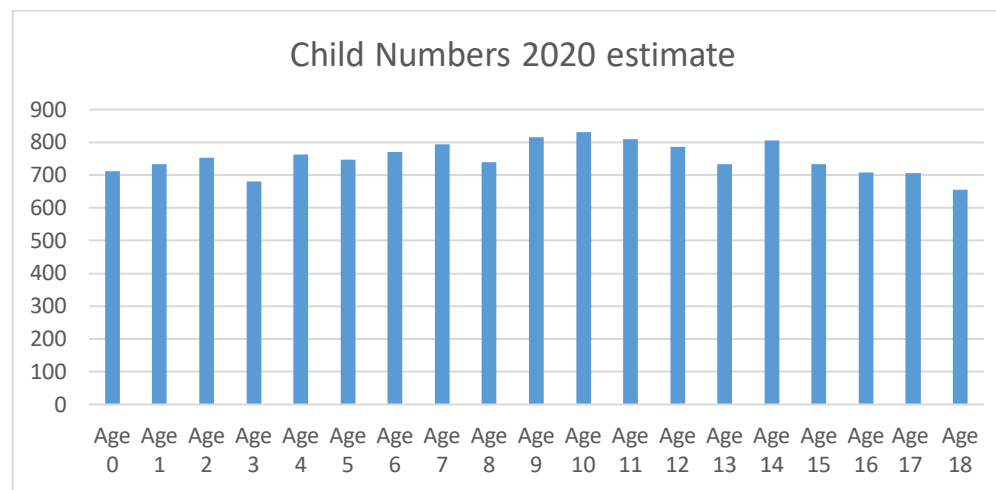
Blaenau Gwent is located in the Heads of the Valleys area of South East Wales. It is one of the smallest Local Authorities in Wales both in terms of geographical area and population size. Some of the data required for this assessment is dependent on census information collected by the Office for National Statistics. The last census was undertaken in 2021, but results are not yet published, so some of the data is sourced from the 2011 census. Therefore, some of the information used to support this assessment may now be somewhat outdated and will require updating for the 2022/23 CSA Progress Report and Updated Action Plan.

Population statistics show that the population in Blaenau Gwent has been in decline for several decades, although the rate of decline has decreased in the last 30 years. The latest 2022 total population estimate is 69,548. Population projections indicate that there will be continued population decline up to 2031, although relatively small (estimated 0.7%). However, the estimates also indicate that there will be a more notable decrease of 7.9% in those aged 15 and under.

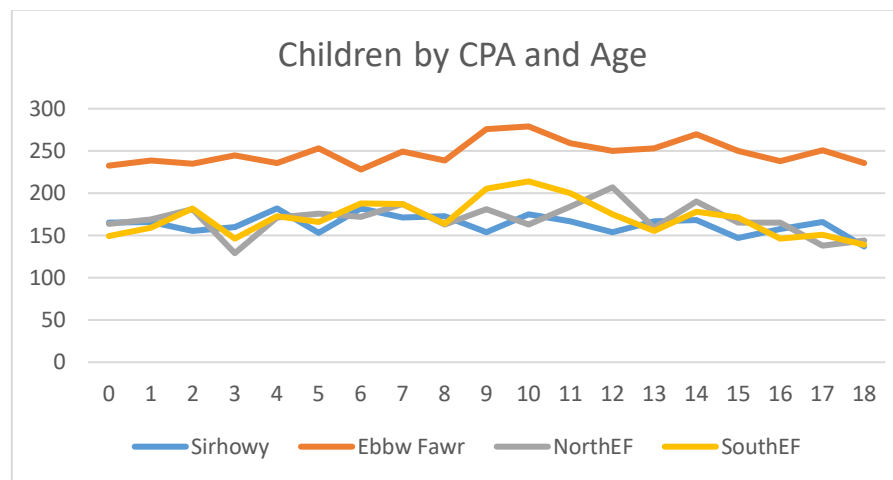
Live birth data for the last 4 years, see below, demonstrates a declining birth rate, which would seem in keeping with population projections.

Year	Live birth rate number
2020/21	623
2019/20	695
2018/19	775
2017/18	749

The 2020 population estimate, indicates the numbers of children by age group in 2020.



When separated into Community Planning Areas the figures show greater numbers of children living in Ebbw Fawr (4719), but similar numbers in Sirhowy (3100), North Ebbw Fach (3208) and South Ebbw Fach (3248).



The 2011 Census data showed Blaenau Gwent's Black and Ethnic Minority population to be just under 1,900. This equates to 2.6% of the total population and well below the Welsh average 6.7%. In 2001 the percentage of people in Blaenau Gwent from minority ethnic groups was 1.8%, approximately 1,300 people, which shows a notable increase from 2001 to 2011. Even so, in 2011 Blaenau Gwent still had one of the lowest levels of people from minority ethnic groups in England and Wales.

The number of Welsh speakers was lower at 7.8% in Blaenau Gwent in 2011 than the Gwent region and significantly lower than the all-Wales average of 19%. This figure shows a decline from 2001 when the percentage was 9.5% and was in keeping with the decline seen across Gwent and Wales as a whole.

The Disability Index in Blaenau Gwent currently has 240 children/young people (161 children aged between 0-17 years and a further 70 Young People aged 18-24 years). As a proportion of the total population for those age groups, that is 1.3%. The Local Authority recognises that there are different definitions of disability and thresholds to access services that may mean not all children are counted.

The Local Authority currently has 197 children looked after, age broken down as follows;

Age Range	CLA Numbers
Under 1 year	8
1 – 4 years	33
5 – 9 years	37
10 – 15 years	77
16 – 18 years	42

The following table shows the numbers of children living in workless households in 2018. It shows there are a higher proportion with almost one in every five children living in workless households in Blaenau Gwent, higher than the Wales average and significantly higher than the UK average.

Children living in workless/mixed or working households by number and percentage of households	Working households (None of working age in employment) %	Mixed households (some working age in employment) %	Working households (all working age in employment) %
United Kingdom	14.5%	27.9%	57.6%
Wales	17.2%	27.4%	55.3%
Blaenau Gwent	19.9%	25.5%	54.6%

5) Supply

Overview – Childcare Types, Services and Places

This information reflects data collected in Summer 2021 via the SASS process to present a snapshot picture of childcare services at a point in time. Updates where appropriate will be included in the narrative for each childcare type as circumstances have changed for some providers since data was collected.

Childcare Type	Childcare Services	Registered	Unregistered
Childminder	Total Childminders	32	0
	Full Day Care	31	0
	Half Day Care	25	0
	Before School	28	0
	After School	28	0
	Wraparound	24	0
	Holiday	32	0
	Other	0	0
Full Day Care	Total Full Day Care *	16	0
	Full Day Care	11	0
	Half Day Care	14	0
	Before School	5	0
	After School	8	0
	Wraparound	13	0
	Lunch	7	0
	Holiday	14	0
	Other	0	0
Sessional Day Care	Total Sessional Care	6	0
	Morning Session	6	0
	Afternoon Session	5	0
	Wraparound	0	0

	Lunch	2	0
	Holiday	2	0
	Other	0	0
Out of School Care	Total Out of School Provision	3	0
	Before School	0	0
	After School	2	0
	Holiday Club	1	0
Nanny	Total Nannies	0	0
Play Provision	Total Play provision	0	12
	BG Play Team	0	6
	SHEP	0	6

There were no unregistered childcare providers at the time data was collected, only play provision was unregistered. One previously unregistered after-school club has closed, and one further unregistered club decided not to re-open following the pandemic.

At the time of recording there were no nannies in Blaenau Gwent that we were aware of, however one person has registered through the Voluntary Approval Scheme in Spring 2022.

There was no crèche provision in Blaenau Gwent.

The table below illustrates that there is a spread of childcare and play services available across Blaenau Gwent. Whilst the number of providers offering both sessional and out of school childcare appear low, it is important to note that most providers registered to deliver full day care offer sessional, after-school and holiday places. Additionally, all childminders offer at least some holiday care.

Childcare Type	Numbers of Providers by Community Planning Area				
	Sirhowy	Ebbw Fawr	North Ebbw Fach	South Ebbw Fach	Total
Childminders	4	7	10	11	32
Full Day Care	4	7	2	3	16
Sessional Day Care	2	1	1	2	6
Out of School Care	0	0	2	0	2
Play Provision	2	4	3	3	12

It is notable that whilst the numbers of childminders registered in Sirhowy and Ebbw Fawr are significantly lower than the numbers in North Ebbw Fach and South Ebbw Fach, both of those former areas are well served in terms of full day care provision.

Registered Places Term Time Provision

Childcare Type	Registered Places Term Time				
	Maximum Capacity	Number of Children Using Service	Total Places Across All Services	Number of Vacancies across all Services	Waiting List
Childminder	228	239	1226	167	7
Full Day Care	621	809	2678	416	49
Sessional Day Care	260	229	229	128	0 #1
Out of School Care	110	130	110	40 #2	0

#1 only one provider recorded a waiting list for 70, assumed to be an error

#2 one provider noted 200 vacancies but only registered for 40 places (they were closed at the time data was collected)

The total number of registered places across all provision is 1,219. For comparisons with previous CSA's where sessional day care places were counted twice (where there were 2 sessions being provided in the same day), that total amounts to 1,335 places.

In almost all childcare types there are more children on the books than there are registered places. This is because by far the most common attendance pattern is part time, which sometimes means one registered place is spread across 2 or more children.

Unregistered Term Time Provision

There is no unregistered provision during term time at this time. After-school clubs that have previously run as unregistered provision have been lost due to Covid.

Registered Places – School Holidays

Childcare Type	Registered Places School Holidays			
	Maximum Capacity	Number of Children Using Service	Number of Vacancies	Waiting List
Childminder	228	N/K	N/K	6
Full Day Care	496	N/K	N/K	0
Sessional Day Care	44	N/K	N/K	0
Out of School Care	70	N/K	N/K	0

The numbers of places are significantly less at 836

The data supplied via SASS does not distinguish between children attending or vacancy rates for holiday and term time care.

Unregistered Provision – School Holidays

Unregistered provision consists of open access play sessions and the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP). Open access play provision runs in Blaenau Gwent over three days per week for 5 weeks of the Summer holidays, during October and February half term. There is no defined limit on places offered, as this will depend on the numbers of staff and volunteer are available on any day to support the sessions. Sessions typically run at 6 sites each week for two hours each time.

SHEP ran in 6 schools in Summer 2021, offering 280 places across 2 weeks of provision. The provision is targeted at children most in need by the schools so is not necessarily an option for all working parents seeking holiday childcare.

Childminders

At the time of data collection Blaenau Gwent had 32 childminders offering 228 registered places over 1,120 different types of provision (full days, half days, before school, after school, school holiday). This is a decrease of four childminders since 2017 and sadly there have been a further 2 de-registrations since the data was captured in Summer 2021.

The table below demonstrates the services offered, geographical spread of childminders on language categorisation:

Area	Total Number	English Medium	English and Welsh Medium
Sirhowy	4	4	0
Ebbw Fawr	7	3	4
North Ebbw Fach	10	7	3
South Ebbw Fach	11	9	2
Total	32	23	9

Nearly all childminders offer a good range of services, with a good spread in each Community Planning areas:

<u>Services</u>	<u>Sirhowy</u>	<u>Ebbw Fawr</u>	<u>North Ebbw Fach</u>	<u>South Ebbw Fach</u>
Full Day Care	4	7	10	10

Half Day am	3	6	8	8
Half Day pm	3	6	9	7
Before School	4	6	7	11
After School	4	6	7	11
Holiday Care	4	7	10	11

There is a lot of choice available in two community planning areas – South Ebbw Fach (eleven childminders) and North Ebbw Fach (ten childminders), in terms of numbers of childminders and services available. There is less choice in Ebbw Fawr (seven childminders) and a very limited choice in Sirhowy, with only four providers identified. No childminder in Blaenau Gwent offers a Welsh medium service although 9 are categorised as offering both English and Welsh. Whilst there are childminders offering this mixed language provision in all other areas, there are none in Sirhowy.

Whilst the data indicates most childminders offered a range of services in terms of Monday to Friday provision and early morning to early evening provision, there is no late evening/overnight care available, and no childminder offers a weekend service. Opening hours range from 6.00am in the morning to 18.30pm in the evening and there are providers offering services over 12 hours each day in each area. All childminders provide at least some holiday provision across the Summer holidays, however twenty-four childminders reported that they didn't open for the Christmas holidays (or had not yet decided at the point they completed the survey. One provider in South Ebbw Fach did not open for any of the half term holidays and one further childminder did not open at Easter. Six childminders in total did not open for May half term. Otherwise there is good coverage over most school holidays in each area.

The majority of children (60%) using childminders in 2017, did so on a part-time basis but that has increased to 80% in 2021. Full time attendance has decreased from 34% of children in 2017 to 16% of children in 2021 and those attending ad hoc has remained a similar proportion (5% in 2017 and 4% in 2021).

Childminders were caring for 277 children ranging in age from under 12 months up to 11 years of age and at the time of the survey were caring for 6 children with additional needs, a proportion of just over 2%.

