

UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS, THE EARLY YEARS AND CHILDCARE OFFER AND INEQUALITIES

REPORT FOR THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

February 2023



Building a Healthier Wales



The Building a Healthier Wales Coordination Group was established in 2019 to progress the prevention element of A Healthier Wales – Our Plan for Health and Social Care. This strategic, multi-agency group is made up of senior leaders from across the public, third and private sectors, to go beyond what could be achieved by health and care alone in order to drive the shift to prevention and achieve a healthy and sustainable Wales. It established a task and finish group in 2022 to undertake the work of this report.

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ISBN: 978-1-83766-094-0

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Policies considered, context and strategic priorities to address equity in implementation

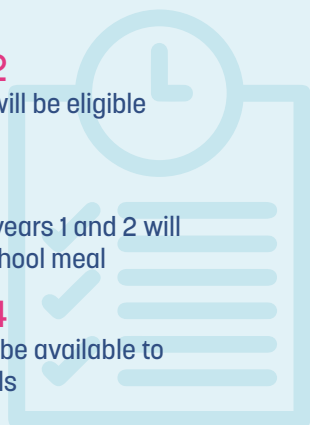
Free school meals

Early Years Childcare

Policies

Wales and Scotland are the first UK countries to commit to free school meals for all primary school children

- ✓ **September 2022**
All pupils in reception will be eligible for free school meals
- ✓ **April 2023**
Majority of children in years 1 and 2 will be eligible for a free school meal
- ✓ **September 2024**
A free school meal will be available to all primary school pupils



Phased expansion of early years provision to include all 2 year olds, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh medium provision



Flying start will be extended on the basis of area deprivation, drawing in an additional **2,500 children** with around **625 eligible** for childcare from September 2022

The Childcare Offer will be expanded to support parents “in education and training or on the edge of work”, with the Offer available to those in education or training from September 2022



Context



23% (63,614) of primary school children were entitled to free school meals in 2021

It is estimated that **up to 40,000** primary age children may be living in poverty but not currently entitled to a free school meal



13% of pupils currently eligible do not take up their free school meal

Obesity rate 4-5 year olds, 2018-2019:

20.9% least deprived quintile

30.2% most deprived quintile



2020-21:

Flying Start

31,832 children received enhanced health visiting through Flying Start*

6,877 children aged 2-3 who were newly eligible accessed any childcare provision

*2020-21 was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with significant changes in the way services were offered

The Childcare Offer



Delivered to **17,626** children

In 2019-20 only **31%** of unemployed parents of a 0-4 year old were accessing childcare

77% of childcare settings surveyed in Wales in 2022 reported recruitment difficulties



Children living in deprivation are considerably more likely to have **impoverished speech, language and communication skills** on starting school

Free school meals

Early Years Childcare

Implementation: strategic priorities

Proportionate universalism should guide planning



Provision



Most deprived

Least deprived

Universal provision, more intensive for those with greatest needs



Co-production should be central to local implementation

High quality provision is essential

- ✓ Evidence suggests reduction of inequalities requires high quality provision
- ✓ Perceptions of quality drive uptake
- ✓ Need uptake to produce benefit
- ✓ Avoid **stigma** of poor service
- ✓ Quality must be seen as non-negotiable



Children's current health and wellbeing is valued at least as highly as their health and wellbeing as adults



High level themes and recommendations to address equity in implementation

Early Years Childcare

Consistent quality of care is maintained as provision is increased



Careful consideration to how expanding provision will impact on sustainability of settings in areas of highest need

Co-ordinated efforts to support recruitment and retention, especially where there is high demand for Welsh medium provision

Embed fair working practices in early years childcare settings



Equality in provision and response to local needs

Clear and high profile communication of what is available to parents



Ensure childcare settings are able to support parents who are working non-standard hours

Monitor the profile of childcare staff so that childcare provision reflects local communities



Involve local in the co-production of expansion of childcare provision



Consider support needed for those on low incomes who are not eligible for the childcare offer

Early Years Childcare

Transitions between childcare and school provide consistency

Offer A

Offer B

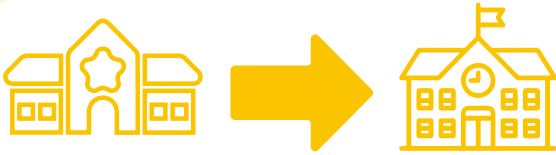
Offer C

Offer D

Explore options for a single, integrated early years childcare offer to families



Ensure that different offers and provision for childcare work together and are understood by those who could most benefit from them



Improve links between school and childcare settings

Parents feel services are supportive and responsive



Communication of childcare provision and benefits, and guidance for professionals should use clear, consistent and no-stigmatising definitions



Continue to support the 'Healthy and sustainable Pre School Scheme' to build knowledge, leadership and engagement around healthy living



Provide tools and support for childcare workers and settings to map and access formal and informal health and social care networks

High level themes and recommendations to address equity in implementation

Universal Primary free school meals

High uptake is essential and demands inclusive and high quality provision

Plan clear communication with parents on availability and quality of school meals



Maintain or increase the quality of food available

Involve children in the planning of menus and mealtimes



Ensure dietary needs are catered for

Link school meal provision to teaching and activities related to healthy eating



Monitor uptake for those previously and newly eligible

Opportunities to socialise and play are central



Ensure pupils can eat in a relaxed and social environment



Ensure that lunchtime breaks provide sufficient time to eat lunch and to play

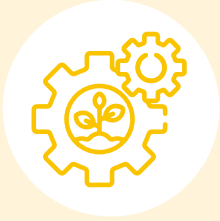
Learn from out-of-school food programmes