The hourly cost of childminder provision ranges from £4.00 per hour to £6.00 per hour, but by far the most common charge was £4.50 per hour. Calculated as an average of all provider charges in each area, North Ebbw Fach is slightly more expensive at £4.89 per hour and Ebbw Fawr produced the cheapest average at £4.37 per hour.

There are a significant, but reducing, number of vacancies across the Borough for childminder services, with a vacancy rate of 13%, compared to 30% in 2017. Seven childminders recorded a waiting list for full day care places, one for afternoon care and three for after school care. The vacancy rate could indicate supply is sufficient, although there is potential to offer more parental choice and flexible childcare, through childminders in the two Community Planning Areas where there are lower numbers. Whilst there are only four childminders operating in Sirhowy and seven childminders operating in Ebbw Fawr, both of these areas are well served by day nursery provision. However, there is potential for growth as childminders could offer more flexibility for some families. It is also important to note that none of the childminders in Sirhowy offer a service in Welsh or in both English and Welsh, so there is potentially a gap in provision in respect of language choice in this area. This may be more sought after by parents with the opening of the new Welsh medium seedling school in Tredegar in 2023/24.

Covid has been a major challenge for childminders with fifteen childminders having to temporarily close their service on at least one occasion. Only one childminder felt that they didn't have sufficient PPE during the pandemic. Sixteen childminders said there had been less training offered, but four felt there had been more. (It may be that the online nature of training offered during the pandemic made it easier for some to access training). Fourteen childminders were unsure of their future sustainability, whilst the remaining eighteen felt confident about their sustainability for another year or longer.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The loss of childminder numbers in Blaenau Gwent is a concern, not just because of the loss of childcare spaces that brings overall but also because of the reduction in choice of types of childcare available for parents/carers. Childminders can sometimes offer flexibility that setting based providers cannot and many parents prefer a home-based setting.

There is some indication that vacancies have diminished since the last full assessment, and this should support sustainability moving forward. Whilst a significant number of childminders were unsure of their future last Summer, it is hoped the grants supplied to the sector in the second half of 2021/22, along with the reduction in of restrictions should provide a more stable base for their businesses.

All but three childminders are registered to deliver Childcare Offer, but none are commissioned to deliver Flying Start or Early Education currently. The expansion of Flying Start will potentially offer more opportunities for childminders and this is being actively considered currently.

Engagement with the Local Authority in terms of training uptake and attendance at Network had significantly improved up until the pandemic. During the pandemic regular communications from the Early Years Childcare and Play team were shared with childminders and there were virtual meetings held to discuss and offer help with grants specifically.

There is a gap in the area for childminding services that could be delivered through the medium of Welsh and extending the number of services that can offer both English and Welsh would be very desirable.

There is also a potential gap for parents who need childcare at atypical times (very early morning, late evening, overnight) that could be considered both by existing childminders and those considering becoming a childminder for those that may want to look for a unique selling point.

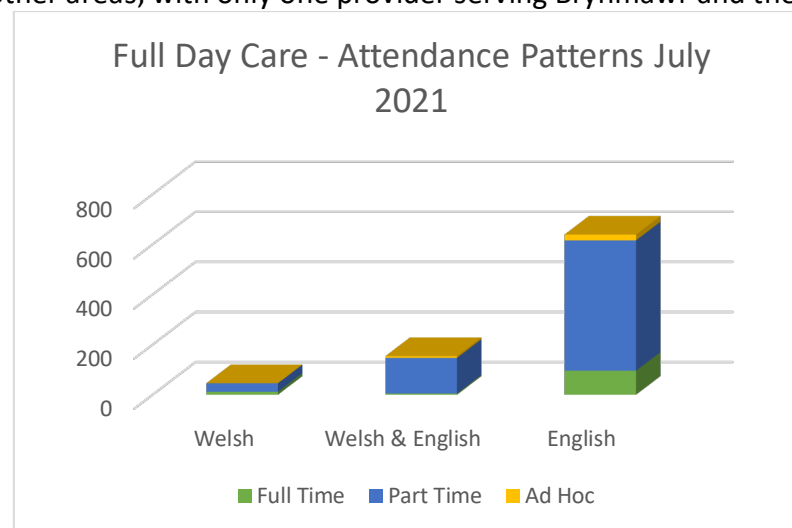
Full Day Care

The number of providers registered to provide full day care has increased significantly from ten to sixteen, since the last CSA conducted in 2017. The providers are made up of eight Day Nurseries (2 new nurseries opened through the pandemic), 2 Cylchoedd Meithrin and 6 Playgroups who between them offer 621 registered childcare places with 3073 places across service types. There are full day providers in every community planning area; four in Sirhowy, seven in Ebbw Fawr, two in North Ebbw Fach and three in South Ebbw Fach. They offer a range of services from full day care to wraparound and lunch service. The table below illustrates the range of services and places offered by providers, for each Community Planning Area:

Service Type	Sirhowy	Ebbw Fawr	North Ebbw Fach	South Ebbw Fach
Full Day Care	104	316	48	42

Half Day Nursery am	129	284	48	81
Half Day Nursery pm	110	284	48	81
Playgroup/Cylch Meithrin am	0	48	43	69
Playgroup/Cylch Meithrin pm	0	48	43	42
Before School	85	153	48	62
After School	85	270	158	42
Lunch	83	108	72	39
TOTAL	596	1511	508	458

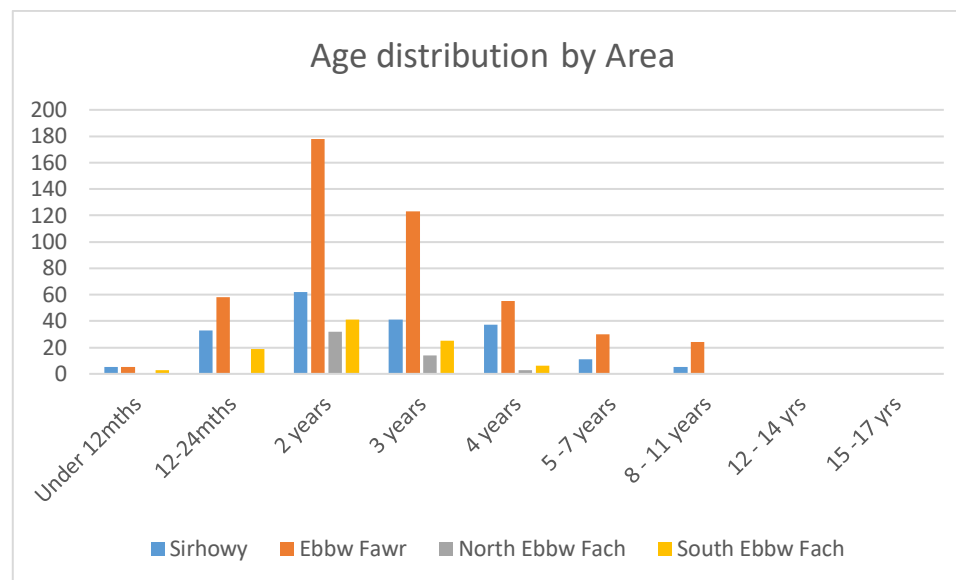
The number of places is significantly higher in Ebbw Fawr, than the other three community planning areas, that area being particularly well served by Day Nurseries with four operating in and around Ebbw Vale. The numbers of full day/half day care and playgroup places in North Ebbw Fach are significantly lower than other areas, with only one provider serving Brynmawr and the top end of Nantyglo.



There has been a significant change in attendance patterns since the last CSA, although part-time attendance remains the most prevalent type, it has increased significantly from 55% to 83%. In contrast full-time attendance has reduced from 36% to 13% and ad hoc attendance from 9% to 4%.

None of the Day Nursery providers identified as Welsh medium providers; one identified as using both English and Welsh, whilst the remaining seven are English medium settings. One Day Nursery in Ebbw Fawr has been piloting the delivery of a Cylch Meithrin service within their setting with some success. The two Cylchoedd Meithrin, that provide full day care for 38 registered places, offer a shorter day than full Day Nursery settings at 6 hours maximum. One playgroup, previously identified in 2017 as a Welsh medium setting, now identifies as an English and Welsh setting and the remaining five playgroup providers identified as English medium settings.

It is notable that the significant years for the provision of full day care services are between the ages of 2 and 3 years, with a decline in numbers from 4 years onwards and no take up post 11 years of age.



32 of the 731 children attending full day care were identified as having a disability or additional needs, which represents 4% of the children taking up childcare places.

The providers reported 410 vacancies over their range of services in July 2021, which is 15% of total services provided and represents a decrease in vacancy rate which was standing at 34% for the same period in 2016.

Only two community planning areas had providers reporting waiting lists – Sirhowy (39 children) and Ebbw Fawr (8 children), all relating to English medium services.

There are 2 Cylchoedd Meithrin offering 95 places, across morning, lunch and afternoon sessions. Up to 99 children were accessing a place in Summer 2021.

The hours of provision range from opening times of between 7.00am to 9.15am and the session end times from 2.45pm to 6pm. Day nurseries typically opening from 7.30am to 6pm, and the Cylchoedd Meithrin/playgroups run from between 9am and 3.30pm. No full day care providers offer late evening finishing times or weekend provision. Session lengths vary from 2.5 hours up to 10.5 hours. There are full day nurseries offering the longer opening hours in each of the Community Planning Areas.

Day Nurseries are generally open for 50/51 weeks of the year (closing for 1-2 weeks at Christmas but open for the remainder of the year. The Cylchoedd Meithrin and Playgroups are more mixed with only four settings offering some holiday provision.

Costs for Cylchoedd Meithrin and Playgroups ranged from £8.50 to £15.00 per session and full day nursery costs ranged from £36 to £45 per day.

Covid had a huge impact on Full Day Care providers with eleven of the 16 providers temporarily closing at least once (by Summer 2021). The two Cylchoedd Meithrin closed early in the pandemic and remained closed for 5 months, five other providers closed for a period of 2-3 months. All providers felt at the onset of the pandemic they had no access to sufficient PPE, although all felt they had sufficient in July 2021. Only five settings said there had been an impact on staffing ratios. Fourteen of the providers has all staff undertaking weekly Lateral Flow Tests, the remaining two had some staff undertaking them. Whilst only ten of the sixteen providers had staff who had to isolate by Summer 2021, it is anticipated that most, if not all, have now had staff isolating. The majority of providers said that there had been less training available. One provider felt lack of IT had impacted on this and two noted lack of staff cover had been a factor. Eight providers noted the restrictions on completing practical elements of training qualifications had been an issue. Lack of availability of suitable training was also highlighted by eight providers but only two felt the training they needed was still unavailable at the time the survey was conducted. Twelve of the sixteen were operating at full capacity in Summer 2021, only one provider was unsure of their future sustainability, one felt confident for 6 months and the remaining were confident for the next year or longer.

Strengths and Weakness

There has been a significant increase in full day care provision since the last full assessment in 2017, there are three new settings in three Community Planning Areas (Sirhowy, Ebbw Fawr and South Ebbw Fach) and the other additions have been created by sessional day providers re-registering to deliver full day care. Whilst still offering sessional care, particularly relevant for Flying Start providers, these providers have been able to offer wraparound services enabling them to offer Childcare Offer to parents that need that service.

After identifying a gap for full day nursery in South Ebbw Fach in 2017, a bid for a new build was put forward and approved as part of the Childcare Offer Capital Programme, however this gap has now been met by a new provider opening up in Llanhilleth in 2021. Plans to pursue the option of a new Full Day Nursery in that area under the Capital Programme have since been dropped, not wanting to displace new provision, with funding moving to support other schemes in Blaenau Gwent. One of those schemes is Flying Start hub expansion at Swffryd, which is currently progressing. An opportunity to deliver full day care for 2–12-year-olds from the newly expanded hub should be tendered in Summer 2022, creating further full day care spaces in South Ebbw Fach.

A gap in provision of Full Day Care has been identified in North Ebbw Fach, specifically in the Brynmawr area, which currently only has one playgroup provider offering limited opening hours.

There are a good range of services available through full day care providers in each of the community planning areas, but limited choice for those parents wanting provision in Welsh or in both Welsh and English. One of the other schemes approved under the Childcare Offer Capital Programme was for a Welsh medium full day nursery to be built in the Ebbw Fawr area, to meet the need for Welsh medium provision. Additionally, Welsh medium sessions have been piloted by a full day care provider in the Ebbw Fawr area, meeting some need in the meantime and hopefully adding to the range of choices for Welsh medium in the longer term. The opportunity to extend the pilot into other English medium full day care providers in all areas of Blaenau Gwent would be welcomed.

There are also plans to incorporate a new Welsh medium childcare setting into the new seedling school planned for Tredegar under the Welsh Medium Schools grant. This is likely to become a full day care provider to provide the greatest flexibility for the setting to support local parents.

Whilst the range of opening hours particularly for the full day nursery providers is currently good, it would seem there is demand (although difficult to quantify) for providers offering care for atypical hours. This could be a service for existing or new providers to consider piloting or providing.

Sessional Care

There are currently six sessional care providers in Blaenau Gwent, a reduction of eight providers since the last assessment, including five registered and three unregistered providers. As outlined in the full day care section, some providers have re-registered as full day care providers.

Community Planning Area	Welsh	Welsh and English	English
Sirhowy	0	1	1
Ebbw Fawr	0	0	1
North Ebbw Fach	0	1	0
South Ebbw Fach	0	2	0
TOTAL	0	4	2

The table above indicates the number of settings in Blaenau Gwent, which completed the SASS as sessional providers in July 2021, categorised according to the language they operate in. It does not include settings that are registered for full day care but offer sessional care and are recognised as offering sessional care locally to avoid double counting. They will, however, be included in the assessment of strengths, weaknesses and gaps in service.

The settings offer 284 places over their range of services; morning sessions, afternoon sessions and lunch services, no provider reported offering wraparound care. The numbers of places per area for term time and the numbers of children attending are in the table below.

Community Planning Area	Number of places offered	Number of Children Attending
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Sirhowy	80	94
Ebbw Fawr	56	26
North Ebbw Fach	72	29
South Ebbw Fach	76	106

Taking into account the settings registered for full day care but offering sessional care places there are at least two providers in every community planning area and a reasonable spread of places across the four community planning areas. There are, however, now only 2 providers offering Welsh medium sessional care (both registered as full day care), with the setting that had been categorised as Welsh medium in Sirhowy in the last CSA, re-categorising themselves as English and Welsh medium. The existing Welsh medium settings are in North Ebbw Fach and South Ebbw Fach.

In terms of vacancies, four providers reported they had vacancies ranging from one place to twelve places. Only one provider reported having a waiting list (for a morning session) but has stated 70 children were waiting for a morning place. This is assumed to be an error as the figure seems unrealistically high.

Only two settings offered holiday care, one in Sirhowy and one in South Ebbw Fach, offering some care in the Summer, February and Easter holidays, but not at October half term, Christmas or May half term.

Opening hours vary, with one provider only offering morning sessions but the remainder offered both morning and afternoon sessions, two settings offer a lunch service. Morning and afternoon session lengths are typically set at 2.5 hours for all registered settings. Settings are registered to offer care for children in the 2 years to 4 years' age group.

Charges per session range from £9 - £11 per session.

All settings are registered to deliver Childcare Offer and all but one is registered with Flying Start.

Covid has impacted on all providers with all settings having closed at least once during the pandemic, three providers closed for over three months. All providers felt they had access to sufficient PPE. No setting had seen an impact on staffing ratios and all staff had been doing the weekly LFT testing. There was a mixed view on the impact on training, with three settings reporting there had been more, two less and one saying there had been no change. Every setting was confident about their future sustainability for at least the next year or longer.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Although the overall number of providers registered to deliver sessional care has declined, the number of sessional places available has not because seven full day care providers offer sessional care places in addition to the existing six registered providers. Settings evolving by re-registering to become full day care providers to meet the needs of parents and to enable them to offer Childcare Offer is very much a positive both for parents and for the settings themselves in terms of sustainability.

There are currently fewer Welsh medium sessional providers than there were in 2017 (a reduction of one provider), however as outlined in the full day care section above, plans are progressing to meet identified gaps in both Ebbw Fawr and Sirhowy.

There has been an increase in the number of settings that are commissioned to deliver Flying Start and the future expansion of that programme offers real opportunities for all sessional providers to receive funding to deliver this programme, along with other childcare provider types. All settings are registered to deliver The Childcare Offer for Wales, and this helps with sustainability/profitability.

All providers support the Funded Childcare scheme (previously Assisted Places). Providers offer support for children with Additional Learning Needs and have engaged well with preparation and learning associated with the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs Education Tribunal Act (Wales) 2018.

All providers engage well with the EYCP team and comply with our transition arrangements, attending transition meetings (as appropriate) and completing transition paperwork. Attendance at Network events is usually very good, as is uptake of training.

Several providers have benefitted from a range of grants that have been offered during the pandemic period and the outlook of the sector is positive with settings reporting some confidence in their sustainability.

Crèche Provision

There is currently no crèche provision in Blaenau Gwent. Flying Start has recently put an opportunity to provide crèche provision out for tender, but there were no applicants, and the opportunity has been re-tendered and a promotional exercise undertaken to try and encourage the setup of a mobile crèche.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Given there is no current provision operating in Blaenau Gwent, there are no strengths to be identified.

There is a need for crèche provision to support key Welsh Government programmes and in particular Flying Start and Families First parenting programmes, so this is a weakness in the local childcare sector currently. However, current feedback suggests that the limited nature of crèche services combined with general recruitment difficulties make it a difficult service to sustain for local providers and so the opportunity has been shared on a wider basis to attract a new provider into Blaenau Gwent.

Out of School Childcare

As of July 2021, there were only two stand-alone out of school clubs in Blaenau Gwent, both based in North Ebbw Fach. Sadly, since then one further club has closed leaving only one remaining club open. At the time data was being collected there were 130 children attending the clubs on a mix of full-time, part-time and ad hoc basis but the majority attending ad hoc.

The club that remains open offers both after school and holiday provision and categorise themselves as English medium setting.

At the time of data collection, the one provider that has subsequently closed reported 40 vacancies, but at the time the club was not open.

The remaining club did not report on vacancies or waiting lists. That provider offers holiday club for all holidays apart from the Christmas weeks. Charges are £6 for an after-school session and £20 for holiday care.

Strengths and Weaknesses

There are huge concerns about the loss of stand-alone after-school provision in Blaenau Gwent, with four after-school providers being lost over the last three years, all school-based providers. The re-opening of Out of School clubs after the Covid pandemic was a difficult area to through for the EYCP team. The pandemic has undoubtedly had a huge impact with after-school clubs being prevented from re-opening up until early Summer term 2021 due to Local Authority and schools concerns around the difficulties in managing protective measures by maintaining bubbles/avoiding children from different classes mixing. The position has been exacerbated by the loss of demand, loss of staff and issues with recruiting new staff. From anecdotal evidence it appears that some parents, who have been enabled to work from home during the pandemic, no longer require after-school provision as they are managing their childcare needs themselves; this has had an impact on demand levels.

Whilst other childcare providers do offer after-school and holiday provision, it is recognised that these providers are often more expensive than stand-alone school-based clubs and most are off school sites meaning children have to travel to the childcare setting.

In 2017 there had been only one stand-alone holiday club and that remains open. This is an English medium service so there is no provision for children, parent/carers wanting a service in Welsh or in both Welsh and English.

The EYCP team will be working with local schools, including the Welsh primary, to ascertain the need for after-school care for their pupils, but conscious of the need not to displace other forms of childcare in the process and also being careful to juggle supply alongside demand.

Open Access Play Provision

Open access play opportunities have increased significantly in recent years, firstly through a commissioning arrangement with a neighbouring Local Authority and in the last two years, through deployment of our own Local Authority Play Team.

Open access sessions are typically offered in most school holidays once a week in 6 locations across each of the community planning areas. The timings of sessions are restricted to 2 hours and children under eight must be accompanied by parents.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The opportunity to access free play opportunities in each of the community planning areas is a positive for children and their parents/carers and feedback received is overwhelmingly positive. However, the limited nature of provision (being in one location once a week, for some holiday weeks with times limited to two hours), is unlikely to present childcare options for most parent/carers.

Inevitably budget restrictions mean the number of sessions we are able to offer is limited and there is no current scope for extending this provision. Although we have been able to employ two new Play Leaders in the last two years through the Welsh Government Playworks grant, the level of service offered is still very dependent on volunteers, some of whom have been working with the team over some years. As volunteers move on, it is necessary to recruit and train new volunteers.

Nanny

There is only one nanny registered as living in Blaenau Gwent (recent registration – April 2022), but no information about services offered or costs is currently kept by the Family Information Service. This is a welcome addition to the range of services available as there have been no nannies in the area previously that we have been aware of.

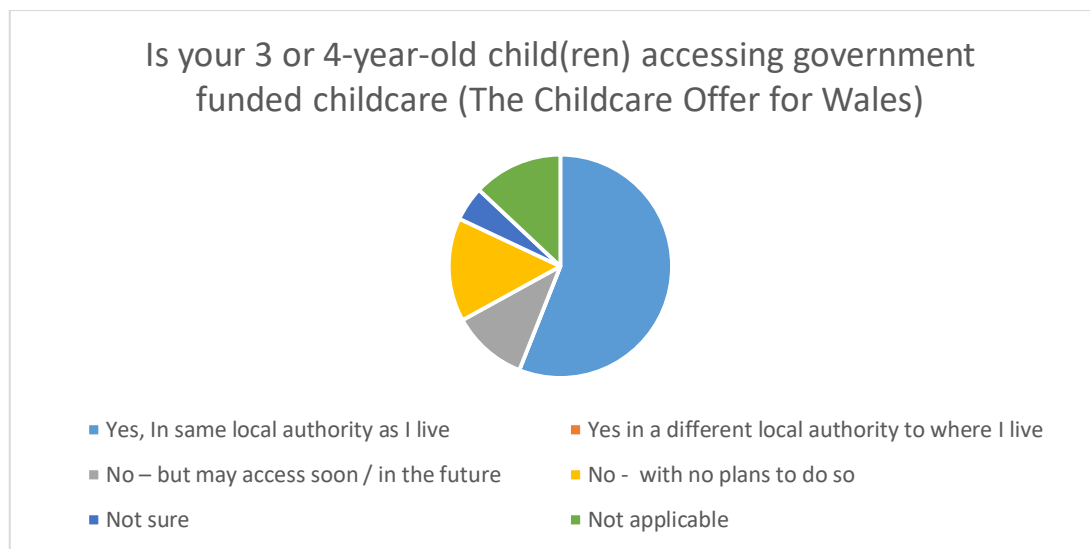
Strengths and Weaknesses

The cost of hiring nannies is likely to still be a barrier to individuals offering the service and parents choosing this form of childcare in Blaenau Gwent. Affordability of childcare remains the top concern for those both currently using childcare and those intending using it in future. According to Talent.com the average nanny salary in the UK in 2022 is £26,325 equating to over £500 per week.

6) The Childcare Offer for Wales

Only four out of fifty-six childcare providers reported they had not registered to deliver Childcare Offer in Blaenau Gwent.

There are a further 142 out of county providers registered in Blaenau Gwent to deliver Childcare Offer for children from Blaenau Gwent and/or Torfaen. As of April 2022, there were 17 children from Blaenau Gwent accessing Childcare Offer in other Local Authority areas. The respondents in the survey with 3–4 year-olds were largely using childcare in Blaenau Gwent (56%), 15% of respondents had no plans to use Childcare Offer and 11% said they may access soon or in the future:



Reasons for not using The Childcare Offer for Wales largely centred around the child being in full-time education, but other reasons given included:

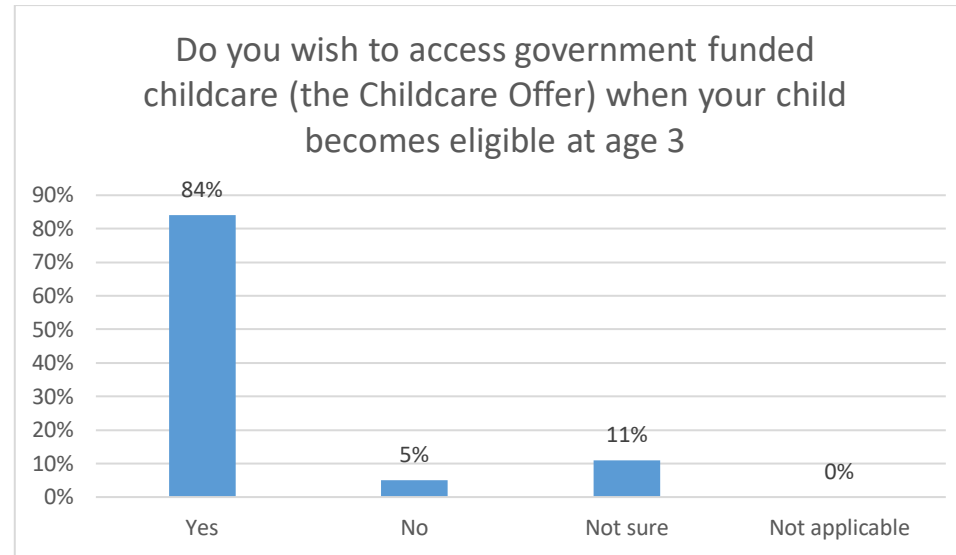
'I am no longer eligible for the childcare funding for my youngest as my husband recently got made redundant the end of July and is now actively re-seeking employment. Therefore I am the only parent working full time with a wage.'

'Not heard of it'

'Not available to me'

'Don't think it's available to us due to not being a flying start family'

A significant majority of respondents, who had younger children, also said they would use Childcare Offer when their child turned three:



The table below shows application numbers for each term since the programme was piloted in Blaenau Gwent. A term-by-term comparison, taking account of the suspension of the scheme in Spring/Summer 2020, shows an upward trend in terms of numbers applying for the Childcare Offer.