Identify how local schemes have used local knowledge and networks effectively

Universal Primary free school meals

Sustainable provision that supports and builds local foundational economies requires long term planning and commitment



Support long-term commitment to local foundational economies to supply food for school meals



Identify and pilot effective models of engagement with local foundational economies

Embed fair working practices in school catering



Maintain food preparation within schools to support fair working practices and provision of fresh, healthy meals



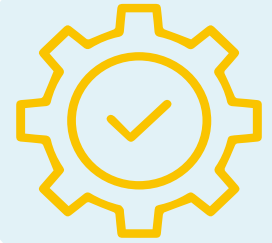
Fair working practices should be embedded within school catering environments

01 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Project overview

The report has been produced in response to a request from the Minister for Health and Social Services to the Building a Healthier Wales Coordination Group to examine the Programme for Government policies on extending

- ✓ early years childcare and
- ✓ the provision of free school meals to all primary pupils, to ensure that these policies do not widen inequalities



We have focused on risks and opportunities in relation to the implementation of these policies. We have not considered opportunity costs in relation to alternative policies.

The policies will see free school meals offered to all primary school children, childcare for 2-3 year olds made available to all families through staged roll out of the existing Flying Start programme and the Childcare Offer made available to families where parents are in education or on the edge of work.

We developed a Theory of Change and a Health Impact Assessment for each policy area. These are available as separate documents. We have presented a simplified, integrated version of the theory of change in this section, and a more detailed overview for each policy area in Section 8. We have also scoped initial requirements for robust evaluation, which should be a key part of developing and implementing the policies.



1.2 Targeted to universal provision: impact on inequalities

Universalising provision may support addressing inequalities, through increasing the reach of the interventions among groups in need, greater influence over systems and focus on prevention, 'shifting the curve' to reduce inequalities over the entire gradient and removing stigma.

There is also a risk that the policies could increase inequalities by extending eligibility, through taking

resources from families most in need to those who could pay for them. Universal provision risks increasing inequalities by lessening focus on those with the greatest needs and putting pressure on existing resources. Sections 5 and 6 of this report suggest recommendations to mitigate this.

1.3 Cross cutting themes: what shapes the inequalities landscape?

- ✓ **The cost of living crisis:** this is expected to reduce disposable incomes for many already experiencing some level of deprivation, but also disrupt lifestyles and create uncertainty, in particular around work and childcare
- ✓ **Addressing inequalities within complex systems:** choices around child nutrition and care take place within complex systems and increasing provision may disrupt these systems in a range of ways
- ✓ **Gender inequalities:** women are often disproportionately affected by inequalities in ways that are very relevant to these policies

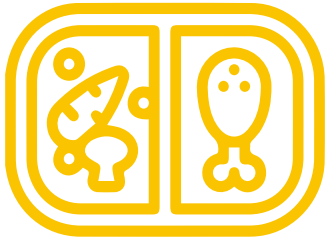
1.4 Strategic priorities for addressing inequalities through implementation

This work has highlighted the importance of implementation in ensuring the effectiveness of the policies in both addressing inequalities and aligning work to address different kinds of inequalities. We have identified four strategic priorities for addressing inequalities when implementing these policies:

- ✓ **Proportionate universalism should guide planning:**
Ensuring provision is equitably available with a higher intensity for those with particular (or particularly high) needs can deliver benefits of universal availability but continue to support those with the highest needs
- ✓ **High quality provision is essential:**
Evidence on childcare and school meals consistently stresses the importance of quality of provision. Quality should be considered 'non-negotiable'
- ✓ **Co-production should be central to local implementation:**
Local implementation should support co-production to ensure benefits are owned by local communities and equitably distributed
- ✓ **Children's current health and well-being is valued at least as highly as their health and well-being as adults:**
Understanding children as individuals with a right to have their current well-being considered, not just their capacity to be healthy and educated workers in the future, is a core principle of Welsh Government policies. Reducing inequalities in children's well-being now is as important as considering the well-being of their 'future selves'



Putting these principles at the core of implementation will be essential to the effectiveness of these policies in addressing and not increasing inequalities.



In considering economic inequalities, evidence from evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals in England suggested that policy had increased income by around £20 per month for a family with two children in primary education

1.5 Evidence on equity outcomes in relation to Universal Primary Free School Meals

In considering **economic inequalities**, evidence from evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals in England suggested that policy had increased income by around £20 per month for a family with two children in primary education.

The current threshold for free school meals (FSM) is restrictive. There are a substantial number of families who would benefit financially from Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM).

There is a risk that the policy, in providing FSM to those who can currently pay as well as those who cannot, increases economic inequalities between those not in need and those most in need.

An estimated 13% of those currently entitled do not take-up FSM. Increasing take-up amongst this group may mitigate or reduce economic inequalities.

There is some evidence that UPFSM may contribute to reducing **health inequalities**, in particular amongst those just above current thresholds. This depends on maintaining high quality provision and service.

There is some evidence that UPFSM may contribute to reduced inequalities in **attainment and attendance**, but the evidence is limited in this area.

There are opportunities to reduce inequalities **within and between communities** if procurement supports local companies and supply chains. There is a corresponding risk that the need to rapidly increase provision privileges larger and more centralised organisations, squeezing out local suppliers.