Blaenau Gwent CBC		Comments
Term	No. of Applications received	
Autumn Term 2017	181	1 st round of applications, so 2 cohorts of children eligible
Spring Term 2018	77	

Summer Term 2018	80	
Autumn Term 2018	106	
Spring Term 2019	98	
Summer Term 2019	92	
Autumn Term 2019	97	
Spring Term 2020	105	Childcare Offer was suspended due to COVID during this application round
Summer Term 2020	52	Childcare Offer was suspended due to COVID during this application round
Autumn Term 2020	97	
Spring Term 2021	92	
Summer Term 2021	78	
Autumn Term 2021	123	
Spring Term 2022	110	Application round remains open
Summer Term 2022	67	Application round remains open

Strengths and Weakness

The majority of providers in Blaenau Gwent (93%) are registered to deliver Childcare Offer in Blaenau Gwent, offering a wide choice of provision for parents wanting to access the Offer. Several children are able to access the Offer in other Welsh Local Authority areas, so cross border arrangements appear to be working well. Since the pilot was introduced, several providers have re-registered as full day care,

extended opening hours, or added holiday provision to meet the needs of parents wanting to access the Offer, and some have added pick-up/drop off services to provide full wrap-around.

A significant majority of parent/carers reported they were either using or intended to use Childcare Offer when their child became eligible. In Blaenau Gwent, all parents of children approaching three are targeted with information about the Childcare Offer. Most parents/carers seem aware of the Offer, and this was also the case for stakeholders that responded to the surveys issued.

The application process can be complicated for some parents, especially those that are unemployed and different Local Authorities use different application systems, making it impossible for an approved case to be simply transferred from one area to another. Feedback from providers has demonstrated levels of frustration and administrative burden caused by some providers having children from more than one Local Authority area meaning they are dealing with two or more Local Authorities and navigating different claims/payments systems.

It is anticipated the introduction of one national digital platform for both parent applications and providers' claims/payments, will simplify things for both parent/carers and providers alike.

The recent rate review and increase in hourly rate from £4.50 per hour to £5.00 per hour from April 2022 has been warmly welcomed by local providers, who had been in receipt of the same rate since 2017.

Welsh Government have recently announced the programme will be extended to parent/carers of three and four-year-olds in training, this will undoubtedly increase application rates further.

7) Flying Start

Flying Start settings in Blaenau Gwent are a mix of Local Authority run settings (2) and commissioned providers (13). All settings take fee payers, Childcare Offer children and offer Local Authority Funded Childcare Scheme places in addition to Flying Start children, so no setting is Flying Start only. The numbers of children attending a setting with a Flying Start place can vary from one child to thirty-three.

A new childcare provision is currently being developed on the Swfrydd Primary School site which will go out to tender shortly for a new or existing provider to bid for. It is envisaged the provision will be open by the end of 2022.

Providers have typically been located in or close to allocated Flying Start geographical areas, however, in order to respond to demand for outreach places, further providers have been commissioned to allow parents/carers access to childcare close to where they live. There are currently no childminders commissioned to provide a service. Additional work is currently being undertaken to support more existing childcare providers to become registered Flying Start providers. A new framework for Childminders to become registered as providers will also be available by September 2022 to support the expansion of the Flying Start programme. The expansion programme will prioritise: addressing deprivation, increasing Welsh language provision and addressing gaps in availability of provision.

Childcare Type	Providers by Area				
	Sirhowy	Ebbw Fawr	North Ebbw Fach	South Ebbw Fach	Total
Full Day Care	3	4	2	3	12
Sessional	1	1		1	3

There are two providers offering Welsh medium provision, one in South Ebbw Fach, one in North Ebbw Fach. Seven providers reported offering a service in both English and Welsh with the remaining seven offering a service in English only.

Year	Take-up No/Eligible No	Take-up Rate
2017-18	244/269	91%
2018-19	261/231	89%
2019-20	202/219	92%
2021-22 Term 1	96/106	91%

Take up of Flying Start childcare remains high in Blaenau Gwent as illustrated in the figures above. Flying Start collect information from parent/carers about reasons for declining a Flying Start place and in 2020-21 these were as follows:

Reason for Decline	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Total
Attends private/full time childcare	0	0	0	0
Parent anxious	2	1	1	4
Alternative childcare e.g., grandparents	1	2	0	3

Due to age	1	1	0	2
Transport	1	0	0	1
Moving out of area	1	1	0	2
Private childcare outside FS area	1	0	1	2
Decline/No reason Given	1	1	1	3

Only 16 parents completing the parent survey were accessing Flying Start childcare, parents not accessing Flying Start areas gave the main reasons as not living in a Flying Start area/not being eligible. Comments included:

'We live one street away from access'

'Not living in a flying start area unfortunately, I did when my daughter was born up until recently and I found it really helpful. It's a shame only certain areas are classed flying start areas as my baby on the way will miss out'

'No information on it don't know where it is if I'm in a flying start area etc'

'I don't live in a flying start area'

'No because its not available to me. The houses on the opposite side of the street in cwm are eligible for flying start but my side are not.'

'Not in flying start area'

'Don't live in a flying start area'

'I don't think we are eligible'

'No as previously explained no longer eligible.'

'Not in the right area for flying start!'

'Because flying start isn't acceptable in my area or post code.'

'Flying Start in our area depends on what postcode you live in. As my post code does fall into the relevant post code she misses out on the Flying Start childcare and all activities that they put on during the year'

One Local Authority Flying Start setting was repurposed to respond to the Covid pandemic and first lockdown, extending their registration to offer a service to a greater age range of children and longer opening hours for vulnerable and key worker children. That same setting has continued to extend the service post Covid and has moved from morning only Flying Start sessions to include afternoon sessions to meet the childcare demand in that area.

Strengths and weaknesses

There is a good mix of Flying Start provision in Blaenau Gwent, with a choice of settings across Community Planning areas that provide either sessional or full day care, enabling parents to have continuity of childcare and wraparound care if needed. There is a choice of language provision in only two areas currently, but there are plans to build new Welsh medium provision in both Ebbw Fawr and Sirhowy, both areas having been identified in previous gap analyses (reported in the Full Day Care section).

Settings engagement with the Local Authority quality assurance process has always been very positive, a new scheme has been recently developed and childcare settings, including Flying Start providers, have been included in the development process.

There are well established transition arrangements in place to ease the transition of children into the setting and then onto starting school nursery. All settings engage with the process and attend transition meetings.

The outcomes for children accessing Flying Start childcare, and the programme as a whole, are monitored closely and reported to Welsh Government. The management information produced helps to shape future delivery of this service.

One of the weaknesses of Flying Start is that is not a universal service available to all children and parents in Blaenau Gwent. There remains a sense that parents feel there is an unfairness in the post-code nature of the service. The planned expansion of Flying Start from September 2022, should help alleviate this.

Further there is suggestion, from some childminders and PACEY Cymru, that childminders should be able to register to deliver Flying Start in Blaenau Gwent. This is something that will be considered as part of the Flying Start expansion plans as mentioned above

8) Free Breakfast Club Provision

All primary schools in Blaenau Gwent offer free breakfast club, although services were stopped during Covid due to concerns about maintaining bubbles and limiting infection/self-isolation risks. All have reopened since the beginning of January 2022.

Area	Name of Schools
Sirhowy	Deighton Primary, Glanhowy Primary, Bryn Bach Primary, Georgetown Primary, St Joseph's RC Primary
Ebbw Fawr	Ebbw Fawr Learning Community Primary, All Saints RC Primary, Willowtown Primary, Cwm Primary, Glyncoed Primary, Beaufort Hill Primary, Rhos-y-Fedwen Primary

North Ebbw Fach	Blaen-y-Cwm Primary, St Mary's Church in Wales Primary, St Mary's RC Primary, Coed-y-Garn Primary, Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg, Ystruth Primary
South Ebbw Fach	Abertillery Learning Community: Tillery Street Campus, Roseheyworth Road Campus, Six Bells Campus, St Illtyd's Primary, Soffryd Primary

9) Foundation Phase Nursery

Blaenau Gwent has three non-maintained settings and twenty-three primary schools offering Foundation Phase Nursery. The locations of the settings/schools are set out below, along with admission numbers.

Area	Name of Settings/Schools	Admission Number
Sirhowy	Tiggys Day Care	Not specified – demand led
	Deighton Primary	30
	Glanhowy Primary	65
	Bryn Bach Primary	30
	Georgetown Primary	60
	St Joseph's RC Primary	41

Ebbw Fawr	Acorns Playgroup Ebbw Fawr Learning Community Primary All Saints RC Primary Willowtown Primary Cwm Primary Glyncoed Primary Beaufort Hill Primary Rhos-y-Fedwen Primary	Not specified – demand led 58 30 60 52 52 30 26
North Ebbw Fach	Blaen-y-Cwm Primary St Mary's Church in Wales Primary St Mary's RC Primary Coed-y-Garn Primary Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg Ystruth Primary	26 30 53 30 60 37
South Ebbw Fach	Cylch Meithrin Brynithel Abertillery Learning Community: Abertillery Campus Roseheyworth Campus Six Bells Campus St Illtyd's Primary Swffryd Primary	Not specified – demand led 59 45 45 30 19

Every primary school and campus of 3-16 schools in Blaenau Gwent offers early years education, offering places in every ward in each community planning area. Additionally, there are now three non-maintained providers, an increase of one provider since the last assessment, which allow parents extra places and choice, including language choice (as the latest provider to register is a Welsh medium setting). Take-up of early years education remains high in Blaenau Gwent, dropping a little in 2020/21 and 2021/22, possibly as a result of Covid concerns:

2021/22	92%
2020/21	92%
2019/20	99%
2018/19	94%

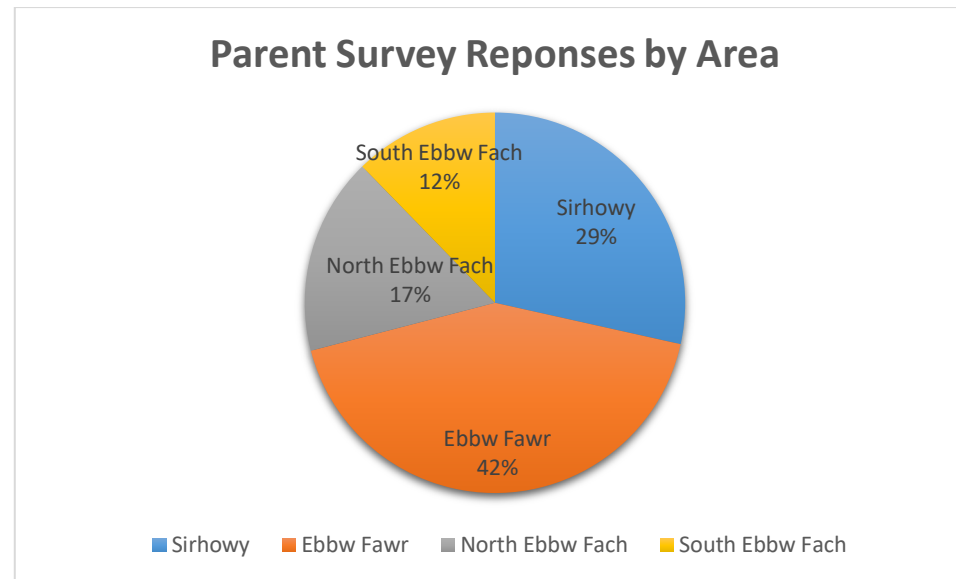
2017/18 97%

All children are offered places over 5 days per week but whilst all non-maintained providers offer 12.5 hours, the hours offered by school providers does vary from 10 hours per week to 30 hours per week and can sometimes vary in one school depending on whether a morning or afternoon place is offered.

10) Understanding the Needs of Parents/ Carers

233 parent/carers completed the childcare survey indicating their Local Authority area was Blaenau Gwent, however it could be ascertained from the data 28 surveys were completed from parents living outside of the area. Local Authority area could not be ascertained for a further 28 parent/carers. The number of responses is very low, despite great efforts made to promote the survey heavily across Blaenau Gwent, and so will not necessarily be representative of the full parent/carer cohort in the area.

The geographical split for those respondents living in Blaenau Gwent is as follows:



There are respondents from each area, but there is a much higher proportion of responses from parents/carers living in Ebbw Fawr at 42%, which is greater than the overall population proportion at 33%. Conversely, the response rate for South Ebbw Fach was far lower at 12% than the proportion of overall population at 23%.

Parents/carers told us the childcare they were currently using term time and in holidays was as follows:

Term Time		Holidays	
Childcare	Total Number	Childcare	Total Number
Childminder	28	Childminder	23
Before School Club/Breakfast Club	50	Holiday Club	9

After School Club	23	Private Day Nursery	67
Private Day Nursery	71	Playgroup	5
School Nursery	25	Pre-Prep (Private) School	0
Play Group	12	Cylch Meithrin	0
Drop Off Creche	1	Drop off creche	1
Nanny	0	Nanny	0
Au Pair	0	Au Pair	0
Family/friends (paid)	5	Family/friends (paid)	8
Family/Friends (unpaid)	137	Family/friends (unpaid)	133
None	20	None	30
Cylch Meithrin	2	Other	0
Other (not stated)	9		

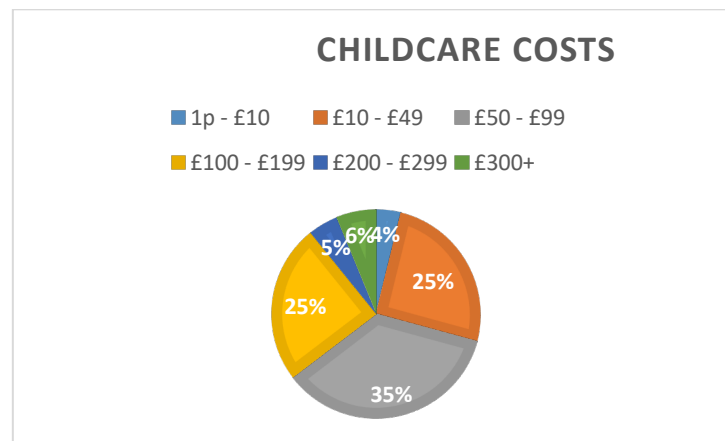
In common with results from the last assessment, there is still a significant number of parents relying on informal childcare, both during term times and in holidays. In terms of more formal provision, the most popular form of registered childcare with respondents is Full Day Nursery, followed by Childminders.