UPFSM provides opportunities to embed fair working practices in school catering workplaces, reducing **workforce inequalities**. There may be challenges to achieving this in the context of economic uncertainty and fiscal constraints. Without action, implementation could result in changes to working conditions that increase inequalities.

1.6 Evidence on equity outcomes in relation to early years childcare provision

The move towards universal provision by extending Flying Start to the 'next most deprived areas' will make childcare more available to families in need but not currently in Flying Start areas. The Childcare Offer will make more childcare available to those with the highest needs but not in work if they meet definitions of being in education or on the edge of work. This may bring benefits to those most in need, but in providing resources for childcare to some families who could otherwise pay for these services, the impact on **economic inequalities** may be uneven.

Those experiencing the most serious inequalities are less likely to be accessing education and may be further from work. This group is expected to derive less benefit from the Childcare Offer than from Flying Start.

Evaluations of Flying Start and the Childcare Offer have suggested that those on lower incomes benefit in ways that reduce economic inequalities. However, early years childcare provision may reduce inequalities by giving parents opportunities to find work, or increase their hours or get a better job. These opportunities may be less available to some groups and in some areas and are highly sensitive to the wider economy.

If well implemented, expanding early years childcare provides opportunities to reduce **health inequalities** between children. Early years childcare may reduce inequalities in health between parents if they are experiencing deprivation or living in rural areas.

There is some evidence that expanding early years childcare will **reduce inequalities in development when children start school, and longer-term academic attainment** between children.

There are opportunities to reduce inequalities between the **childcare workforce** and workers in sectors requiring comparable/fewer qualifications and experience by improving pay, conditions, career progression and recognition. However, there are also risks that expansion of a sector already experiencing recruitment and retention issues increases inequalities through higher demands and increased use of insecure contracts.



1.7 Theories of Change

A theory of change is a methodology that defines long-term goals and maps backward to identify necessary preconditions. Theories of change were developed for both policies, a simplified version is included below.

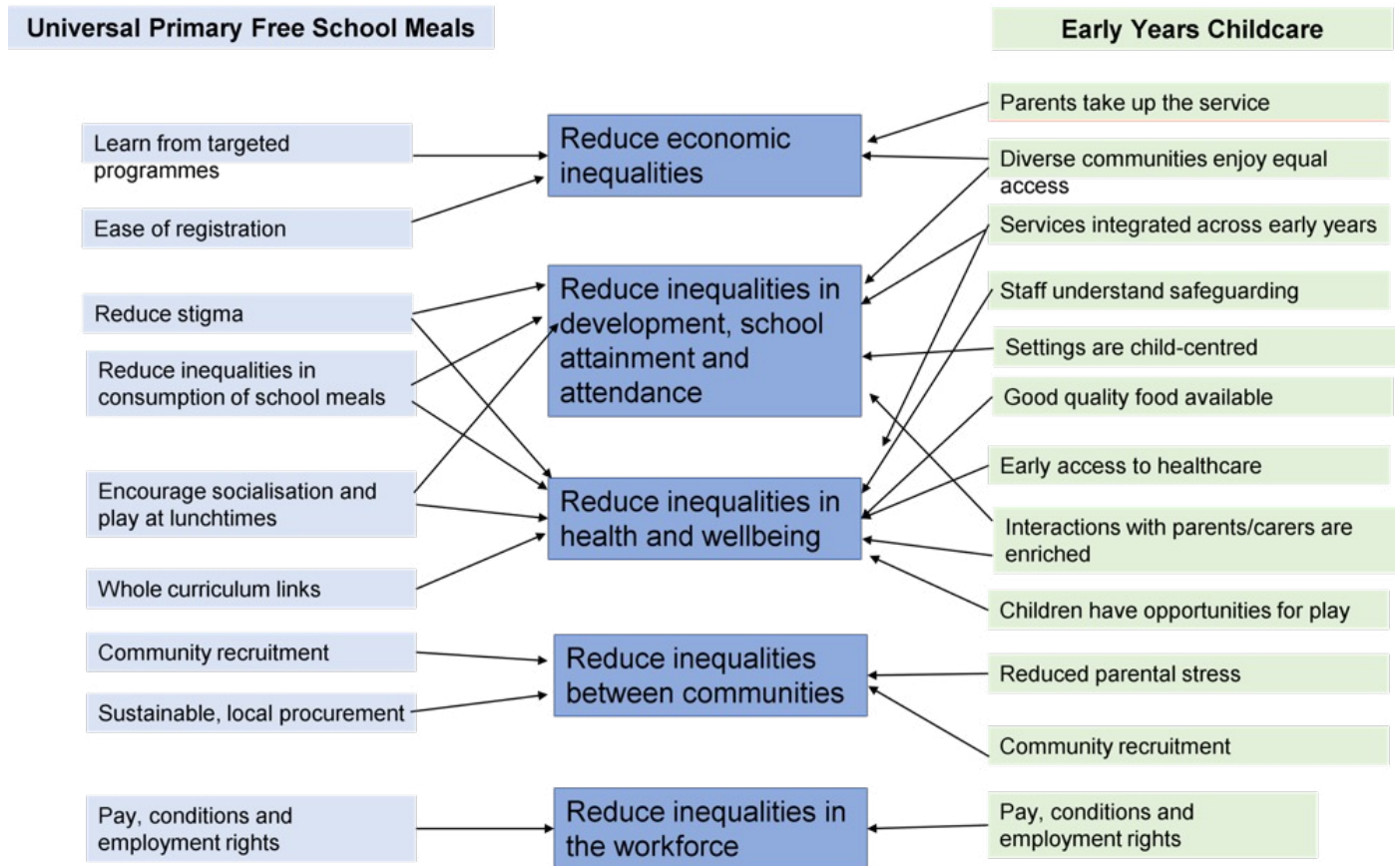


Figure 1: Simplified, integrated Theories of Change for both policies



1.8 Monitoring and evaluation

Robust and adequately resourced monitoring and evaluation is crucial to assessing the impact of these high-profile and innovative policies. UPFSM and early years childcare expansion represent major investment by Welsh Government affecting a substantial number of children and families. They

position Wales at the forefront of policymaking on free school meals and early years childcare. Understanding the impact of these interventions on child outcomes and inequalities is essential to ensure the programme delivers the anticipated benefits.

Our work on monitoring and evaluation has focused on identifying:

- ✓ Models and designs used by evaluations of comparable programmes
- ✓ Key outcomes for evaluation, based on the Theories of Change
- ✓ Required data on uptake
- ✓ Relevant data currently available
- ✓ Relevant data not currently available



Given the complexity of the programmes and range of outcomes we suggest a **Monitoring and Evaluation Subgroup** is formed to support the evaluation programme of Welsh Government to enable monitoring of impacts on health inequalities.

This sub-group would

- ✓ Support Welsh Government to determine requirements to monitor the impact of the policies on inequalities in outcomes and uptake,
- ✓ support Welsh Government to design an evaluation proportionate to ascertain how and why progress has been achieved and lessons learnt to inform future action, and
- ✓ link in to Welsh Government programme management structure and governance arrangements

Identifying the required data and working with stakeholders to make sure it is available in a timely way is a priority. Planning data for evaluation as early as possible in the policy development process is likely to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of data gathering across monitoring and evaluation.

1.9 High level themes and recommendations

Universal Primary Free School Meals

High level themes	Recommendations
High uptake is essential and demands inclusive and high quality provision	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maintain and where possible increase the quality of food available 2. Ensure those with dietary needs, including those with food intolerances and from minority backgrounds, have appropriate food available 3. Monitor uptake for those previously and newly eligible 4. Take a whole school approach, linking school meal provision to wider teaching and health and well-being activities related to healthy eating 5. Involve children in the planning of menus and mealtimes 6. Plan clear communication with parents on availability and quality of school meals
Opportunities to socialise and play are central	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Ensure that lunchtime breaks provide sufficient time to eat lunch and to play 8. Ensure the lunch environment allows pupils to eat in a relaxed and social environment
Learn from out-of-school food programmes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Identify how local schemes have used local knowledge and networks effectively
Sustainable provision that supports and builds local foundational economies requires long term planning and commitment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Support long term commitment to partnerships and planning in local foundational economies to supply food for school meals 11. Identify and pilot the most effective models of engagement with local foundational economies (e.g. anchor institutions; community wealth building)
Embed fair working practices in school catering	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Maintain food preparation within schools to support fair working practices and provision of fresh, healthy meals 13. Fair working practices should be embedded within school catering environments through setting contract standards, committing to hourly rates at the real living wage and supporting increased negotiating power of workers through union membership and social partnership

Early Years Childcare

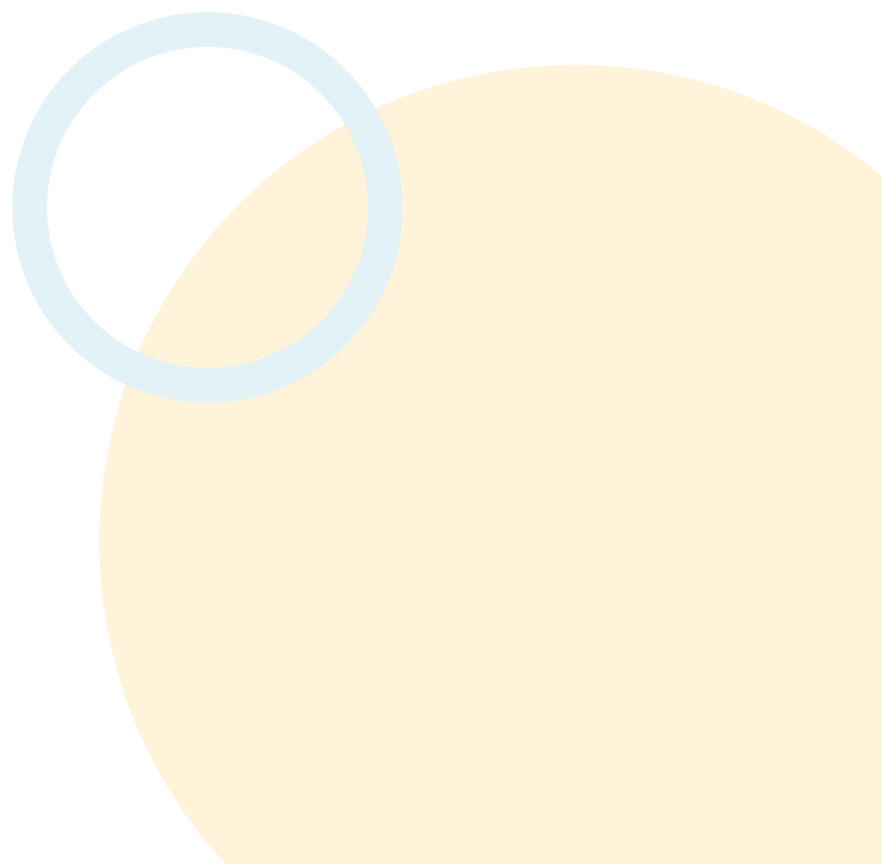
High level themes	Recommendations
<p>Consistent quality of care is maintained as provision is increased</p>	<p>14. Careful consideration needs to be given to how expanding provision will impact on sustainability of settings in areas of highest need</p> <p>15. Co-ordinated efforts to support recruitment and retention in those areas may be required, especially where there is high demand for Welsh medium provision</p>
<p>Embed fair working practices in early years childcare settings</p>	<p>16. Fair working practices should be embedded within childcare environments through setting contract standards, committing to hourly rates that reflect the living wage and supporting increased negotiating power of workers through union membership and social partnership</p>
<p>Equity in provision and response to local needs</p>	<p>17. Consider support needed for those on low incomes who are further from education and work and therefore not eligible for the Childcare Offer</p> <p>18. Involve local communities in the co-production of expansion of childcare provision including through involvement in Local Authority Childcare Sufficiency Assessments</p> <p>19. Ensure childcare settings are able to support families in which parents are working non-standard hours</p> <p>20. Monitor the profile of childcare staff and encourage recruitment amongst those from ethnic minorities so that childcare provision reflects local communities</p> <p>21. Clear and high profile communication of what is available to parents</p>
<p>Transitions between childcare and school provide consistency</p>	<p>22. Ensure that different offers and provision for early years childcare work together effectively and are understood by those who could most benefit from them</p> <p>23. Explore options for a single, integrated early years childcare offer to families</p> <p>24. Improve links between school and childcare settings, exploring options such as a universal template for communication and hand-over</p>