9 out of 43 parent/carers with two-year-olds were accessing a Flying Start place. Parent/carers not accessing Flying Start were largely living outside of a Flying Start area, so ineligible.

For the 77 parent/carers with three–four-year-olds, 55 reported using early education and 34 reported using Childcare Offer. Reasons for not using Childcare Offer included: child in full time school, not heard of it, not eligible.

9.5% of respondents said their child had a disability, 11% said their child had a special education or additional learning need.

Whilst a larger proportion of parent/carers reported they had no childcare costs, a significant number of the total proportion used unpaid family/friends' care. Of those having to pay, the most common cost was between £50 and £99 per week.

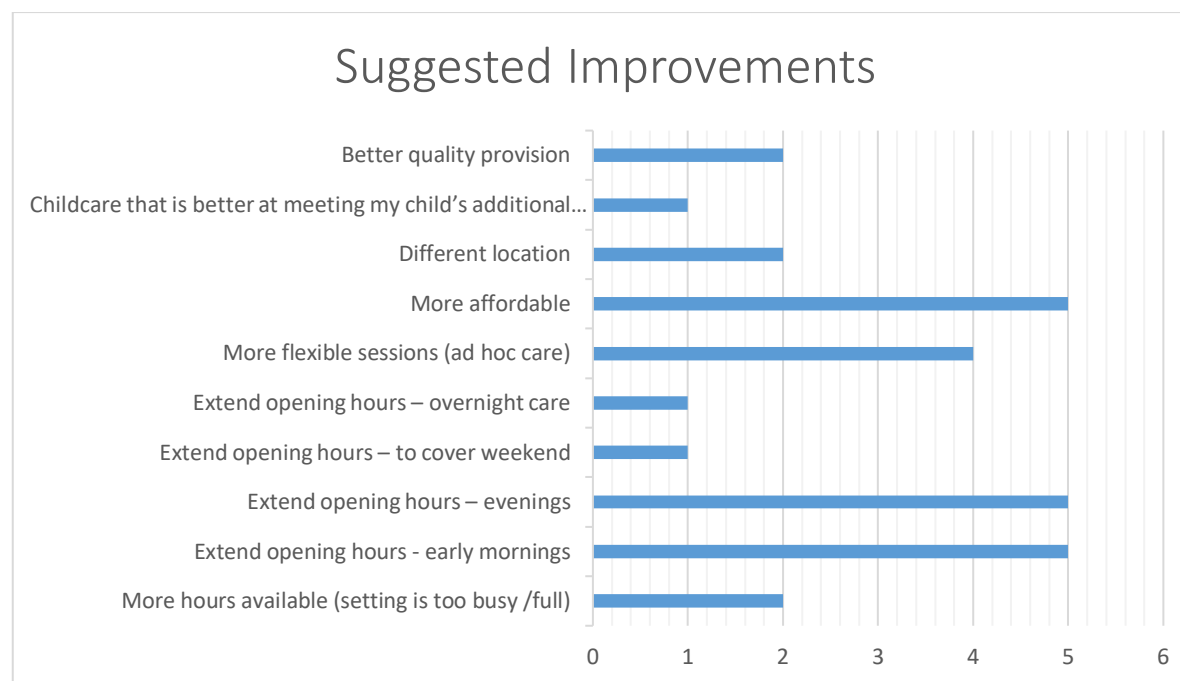


As indicated by the provider survey the majority of children are attending settings on a part-time basis. Only 38 parent/carers indicated they used 30 hours or more childcare a week.

A significant majority of parent/carers reported being either very or quite satisfied with their current childcare provider (95%).

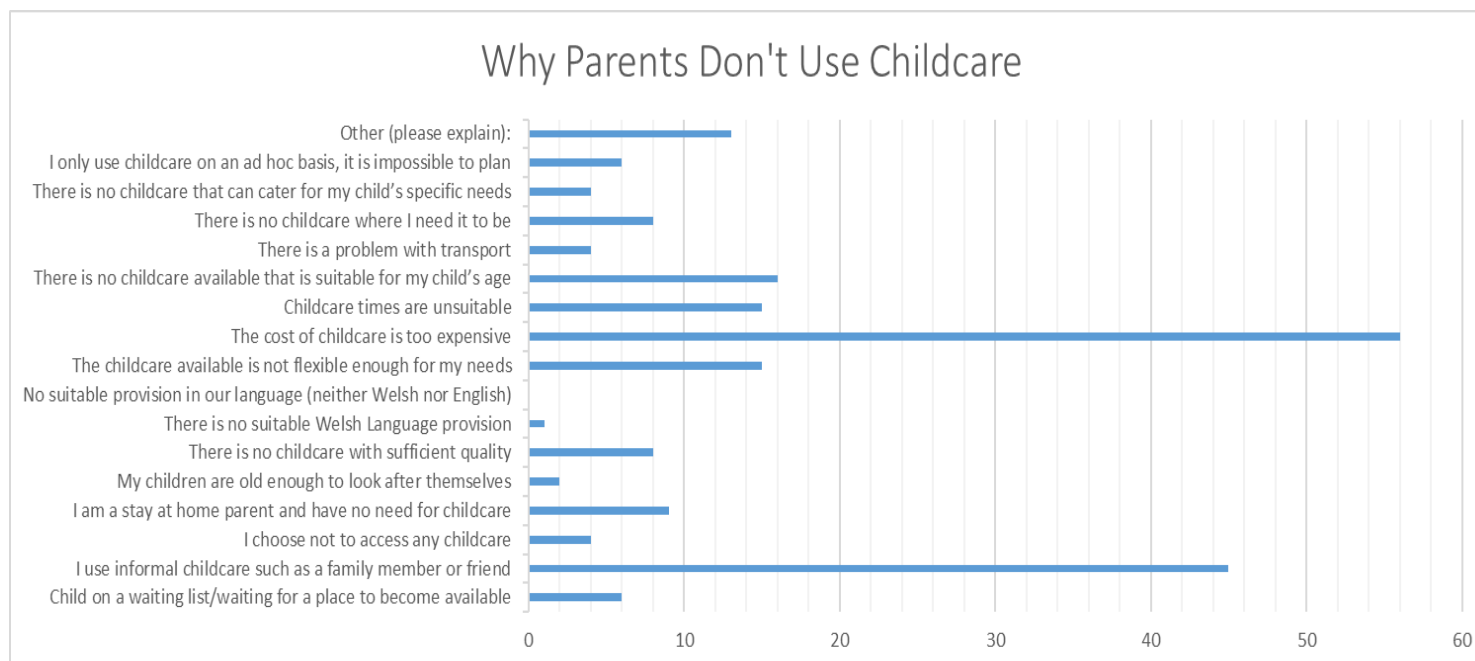
Parent/carers noted barriers to accessing Welsh medium childcare included distance (11 respondents), availability (11 respondents), Insufficient hours (5 respondents) and Cost (3 respondents).

For those not happy with their childcare, the following improvements were suggested:



Affordability and extended opening hours feature most prominently in parent responses.

Respondents not using childcare were asked to provide reasons why they did not, and the top reason given (by some margin) was the cost of childcare. This was followed by a preference for using family/friends. Whilst the numbers are relatively low, it is concerning that some parent/carers report difficulties with finding childcare available for their child's age and suitable for their needs. Some parents also have difficulties with the flexibility offered by services.



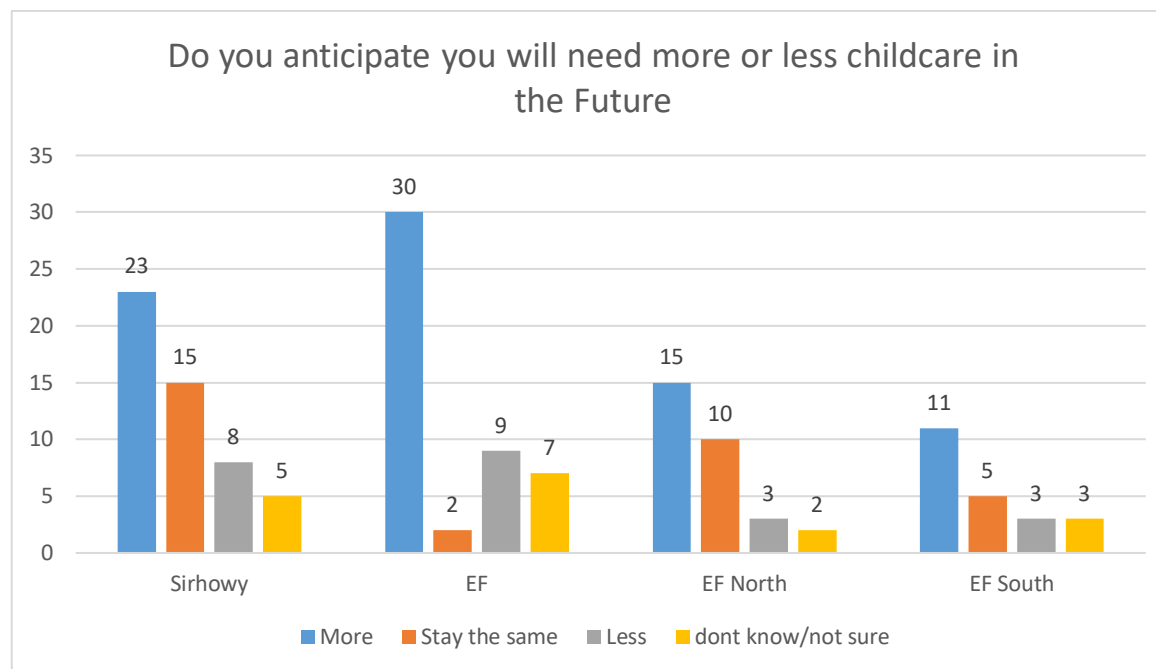
Other comments about childcare services were invited at the end of the survey and responses can be sorted into themes which include:

- After-School/Breakfast clubs not running during in the pandemic was very problematic
- Lack of provision for children with ALN and disabilities
- Costs of childcare being prohibitive to working/increasing work hours
- Flexibility of opening hours being an issue
- Provision for older children harder to source
- Concerns about quality of care

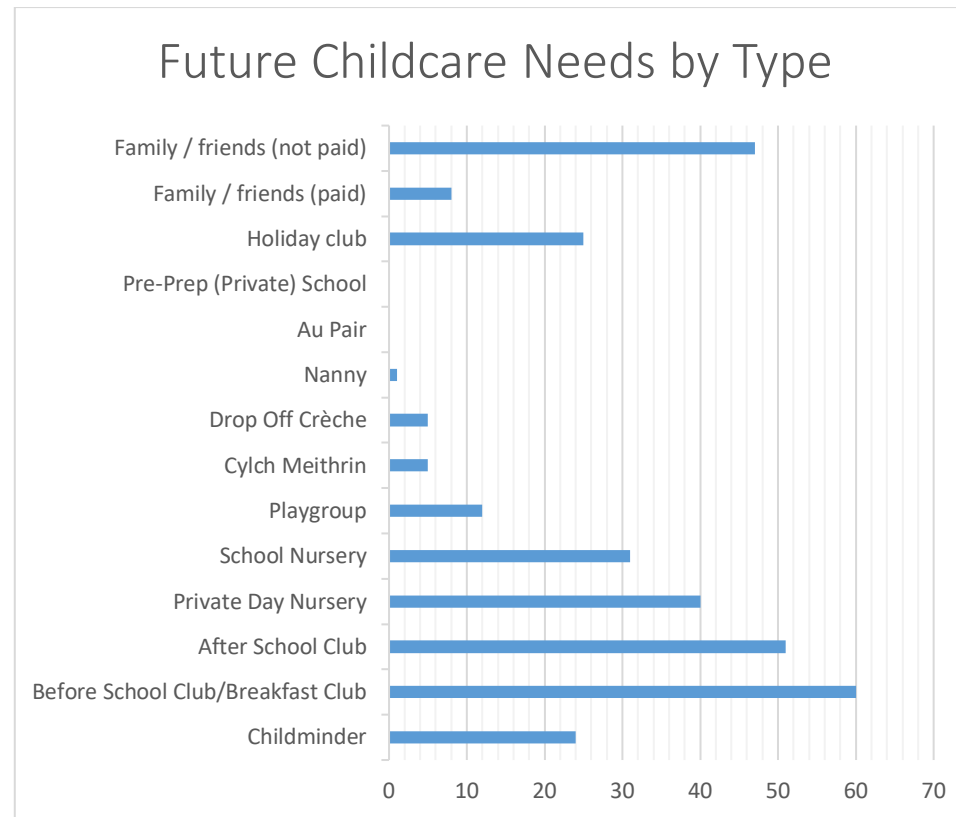
11) Future Demand

Parent/Carer Survey

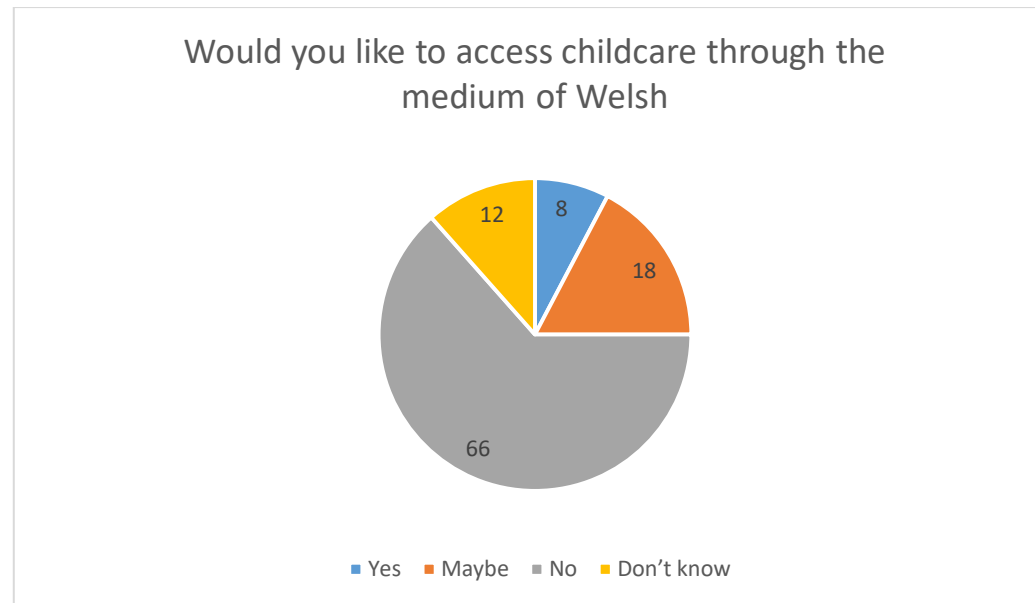
Survey results indicate that the majority of respondents said that they would need more childcare in future. Broken down by Community Planning Area, there appears to be greatest future demand in Ebbw Fawr, followed by Sirhowy, North Ebbw Fach and then South Ebbw Fach.



When asked what type of additional childcare was required in future, the results indicate a continued reliance on unpaid family/friends care but also higher demand for breakfast club, after-school club and full day nursery places. However, it must be noted again that the sample size is not large, and caution must be taken with regards to 'potential' future plans for childcare.



49 respondents indicated they had some Welsh language skills. In terms of demand for Welsh medium childcare specifically, the parent/carers response indicates that combined 26 parents indicated either they would like or would possibly like to use Welsh medium services.



Key Developments

Current population data suggests there will be continued population decline in Blaenau Gwent, particularly marked in the 0-15 group. This in itself, if confirmed by the latest 2021 Census data, could indicate the need for childcare may also decline. There are, however, other factors that will impact on, or could impact on future childcare needs.

These include the expansion of the Flying Start programme, starting in 2022, with the intention of offering childcare provision to all two-year-olds in the coming years. Whilst the first-year expansion is relatively small in terms of numbers, with an additional 88 children being able to access childcare from September 2022, eventually the full cohort of two-year-olds accessing childcare will drive much greater demand. In Summer 2021, 475 two-year-olds were attending a childcare setting, as a proportion of the population estimate of 733 children (for one-year-olds in 2020, that would be two-year-olds in 2021) that represents 65%. Within that 65% of children that attend childcare, it is also important to recognise that not all those children will be attending settings five days a week. SASS evidence shows part-time attendance is by far the most common form of attendance. The numbers of children increasing the days they attend a setting, along with children becoming eligible

for Flying Start childcare who otherwise would not have attended, is likely to result in a much greater need for pre-school childcare provision. The Flying Start team and Early Years Childcare and Play team are currently working to scope current capacity against growing demand.

The extension of the Childcare Offer for Wales to parents accessing training and education from September 2022, may further impact on the numbers of three and four-year-olds accessing childcare. It is difficult to quantify numbers as many of the children that may now fall into eligibility under this extension may already be accessing childcare funded by parents, PACE or college funding schemes.

There are a significant number of new housing developments that could attract families to move into Blaenau Gwent. The huge increase in people having home-working opportunities is encouraging many families to extend their house search areas and the relatively lower house prices in Blaenau Gwent may attract families from neighbouring areas. Plans for approximately 1500 new homes in the Ebbw Fawr area and just under 300 homes in the Sirhowy areas could attract new families into those areas and could impact on childcare needs, in those areas specifically, or more widely in Blaenau Gwent. There are currently no major business developments planned that would have an impact on likely demand levels for childcare.

Welsh Government plans on potentially extending the school day in Wales and restructuring term dates may also impact on childcare needs or the pattern of childcare offered in future, particularly for after-school and holiday care providers. Pilots conducted in Spring Term 2021 offered some children an extended school day with an hour added to the end of the school day, this may negate the need for childcare for some parents, but is not likely to suit all parents, who may need childcare later into the afternoon and early evening. Changes to term dates may have less of an impact, unless the number of term weeks are increased.

Blaenau Gwent is one of ten Local Authorities involved in the Cardiff City Deal which is '*designed to build on the region's sectoral strengths, its high skill base and three successful universities and accelerate economic growth and productivity through a series of considered targeted investments in skills, infrastructure, innovation-led scalable projects and priority industry sectors and businesses*'. With collective investment levels expected to reach £1.2bn, it is estimated to deliver 25,000 new jobs in the region over a twenty-year period. This could mean the unemployment levels in Blaenau Gwent decline, which could lead to demand for childcare from working parents.

The pandemic has offered a lot of working parents much more flexibility in their working hours and offered home-working or hybrid working arrangements. It appears that many organisations are not currently planning to revert to pre-pandemic working models and that flexible working arrangements will be retained. This does seem to have impacted the childcare sector during the pandemic, with a particular impact on attendance patterns (far fewer children attending full time) and reduced use of after-school care.

12) Cross Border Provision

There is agreement among Gwent Local Authorities that children can access Foundation Phase Nursery in another Local Authority in the region and costs will be picked up by the Local Authority in which the child is accessing provision.

There are currently no children from outside Blaenau Gwent accessing Foundation Phase Nursery in non-maintained settings in Blaenau Gwent. The Local Authority does not have access to information about children from Blaenau Gwent accessing Foundation Phase Nursery or childcare elsewhere.

There are strong working links with other Gwent Local Authorities and the South Wales Education Achievement Service in supporting the early years education providers. There are regular meetings to share information, to agree grant allocations and priorities for the sector. Local Authorities join the termly Network events to provide updates of relevance to providers.

There is also close co-operation with the other Childcare Offer delivery authorities where a family move from one area to another to support continuation of the service, whilst eliminating the potential for double funding.

13) Workforce Development

Local Authorities (LA) have a duty written within the Childcare Statutory Guidance to Local Authorities (revised 2016) to provide access to an appropriate level of training that ensures childcare providers are able to run effectively and efficiently.

Blaenau Gwent EYCP team monitor qualifications and training undertaken on an annual basis and records training as it is undertaken in-house. The team uses the information gained to plan for training needs, enhanced by information provided by the Quality Improvement Officer, the Play Sufficiency Officer, Flying Start Advisory Teacher and Flying Start Childcare Co-ordinator which is picked up during quality assurance and monitoring/support visits. Input is also provided by the Healthy and Sustainable Pre-School Officer and colleagues sitting on the Early Years Additional Needs Support panel. The records are also used to alert providers to training that is due to/or has expired and to monitor take-up/compliance with training/qualifications required under National Minimum Standards. The following extract of the spreadsheet demonstrates how the team use data for monitoring and planning. With the introduction of the Childcare Offer for Wales, and the proposed expansion of the Flying Start programme, it is essential that a profile of the current workforce be maintained to ensure that it meets the need to support both new and existing provision to meet the current national minimum standards and relevant programme requirements.

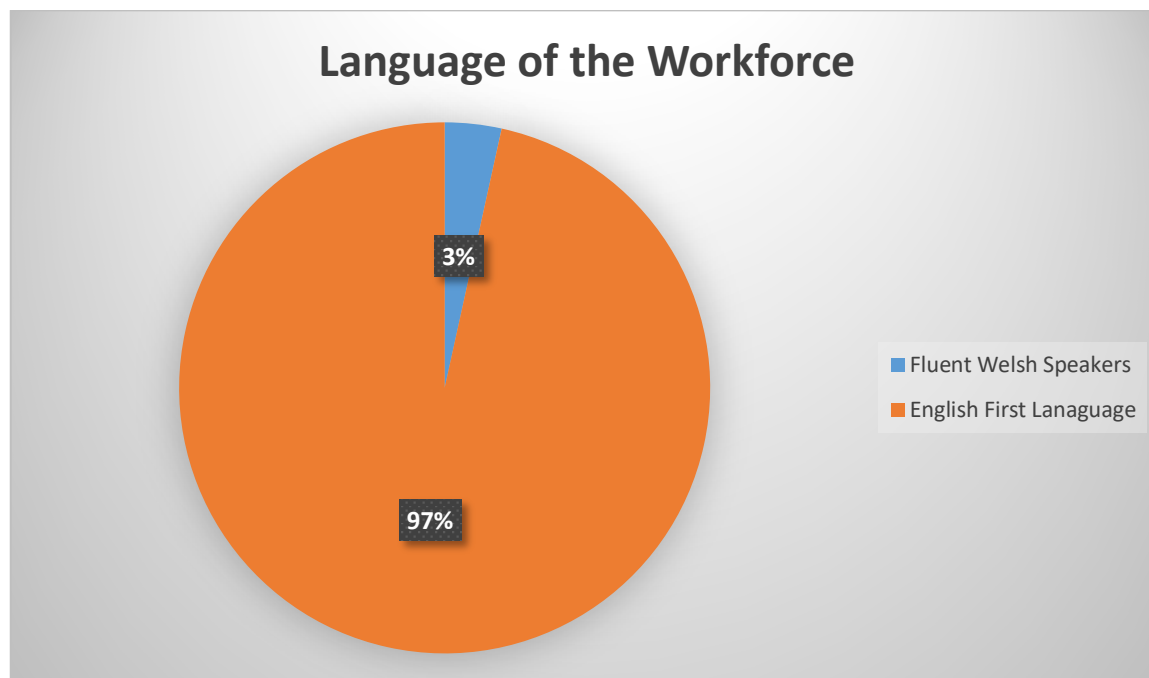
There is a strategy in place for developing the workforce in Blaenau Gwent, that acknowledges we have to keep “growing our own” early years’ practitioners. Eighteen years ago a strategy was developed to offer the community of Blaenau Gwent introductory Children’s Play training at OCN level, completed in 2 hours a week for 10 weeks. This could then lead onto NVQ level 2s and 3s in Childcare Learning and Development, CCLD (now in Childcare Learning Play and Development, CCPLD). The childcare workforce can be very unstable with fewer entering the workforce than leaving, key factors contributing to this instability can be the low pay, work demands, demographic characteristics, and in Blaenau Gwent specifically, continuous professional development opportunities. Our childcare practitioners often leave childcare to work in higher paid family support roles in Education, Health and Social Services, which is good for the economy, the social care sector and the individual but contributes highly to instability of the sector and which is why we must keep attracting students in secondary schools and the community to enter childcare. Early years degree courses have recently been funded for colleagues within the EYCP team.

The Workforce within Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

The Early Years, Childcare and Play workforce within Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council consists of 236 childcare practitioners with 98% of those being female. There has been some fluctuation in the size of the workforce with an increase of 6% (as of March 2022) which is attributed to the 2 new Day Nurseries that have opened in the last 2 years along with 1 new Preschool. These openings have mitigated the losses over the last 2 years with 9 childminders de-registering, the closure of 4 After School Clubs and 1 Preschool.

Language of the Workforce

The majority of the workforce use English as their first language, with two settings; Cylch Meithrin Helyg Bychan and Cylch Meithrin Gwddi Hw stating they use fluent Welsh. Within the total workforce 3% are fluent Welsh speakers and 97% state English is their first language.