Early Years Childcare

High level themes	Recommendations
<p>Staff and services working across early years are able to support children to be healthy and to access a range of appropriate health and social services</p>	<p>25. Provide tools and support for childcare workers and settings to map and access formal and informal health and social care networks such as local primary care social prescribing</p> <p>26. Continue to support the Healthy and Sustainable Pre School Scheme to work with current and new settings to build knowledge, leadership and family and community engagement around healthy living</p>
<p>Parents feel services are supportive and responsive</p>	<p>27. Communication of childcare provision and benefits, and guidance for professionals should use clear, consistent and non-stigmatising definitions developed with stakeholders</p>

Universal Primary Free School Meals and Early Years Childcare

High level themes	Recommendations
<p>Monitoring and Evaluation</p>	<p>28. A 'Monitoring and Evaluation Subgroup' is formed to support Welsh Government development of a monitoring and evaluation programme</p>



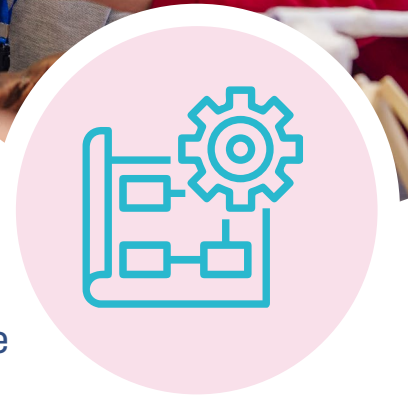
02 OUR APPROACH

This report has been produced by the Building a Healthier Wales Task and Finish Group in response to the request from the Minister for Health and Social Services to:

“examine ... the early years and childcare offer, and extension of free school meals to all primary pupils, focusing on agile advice to ensure that we don't inadvertently widen inequalities”

The plan agreed with the Minister in January 2021 identified four areas in which the Group would provide support:

- ✓ Defining health and equity outcomes to be achieved and the mechanisms required (through a Theory of Change approach)
- ✓ Advising on how to maximise net benefits of these policies in respect of health equity (through a Health Impact Assessment approach)
- ✓ Ensuring these policy changes are fully monitored and evaluated to gauge the above effects
- ✓ Actively informing and supporting the implementation of these policies through harnessing the sectoral expertise and networks of the Building a Healthier Wales membership



2.1 The Task and Finish Group

The Task and Finish Group, whose members were nominated by the Building a Healthier Wales Co-ordination Group, was established to undertake this work. The group draws on expertise from policy teams in Welsh Government, Third Sector

organisations representing groups particularly affected, and specialists from public health teams, including early years development and education, childhood nutrition, policy and evaluation. Group members are listed in Appendix 1.

In addition to this report, the Task and Finish Group has:

- ✓ Produced a Theory of Change and Health Impact Assessments for both policy areas
- ✓ Scoped initial requirements for robust evaluation, including liaising with policy and evaluation teams in Welsh Government, reviewing evaluations of comparable policies in the UK, scoping data requirements and engaging with academic partners
- ✓ Worked closely with Welsh Government policy teams to align our work with theirs. This has included:
 - involving policy teams directly in the work of the Task and Finish Group
 - engaging with evaluation and analyst teams to share knowledge on data availability and approaches to designing and specifying evaluation
 - producing a paper summarising evidence on inequalities relating to plans for initial roll-out of free school meals to infant years
 - sharing drafts of work as it has progressed, meeting regularly to share updates and progress



2.2 Evidence

Stakeholder understanding has been central to this work. In addition to the perspectives represented within the Task and Finish Group, the Health Impact Assessments involved a range of additional stakeholder and representative organisations.

These are listed in Appendix 1. In addition, we had the opportunity to visit a school and discuss experiences of school dinners with primary pupils and catering management and staff.

Evidence was also gathered and collated from a range of sources including:

- ✓ Welsh Government evaluations and research on Flying Start and the Childcare Offer
- ✓ Evaluations of Sure Start in England
- ✓ Evaluations of the implementation of Universal Infant Free School Meals in England and Scotland
- ✓ A scoping report by the Public Health Wales Evidence service on the impact of enhanced health visitor support on inequalities
- ✓ Two literature searches carried out by Welsh Government researchers on evidence for the impact of free school meals on health, socioeconomic benefits and school attainment
- ✓ A scoping report by the Public Health Wales Evidence Service on the impact of free school meals on inequalities
- ✓ Guidance and reviews from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and Cochrane, an independent organisation that synthesises health and care evidence
- ✓ Statistical reports related to health, well-being and education of children in Wales, including those produced through the National Survey for Wales, the Pupil Level Annual School Census and the Public Health Wales Health Outcomes Framework
- ✓ Relevant research and reports identified by members of the Task and Finish Group and academic colleagues

The Theories of Change developed for each policy were used as frameworks to collate and analyse the evidence used in the development of this work.



03 THE POLICIES: AN OVERVIEW

The policies were initially described in the Programme for Government, as updated in December 2021 to reflect the co-operation agreement between Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru, which set out commitments for the current Senedd term (2021-26). Both policies involve making provisions currently targeted at those most in need available to all children and families.



3.1 Universal Primary Free School Meals

Plans announced up to and including the Welsh Government Annual Report 2022², published on 5 July 2022 commit to:

- ✓ Implementation of universal free school meals for primary school children from September 2022, including most of those in reception
- ✓ By April 2023, the majority of children in years 1 and 2 will also be eligible for a free school meal
- ✓ All primary school pupils will be entitled to a free school meal by September 2024



For context, 23% (63,614) of primary school children were entitled to free school meals in April 2021³.

The Scottish Government has also announced an intention to provide universal primary free school meals (UPFSM), meaning Wales and Scotland will be the first countries to offer UPFSM in the UK and two of only a small number of countries across Europe. England and Scotland

implemented universal free school meals in infant years (reception, years 1 and 2: universal infant free school meals, UIFSM) in 2014, with Scotland extending provision to all those up to the equivalent of Year 4 in 2022.

3.2 Early years childcare

There are two policies specifically related to early years childcare:

- ✓ Fund childcare for more families where parents are in education and training or on the edge of work
- ✓ Deliver a phased expansion of early years provision to include all 2 year olds, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh medium provision

The phased expansion of early years provision for 2 year olds will happen through the existing Flying Start programme and we have considered this context throughout our work.

The Childcare Offer allows parents to claim up to 30 hours a week of early education and childcare in Wales for up to 48 weeks of the year. It is available to children where all parents in the household are in work and earning the equivalent of a minimum of 16 hours per week at an applicable minimum

wage and less than £100,000 per year (per parent in a two-parent household).

Flying Start is a targeted Early Years programme for families with children under 4 years of age in some of the most disadvantaged areas of Wales. The core elements of the programme are drawn from a range of options that have been shown to influence positive outcomes for children and their families.

These include:

- ✓ Funded quality, part-time childcare for 2-3 year olds for 12.5 hours per week, 39 weeks of the year^a
- ✓ An enhanced health visiting service
- ✓ Access to parenting support
- ✓ Support for speech, language and communication

Flying Start is geographically targeted, based on area-level deprivation. All families living in a Flying Start area are entitled to services, regardless of income.

- ✓ The programme for government describes extending support with childcare to parents “in education and training or on the edge of work”, and this is being delivered through an expansion of the childcare offer
- ✓ The childcare offer was made available to those in education or training from September 2022
- ✓ All four elements of Flying Start will be extended from September 2022, drawing in an additional 2,500 children of which around 625 will be eligible for childcare, based on area-level deprivation



^aSome sessions may also be made available over the summer on a locally-defined basis

For context, in 2020-21:

31,832 children

received enhanced health visiting through Flying Start, representing **87.9%** of the **36,215 children** expected to receive support each year⁴



6,877 children

aged 2-3 who were newly eligible accessed any childcare provision through the programme, **84%** of those eligible⁴

508 places

were taken up following an offer of formal structured parenting support, with **353 (69%)** completing the course. **1,394 places** were taken up following an offer of informal structured parenting support, with **1,108 (79%)** completing⁴



Note that 2020-21

was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic which led to significant changes in the way Flying Start services were offered and to data collection requirements. The number of children receiving Flying Start services was **over 36,000** in each of the preceding six years⁴



During the period

September 2020 to August 2021,
the Childcare Offer was delivered to **17,626 children**⁵



3.3 Opportunities and risks in relation to health inequalities

Within the policies on expansion of free school meals and early years childcare there are specific opportunities to address inequalities:

- ✓ **Ensuring inclusive provision:** Universal approaches may provide greater opportunities to shape availability of provision in ways that are more equitable, in particular ensuring that the needs of vulnerable groups are met
- ✓ **Increased support for those just above the threshold:** Current thresholds and availability target those most in need, but a substantial number of families with low incomes and high needs are not currently eligible for free school meals or early years childcare
- ✓ **'Shifting the curve':** Universal approaches can address inequalities over the entire population, reducing inequalities across the entire gradient, not just at extremes of need
- ✓ **Prevention:** Addressing complex systems 'as a whole' can maximise opportunities to identify and address preventative approaches
- ✓ **Removing stigma:** Universal provision can remove stigma, reducing inequalities in mental health and well-being. Whilst parents may be most vulnerable to stigma, the evidence shows that even primary school children can be aware of who is receiving a free school meal