Recruitment and Retention

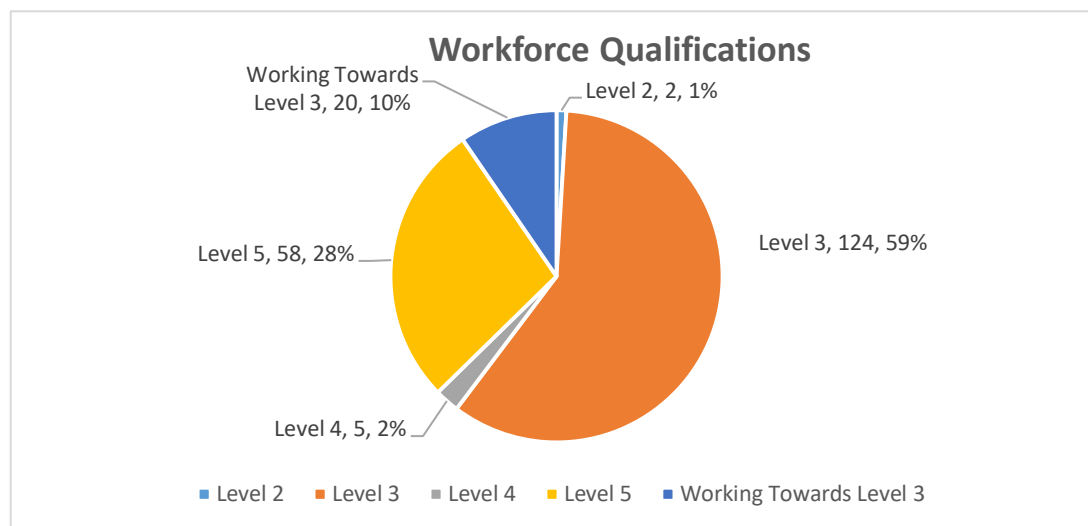
The Early Years Childcare and Play team continue to work in partnership with CWLWM, the local college, schools, Job Centre Plus, Communities for Work and other work programmes; to promote Early Years Childcare and Play and encourage people to seek a career in the childcare sector. Childcare providers in the borough have reported their concerns in finding suitable qualified staff to recruit, this has been affected considerably due to Covid-19 with practitioners reportedly leaving the sector to work elsewhere and a reduction in the enrolment of new students onto childcare courses locally in the past 2 years.

Impact on National Qualifications and the workforce due to Covid-19

There has been a notable decrease in the number of students enrolling on childcare qualifications due to the restrictions caused by Covid-19. In addition, there has also been a decrease in the number of childcare practitioners accessing further childcare study due to the following reasons: work placements not allowed to take place, settings temporarily closing and students unable to progress with the competency/evidence sections of their qualification, bubbles within the childcare provision and also many of the childcare workforce were furloughed.

Qualifications and the Childcare Workforce

In Blaenau Gwent County Borough, the statistics indicate that, of the 236 childcare workforce, 77% possess a Level 3 Childcare Qualification & 25% of the workforce hold a Level 5 Childcare Qualification. Further analysis of the statistics below shows the breakdown of the highest qualification held of the 236 childcare workforce:



Mandatory Training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

There are some clear training and qualification needs which have to be considered when planning the training and qualification programme for 2022/23, and the subsequent 3 years. For example, in the next 5 years we will be dedicated to delivering New Curriculum, Foundation Learning and Additional Needs training. Being able to offer relevant, high-quality training, as well as new training from leading sector professionals will ensure the children accessing Early Years, Childcare and Play are experiencing the best possible outcomes.

The team co-ordinate a robust mandatory and CPD training programme for all individuals who work in the Childcare, Early Years and Play sector within the Borough. Training in some topics is offered at various levels. Safeguarding Level 1, 2 and 3 courses are fully funded (reflecting the importance we place on high standards in safeguarding practice), all in-house delivered CPD training is offered at a subsidised rate of £5.00 per place & all other external training is offered on a full cost recovery basis.

The following mandatory training courses are provided on an annual basis either by the Early Years Childcare and Play team or tendered externally through our Workforce Development department and are required to be renewed every 3 years:

Safeguarding Level 1 & 2

Level 2 Basic Food Hygiene

Paediatric First Aid

Additional Learning Needs

Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Annually a full training programme is designed following input from colleagues as outlined above. Prior to Covid-19 all training courses were offered face-to-face but since 2020 training is now also delivered online. CPD Courses delivered from 2017-22 include:

Neglect Level 3	Domestic Abuse Level 3
Autism	Block Play
Playing Throughout the Seasons	Signalong
Campfires Burning	Outdoor Learning
Planning	Observation
Loose Parts	Risk Benefit
The Developing Child	Woodland Crafts
The Keyworker to Success	Leadership Clinic
Elklan	Motivating Staff
Recruitment & Retention	Internet Safety
Schemas	Treasure Baskets
Volunteers in Play	Sun Safety
Improving Physical Activity through Play	

ComIT training

The Communication Intervention Team (ComIT) is a service set up for children and young people with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN).

ComIT aims to meet the additional needs of children and young people with a non-clinical diagnosis and primary need of Speech, Language and Communication (SLC0 when that need is severely impacting on the child's learning.

ComIT have produced guidance and training for practitioners who provide Early Childhood Education and care for children aged between 0-3 years 11months. It aims to develop practitioner knowledge of SLC development and practitioner confidence and skills to identify and meet children's needs within the setting.

Even though Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has a well-qualified Early Years Childcare and Play workforce we still have childcare practitioners who would like to further their qualifications by enrolling on higher level courses. In addition, we continue to have individuals interested in becoming registered childminders and signpost them direct to PACEY to enrol on the childminding course and support them following qualification.

14) Covid Impact

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on all aspects of society in Wales, it has touched every family, community, organisation and business. In terms of the impact it has had on the childcare sector, there are two main areas to consider. Firstly, the critical role of childcare in the Government's pandemic response and secondly the impact the pandemic has had on settings as organisations/businesses and the resulting impact on families and communities.

From the early days of the pandemic, it was very clear the strategic role that childcare settings were to play in the Government's response to the pandemic. The need to keep keyworkers in the NHS, social care, blue light services and other identified essential workers in work was paramount and for working parents that meant a need for childcare to remain open to enable those workers to work. The picture for settings in the early days of the pandemic was changing rapidly with providers making decisions about whether opening was a viable and safe option for them. During the pandemic a significant number of providers in Blaenau Gwent remained open to provide a service to keyworker and vulnerable children. During the first lockdown period, only 33.9% of services closed completely representing 42.8% of childcare places. The Local Authority team was also able to put in place arrangements to ensure a service could be provided to key worker if needed and vulnerable children. The Flying Start team re-purposed one of their settings within a week to specifically to support vulnerable children, completing a variation for Care Inspectorate Wales to enable them to offer extended provision to a greater age range to accommodate sibling groups. The Flying Start team also worked closely with Social Services Children's teams and the Family Information Service to help place children who couldn't access the repurposed hub. The EYCP team set up the Welsh Governments Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme within weeks at the beginning of the pandemic to ensure that places were found for keyworker and vulnerable children and funding was delivered quickly to providers delivering these necessary services.

Providers that had closed in the early days, largely re-opened from late June 2020 and remained open (except for intermittent individual Covid closures), with the exception of most after-school provision that had been impacted by concerns around use of school buildings, the mixing of bubbles and school closures.

The level of commitment and flexibility within the sector was further tested in response to Summer holiday 2020 arrangements for vulnerable children, as where settings were limiting their numbers of children and operating on a 'bubble' basis, there were concerns about finding placements for vulnerable children. The local sector responded magnificently, with providers going above and beyond to accommodate children, including creating new settings/expanding very quickly to ensure they could offer services those children who needed it.

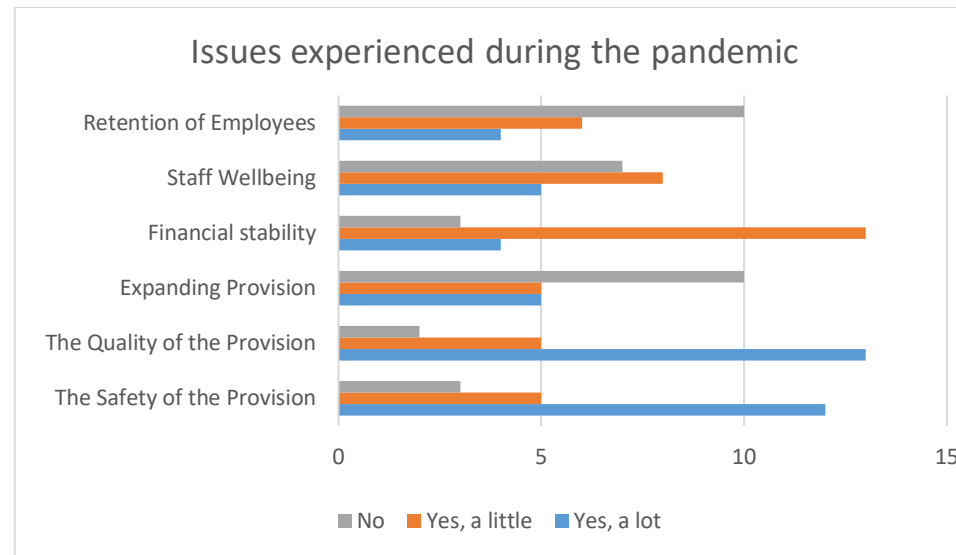
Several schemes to support settings financially have emerged during the pandemic including the Economic Resilience Development Fund, Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, Self-employed Income Scheme, Childcare Provider Grant, Childcare Offer Small Capital Covid Grants, Cwtch (sustainability) Grants and other schemes related to Education. Whilst there have been challenges in setting up administrative systems quickly to deliver these grants, they were successfully delivered in partnership with other Local Authority colleagues, Umbrella Organisation support and with the childcare providers themselves. Over £547,000 has been distributed to settings during 2021/22, the administration of these grants has had a huge impact on the work of the EYCP team.

The closure of childcare to children other than keyworker and vulnerable children demanded that we review our support for children with ALN and children attending childcare through our Assisted Places schemes, who were unable to access their childcare place. Plans were put in place to offer alternative services with resource packs being delivered to children's homes and regular contact maintained with professionals within the EYCP team to support families to continue with play, learning and development at home.

After a period of suspension during Spring and Summer Term 2020, the Childcare Offer was restarted during August 2020 and presented a huge challenge for the Local Authority team and childcare providers, due to the shortened timeframe for dealing with, effectively, double the number of applications. Changes to the eligibility guidance which needed to be understood and implemented presented further challenge. A huge effort by both the Local Authority and childcare providers meant the scheme was back up and running from September 2020.

The level of challenge there has been for childcare providers and the teams supporting providers, both within the Local Authority and in other organisations, during 2020-22 cannot be overstated. Difficulties with staffing and Covid closures has been especially difficult for lots of providers, with real concerns expressed over sustainability. Up until the date SASS data was collected, we had only lost three providers in Blaenau Gwent, one full day care provider and two after-school club (one registered, one excepted). Sadly, since then further businesses have closed, with two more after-school clubs closing and four further childminders deciding to close doors. Feedback suggests that whilst sustainability was a key consideration, other issues, notably difficulties in recruiting staff and individuals opting for a different career also played a large part in decisions. There have been particular issues for the after-school sector, much of which is co-located on school premises and subject to additional considerations in re-opening due to school concerns about access and managing bubbles. Despite lots of support offered with developing risk assessments to allow for safe re-opening, some clubs have closed citing issues with staffing as the primary cause.

Providers were issued with a survey in Spring 2022 and reported on some of the key issues they had been facing. Concerns with the quality and safety of provision were top concerns during the pandemic and this is borne out by anecdotal evidence collected for Welsh Government in Spring 2021, when providers felt the restrictions very much affected practice.



In terms of concerns moving forward the main concerns reported were ongoing costs associated with Covid, numbers of children attending and financial sustainability. Nevertheless, nineteen out of twenty providers responding felt they would still be operating in five years. 50% of providers were increasing their fees and 40% were considering it.

Asked about ideas for improvement for different groups, overwhelmingly additional access to Flying Start was suggested – see Wordcloud below.



Support for training, support and training in additional learning needs and better communications were also suggested. There was also a concern about the amount of Welsh medium provision with 45% of respondents feeling there was not sufficient provision with suggestions made around increasing Welsh training opportunities and the provision of language guides.

The EYCP team has made significant changes to the way in which it has worked with settings over the pandemic period. Guidance prevented face-to-face visits to settings for over a year and, for a period, restrictions made it impossible or difficult to bring people together to attend training. Most work has migrated to online and telephone contact, with great use made of Microsoft Teams to keep in contact with settings. Our training programme was modified during 20/21 to allow most training to take place online and the majority of training in 21/22 remained online also. This has benefitted settings and staff working in them by reducing travel time to attend courses and in some cases, it has also allowed for larger groups to attend training. It is planned to have a mixed programme for 22/23, as this will allow us to offer the hands-on training alongside training that is suited to online delivery.

Progress against actions to address gaps identified in the last CSA and subsequent progress reports has been impacted significantly by the Covid pandemic with many being taken forward to the action plan associated with this current CSA. The main focus of our work as a Local Authority team during the last year has been on supporting and guiding the childcare sector to stay open and remain sustainable and supporting families requiring/using childcare.

In terms of overall childcare numbers there was a decrease during 2020-21, the number childcare places decreasing from 1403 places to 1335 places.

In 2018, proposals were submitted to Welsh Government under the Childcare Offer Capital programme to develop new childcare places to increase capacity in areas where supply was not sufficient for supporting places for Childcare Offer. Five projects were approved, including one small capital grant scheme for local providers. Whilst the grant offered under the small grants scheme has been fully used in 19/20, 20/21 and 21/2, delays in the larger capital projects have been caused by the pandemic and progress has been much slower than planned. In the interim period one of the proposals was withdrawn due to a new provider opening a full day care facility in the area we had proposed building a full day care centre. The three remaining projects (extension to Swffryd Flying Start childcare setting, extension to Blaina ICC childcare and a new full day care centre in Ebbw Vale) are all progressing now and there has been an additional project granted approval under the Welsh medium grant for a Meithrin to be included in the new Welsh medium seedling school planned for Tredegar.

15) Gap Analysis

This analysis will consider the supply and demand of childcare, summarise the gaps in provision with a specific focus on the following areas:

- Childcare provision for children of parents who work atypical hours
- Welsh medium childcare provision
- Childcare provision for different language categories

The analysis will also outline childcare needs which are not being met in the Local Authority area, including those which relate to the:

- Types of childcare available
- Age of children for whom childcare is available
- Affordability of childcare
- Times at which childcare is available
- Location of childcare

Childcare provision for children of parents who work atypical hours/Times at which childcare is available

There is very little formal childcare available for parents working atypical hours. The earliest any provider opens is 6am and the latest they close is 6.30pm. The majority of providers offer a start time of between 7am and 9am. Only one provider (a Day Nursery) offers childcare on a Saturday and there is no provision available on Sundays. Whilst the parental demand survey suggests some parents do struggle with childcare at atypical hours, it is important to recognise that the sample size was really quite small. However, the employment profile of Blaenau Gwent shows a significantly higher proportion of people working in the manufacturing, care, leisure and services sector than the Wales average. This should suggest a higher demand for flexible childcare as these occupations often require shift and weekend working patterns. Evidence suggests there is still a significant number of parent/carers in Blaenau Gwent that rely on family and friends to care for their children and also some evidence that parents' co-ordinate their work hours to care for children between them. As the expense of childcare has been noted as one of the main barriers to using childcare, this may limit the take up of flexible childcare where it could be offered.

All providers have to consider the additional staffing costs and overheads they would incur in extending opening hours and contrast these with the potential additional business the extended hours could attract. New providers, particularly childminders (whose overheads may be less than setting-based provision), could consider offering atypical hours as a unique selling point.

Welsh medium provision

There is a clear lack of Welsh medium provision in Blaenau Gwent, with two community planning areas, Sirhowy and Ebbw Fawr, currently having no Welsh medium provision at all. Those areas have, however, already been identified in the previous assessment and follow up reports and capital build plans are in place to bring full day care childcare options to both of those areas. The parent survey conducted indicated barriers to accessing Welsh medium provision included distance and availability and some demand was reported for Welsh medium childcare in future by 26 parent/carers that either wanted or would consider Welsh medium childcare. More local provision, offering wider opening hours may encourage those parents to take up Welsh medium options when needed. There are currently no childminders operating in Welsh, although some offer a service in both Welsh and English. There are only English medium childminders in Sirhowy which offers a more restrictive choice for parent/carers in that area. Current Welsh medium providers in North and South Ebbw Fach only offer childcare to children aged two to four years and for limited hours during the day. There is no after-school or holiday provision offered in Welsh.

There has been a Cylch Meithrin registered in Sirhowy, but the provision remains unstaffed and closed currently. The Local Authority would welcome that provision opening soon to begin building demand for the new seedling school. Welsh medium sessions have been incorporated into English medium Day Nursery provision in Ebbw Fawr, extending choice in that area. Extending this pilot into other English medium Day Nurseries would be very welcome. The need to develop services especially in light of the new Welsh seedling school to be built in Tredegar is desirable. The new full day care options will help meet some of these gaps identified but the need to explore recruiting Welsh speaking childminders, or upskilling childminders, particularly in the Sirhowy area is clear. The need to look at Welsh medium after-school provision beyond the new developments in Ebbw Fawr and Sirhowy is also needed to ensure there is access for children living in/attending school or early education in North and South Ebbw Fach.

Childcare provision for different language categories

There are a very small number of ethnic minority families in Blaenau Gwent and no direct evidence to suggest there is a need for childcare to be delivered in other languages at this time. All settings are encouraged and supported by the Local Authority to be fully inclusive and to respect and celebrate diversity.

Types of childcare available/Location of childcare

Whilst overall supply of childcare meets demand in Blaenau Gwent and there has been considerable progress since the last CSA, there are still some gaps in provision in relation to childcare types which will be limiting parental choice. There are low levels of childminders in the Sirhowy and Ebbw Fawr areas, particularly in Sirhowy with only four childminders, which restricts parental choice. There is a good spread of sessional day care providers across all Community Planning Areas (although many are now registered as full day care providers) and plans to open new full day care facilities in Ebbw Fawr and Sirhowy will enhance existing provision and choice.

There is a significant drop in the numbers of childcare places available in the school holidays across every community planning area but there is no evidence from either the parent/carer survey or via Family Information Service records to suggest this constitutes a gap for parent/carers.

Parent survey data suggest that some families have difficulties finding suitable childcare for children with additional learning needs or special educational needs. Provider survey responses note more could be done to help them be more inclusive. Whilst all providers are encouraged to be inclusive, work needs to be done to assess what providers need and further training needs to be offered to providers.

Age of children for whom childcare is available

Childcare is available for children of all ages in each community planning area, with Day Nurseries and Childminders offering care to the broadest age range. There is a much greater number of places and childcare types available to 2–4-year-olds in Blaenau Gwent because of the number of sessional day care places on offer. Although childcare is available for children up to the age of 17, very few children attend childcare after the age of eleven. There was some evidence via parent survey to suggest that some parents find it harder to find suitable childcare for older children. School-based provision could fill this gap, but feasibility will need to be tested to ensure any new provision setting up is likely to succeed.

Affordability of childcare

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that affordability is a key issue for parents. Expense/ affordability is consistently highlighted as a concern by parent/carers, despite the programmes that offer funded childcare (Flying Start and Childcare Offer). There has been an increase in the number of providers registered to deliver Flying Start in Blaenau Gwent and almost all providers are registered to deliver Childcare Offer. This allows working parent/carers opportunities to save money on childcare costs. Parent/carers responding to the survey indicated receiving other support with childcare costs, namely the childcare element of Working Tax Credits/Universal Credit, Tax Free childcare, Childcare vouchers and Student grants. With Blaenau Gwent workers' earnings being significantly lower than the Welsh average, this is perhaps

unsurprising, particularly at the moment with the cost of living crisis affecting most families. Over half (28) of childcare providers were receiving tax free childcare payments or childcare vouchers from parents/carers in Summer 2021. All Day Nurseries currently accept both of those schemes, the majority of childminders also (twenty accept tax free childcare and twenty-five accept childcare vouchers), however, 6 out of 14 playgroups do not accept either of those schemes, the only stand-alone after-school and holiday club accepts tax free childcare but not childcare vouchers.

It is not unsurprising, but a little concerning, that half of all childcare providers responding to our survey were intending on increasing their prices this year. Whilst they need to, to remain sustainable moving forward, additional costs will undoubtedly be difficult for lots of families. The expansion of the Flying Start programme to all two-year-olds will be welcomed by all families but working families are likely to benefit the most as it should reduce their childcare costs overall or allow them to use childcare for the first time. The extension of the Childcare Offer to include parents in training is also a welcome help for parents looking to upskill and join or re-join the workforce. There is a need to continue to promote all forms of financial help to parents, particularly as programmes are expanded and extended to ensure no-one misses out on funded childcare which they are eligible for.

16) Action Plan

Priority	Action	Milestones	Timeline
1. To complete all existing Capital programme projects and develop additional plans in response to identified gaps.	1a. Childcare Offer Capital Programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Glyncoed FDC Blaina ICC extension 	Tender for construction work evaluated Construction undertaken Tender for childcare provider Opening of new provision Design finalised Planning application submitted Tender for construction issued Construction work undertaken Childcare Setting expansion	Spring 2022 Summer 2022 Spring 2023 Spring 2024 Summer 2022 Summer 2022 Autumn 2022 Spring 2023 Summer 2023
	1b. Flying Start Capital programme: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Swffryd Hub extension 	Construction work commenced Tender for childcare provider issued	Summer 2022 Summer 2022

		Childcare tender awarded	Summer 2022
		Construction completed	Spring 2023
		Childcare setting open	Spring 2023
	1c. Welsh medium education grant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cylch Meithrin provision at new seedling school in Tredegar 	Planning application submitted Tender for construction issued and evaluations completed Construction starts Childcare tender issued School/setting opens	Summer 2022 Summer 2022 Autumn 2022 Spring 2023 Spring 2024
	1d. To bid for further Childcare Offer capital grant to develop a new Full Day Care setting in North Ebbw Fach (Brynmaur)	To submit a grant proposal when the next grant programme opens	To be confirmed
2. To support the rollout of Flying Start childcare to all 2 year olds from September 2022	2a. To support the Flying Start team in the assessment of the need for additional childcare places, with a focus on increasing Welsh language provision and addressing gaps in availability of provision.	Once rollout area agreed, undertake mapping of local provision, identifying gaps.	Summer 2022 – ongoing
	2b. To support the Flying Start programme with setting a specification for childminders to become Flying Start providers.	Development of childminder specification and promotion of scheme to local childminders, including CPD/qualification route advice.	Summer 2022 – ongoing

3. To ensure all childcare settings are inclusive and children with disabilities have access to suitable care	3a. To ensure all childcare settings in Blaenau Gwent are inclusive and can offer suitable care.	<p>The ALN Support Worker to develop an audit tool to assess how inclusive settings are and levels of compliance with the new ALN Act.</p> <p>Undertake an assessment of all settings.</p> <p>To offer support and information to support settings have confidence in their roles.</p>	<p>Autumn 2022</p> <p>Autumn 2022 - ongoing</p>
	3b. To ensure that ALN training needs of childcare practitioners are assessed, and the annual training programme meets the need of the sector in terms of ALN training.	Early Years Additional Support Panel to discuss training needs of the sector and agree priorities for the next year	Summer 2022 - ongoing
4. To extend childcare choice/types in relation to childminding and after-school club provision	4a. To attract more people to become childminders in Blaenau Gwent, particularly in Sirhowy and Ebbw Fawr, where numbers are lower	<p>To work with PACEY in promoting childminding as a career.</p> <p>To offer specific information about the benefits of childminding as a career to students undertaking the Steps Into Childcare course.</p> <p>To revise the Childminder briefing and offer sessions 3 times per year.</p> <p>To promote childminding as a career during visits to parent and toddler groups, visits to school, Job Centre plus events and</p>	<p>Summer 2022</p> <p>Autumn 2022/Spring 2023</p> <p>Autumn 2022 – ongoing</p> <p>Autumn 2022 - ongoing</p>

		<p>with the Blaenau Gwent Multi-Agency Forum.</p> <p>To work with the Flying Start programme to identify how childminders can register to deliver Flying Start programme and to promote opportunities to existing and potential new childminders.</p>	Summer 2022
	4b. To explore the potential for new after-school/holiday clubs to set up	<p>To work with schools to undertake feasibility studies to assess the need for after-school and holiday childcare, prioritising the schools that have recently lost provision</p> <p>To promote Playwork careers and qualifications to existing childcare and education workforce, college and year 11 students.</p>	<p>Autumn 2022 – Spring 2024</p> <p>Autumn 2022 - ongoing</p>
5. To extend Welsh language options for parents/carers seeking childcare	5a. To increase the use of Welsh within existing settings, so there is an increase in the number of settings reporting they operate in both English and Welsh at the next CSA.	<p>To promote Welsh language learning to the whole workforce, through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network events • Monitoring/QA visits • Training • Development of Welsh language resources • Signposting to Camau and Cwlwm Welsh Language Co-ordinators 	<p>Autumn 2022 – ongoing</p> <p>Autumn 2022</p>

		To work with Mudiad Meithrin SAS programme to identify the potential for the pilot of Welsh medium sessions within English medium settings to be extended	
	5b. To establish the need for Welsh language after-school care with pupils using Ysgol Bro Helyg and the new seedling school planned for Tredegar	To design and undertake a feasibility study for use in Ysgol Bro Helyg (taking note most pupils use school transport) To replicate the above for the new seedling school when open	Spring 2023 Autumn 2024
	5c. As part of Capital programmes (see above), to seek Welsh language providers to establish in Glyncoed (Ebbw Fawr) and Tredegar (Sirhowy).	Tender documents to outline Welsh language requirements and delivery expectation	Spring 2023
6. To have robust systems in place for collecting information about issues with childcare from parents/carers or other stakeholders	6a. To set up a follow up system for contacting FIS enquirers to identify where parents have had difficulty accessing childcare or other issues related to childcare	Enquiry system to be set up To include a section on the FIS website, under development, to report issues with accessing childcare	Autumn 2022 Autumn 2022
	6b. To encourage stakeholders in other organisations to share information with us when parents having difficulties in accessing childcare are identified.	An audit to be undertaken on an area basis of services and organisations that could become FIS champions Roll out of FIS Champion scheme Develop system for reporting in issues	Autumn 2022 Spring 2023 Summer 2023
7. To develop a workforce development plan, considering recruitment and retention issues,	7a. To set up a task and finish group to consider recruitment and retention issues, to feed into a workforce development plan.	To identify appropriate stakeholders	Summer 2022
		To set up meetings	Autumn 2022
		To produce a workforce development plan	Spring 2023

setting key actions to support the sector			
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