There are also a number of interlinked risks in relation to inequalities:

- ✓ **Less efficient allocation of resources in relation to need:** Resources that could be used to support those most in need are instead directed to those who are (or would be) capable of paying. Universalising provision means foregoing potential benefits of further targeting
- ✓ **Less effective allocation of resources to groups with specific needs:** Universal provision, in addressing needs at a population level, may marginalise those with the greatest needs who benefit most from specific or more intense provision
- ✓ **Resource overstretch:** Rapid implementation may result in lower quality services, disproportionately affecting those most in need, who have less choice of services. This is a particular issue in tight labour markets reporting recruitment and retention as strategic issues

04 CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES: WHAT SHAPES THE INEQUALITIES LANDSCAPE?

In developing this work, a number of issues have been identified that define how inequalities emerge, are embedded and are perpetuated in relation to policies on early years childcare and universal primary free school meals. These issues shape inequalities across the economic and social landscape within which these policies will be implemented. Policy development will need to engage with these issues to avoid inadvertently increasing inequalities and to address inequalities in consistent and effective ways.



4.1 The 'cost of living crisis'

The rise in the cost of living over the past 12 months has consistently been identified as a crisis for many people in Wales, with Welsh Government prioritising measures to give financial support to those experiencing the greatest hardship⁶. Detailed evidence of the specific impacts of this 'cost of living crisis' is necessarily limited, but two impacts – rising prices (especially for food and fuel) and lower income – were consistently identified by stakeholders as affecting them in ways that relate specifically to childcare and school meals.

Living with a low income and experiencing poor health and well-being as a result has been a reality for many children and families in Wales over the past decade, with the pandemic intensifying problems for many of the most vulnerable⁷. The challenges faced by these families have been exacerbated by funding cuts to local authorities who are responsible for providing important

elements of support for residents in need⁸. Policies on expanding eligibility for free school meals and childcare and early years support have the potential to reduce inequalities as more families experience these impacts.

However, our work with stakeholders also noted that the current cost of living crisis has impacts beyond simply 'lower disposable income for more people'. Stakeholders noted that rising costs created specific issues for those living with deprivation. A need for constant attention to how basic day-to-day needs were met, with frequent reviews of budgeting for essentials such as food provision and childcare can result in decision-making increasingly focused on the short term. For example, we heard of families reviewing food prices at different shops and changing their purchasing habits regularly and being forced to change childcare arrangements to cut fuel costs.



To effectively support families experiencing deprivation provision must be sustainable with the capacity to meet the needs of families whose needs may evolve in the face of an unpredictable economic situation

The uncertainty brought by the cost of living crisis disrupts routines and lifestyles which is likely to be most intensely felt by families of young children who are living with deprivation, and especially for those in rural areas where fuel costs represent a larger proportion of outgoings. These inequalities may be magnified over the medium and long term, as decisions shaped by immediate needs to provide the basics of life reduce opportunities to plan and invest in opportunities to increase income in the long term, such as education or career development. Stakeholders told us that the cost of living crisis is also most keenly felt amongst those who currently already face uncertainty related to the perceived complexity of the UK benefits system, in particular the rules around tapering of Universal Credit if working hours are increased.

This evidence brings the issue of allocation of resources into sharp focus. Families currently receiving free school meals and childcare may experience considerably increased hardship whilst resources are used to provide these benefits to those less in need. In addition, issues in the economy and in particular the labour market may be intensified by the cost of living crisis in ways that make the mechanism for reducing economic inequalities through childcare (i.e. enabling parents to take-up work) less effective. If wage growth lags behind inflation (more likely for those in lower paid work⁹) this may reduce both incentives to work and the economic benefits for those who are working.

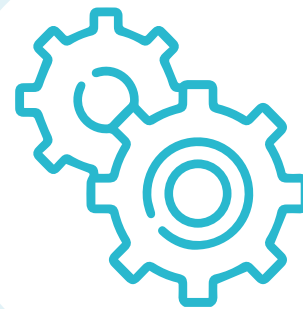
Policy development will need to consider the impact of the cost of living crisis on those most in need, in particular those who currently benefit and those just outside current thresholds. These groups may face severe hardship whilst policies increase provision of resources to those less in need.

These groups may also experience reduced capacity to benefit from free school meals and early years childcare, increasing inequalities. These groups may experience less benefit relative to their increasing economic needs and be less able to benefit from early years childcare policies.

Expansion of childcare and free school meals eligibility is likely to be an effective way to support families dealing with the cost of living crisis to the extent that it can make resources available to families most in need, but enables them to use those resources to reduce uncertainty and support continuity.

To effectively support families experiencing deprivation provision must be sustainable with the capacity to meet the needs of families whose needs may evolve in the face of an unpredictable economic situation.

A family from an ethnic minority living in an urban area and a low income family in a predominantly Welsh speaking rural area may have very different experiences, support systems and cultural preferences and these will give rise to different impacts on inequalities



4.2 Addressing inequalities within complex systems

Choices around child nutrition and care take place within complex systems. Different models, expectations and constraints arise from personal preferences, availability of resources and capacity to use those resources given different patterns of work, cultural and religious heritage and networks of informal care. A family from an ethnic minority living in an urban area and a low income family in a predominantly Welsh speaking rural area may have very different experiences, support systems and cultural preferences and these will give rise to different impacts on inequalities. These systems are dynamic: they may adapt and develop in response to changes in school meal or childcare provision.

As this report highlights, inequalities may exist on many dimensions. Universal provision of school meals and early years childcare has the potential to be effective across the population in reducing socioeconomic inequalities and may also act positively to increase social cohesion and lower barriers to access disproportionately experienced by those facing deprivation or marginalisation. However, there is also a risk at a high level that addressing one inequality effectively at a population level increases inequalities for groups within that population, especially those who face multiple inequalities.

Moving from targeted to universal entitlement creates a risk that provision that has evolved to meet the needs of those with higher needs is replaced by provision focused on addressing the needs of the majority who have fewer needs.

A proportionate universalism approach, ensuring those with the greatest needs receive more intensive support within provision for the whole population may address this risk. However, this depends on understanding the needs of those facing specific inequalities and the impacts of policies on the complex systems that define their needs and choices.

Understanding these complex systems is essential for identifying unintended impacts on inequalities, but is not sufficient to manage those impacts. It is equally important to have a clear understanding of the policy objectives to support resolving tensions across multi-faceted inequalities. There are well-established objectives for Flying Start¹⁰ and the Childcare Offer¹¹ and a statement of the overarching goals of the extension of eligibility for free school meals has also been set out¹². Currently these do not describe in detail which inequalities are to be addressed or prioritised.

To maximise the potential for addressing inequalities, it is essential that clear and detailed objectives are formally established for each policy area, that these include the addressing of inequalities and are linked to monitoring and evaluation plans.

It is also important that policy development acknowledges and reflects the complexities of the systems within which policies will be implemented. A co-production approach with local communities will support effective implementation.

4.3 Gender inequalities

We have considered the inequalities faced by a wide range of groups impacted by the policies, including those living with deprivation or marginalisation, those in different geographical locations and the workforce who will deliver the policies. We have also noted intersectionality, where those experiencing multiple inequalities may be disproportionately advantaged or may face additional barriers to taking up provision.

Within each group, women are frequently disproportionately affected by inequalities. Lone parent families in Wales were six times more likely to be headed by a woman than a man in 2018¹³, there are 8 women for every man working in an average early years childcare setting in Wales¹⁴, women are disproportionately likely to drop out of the workforce to care for young children¹⁵.

Welsh Government has set out an ambition for Wales to be a world leader for gender equality, defined as an equal sharing of power, resources and influence¹⁶. Expansion of early years childcare has been identified as an important approach to achieving this, with models from other countries suggesting that providing universal childcare reduces inequalities women experience in relation to opportunities and power across society, not only differences in income¹⁵.

The evidence from stakeholders in particular noted that the inequalities women faced were linked in ways that were rarely the case for men. Responsibility for budgeting and planning family meals were more likely to be done by women, childcare disproportionately falls to women if childcare is limited or unavailable, but so does organising work around childcare, including negotiating hours and arranging pick-up and drop-off. These responsibilities magnify the stresses that poverty can already impose through

organising (and re-organising) daily life to balance limited time and money on a day-to-day basis in the face of constant uncertainty and can leave little time for rest, socialising and health promoting activities like exercise. The responsibilities that women disproportionately face may therefore magnify the experiences of economic and health inequality.

Where increased childcare provision becomes available to women seeking work, the work they access may be in childcare or school catering, which offer a relatively high proportion of jobs with low entry criteria and flexibility. However, these sectors also have long-standing issues with low pay and career progression^{17,18}. 'Freedom' from childcare responsibilities may contribute little to addressing health and well-being inequalities if those responsibilities are entirely replaced by a job that produces its own stresses.

These policies represent a substantial opportunity to reduce inequalities that are disproportionately experienced by women in Wales in particular because they have the potential to address ways in which inequalities cluster together and link to form trajectories for women's lives as parents and workers. However, a narrow focus on inequalities risks missing this bigger picture and potentially increasing inequalities for women even as they address issues for more tightly defined groups.

To address the specific inequalities experienced by women, implementation must consider how different aspects of women's lives are linked through different roles and ensure needs are addressed in a holistic way.

05 UNIVERSAL PRIMARY FREE SCHOOL MEALS

5.1 Evidence on equity outcomes

Overall, there was strong consensus from research, evaluation and stakeholder evidence that extending eligibility for free school meals to all primary school children could reduce inequalities, particularly amongst those who are experiencing low income and deprivation.



UPFSM are likely to be of particular benefit to those currently experiencing poverty with incomes above the current threshold. There are some benefits to those currently eligible for free school meals and these could be increased if uptake is increased. There are some groups, including those without recourse to public funds, which are likely to benefit substantially. There are risks that some groups, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds and with special dietary needs may experience increased inequalities.

Evidence on the reduction of economic inequalities suggests that those who are just above the current threshold would benefit most, as the financial savings (estimated in evaluations of UFSM in England at £20 per month for a family with two primary age children in term time¹⁹) are expected to disproportionately benefit those with the greatest needs. Economic inequalities may increase for those already entitled, as better off families gain. However, an estimated 13% of children currently entitled to free school meals²⁰ do not take-up the offer, highlighting the potential for the policy to reduce economic inequalities if implementation can reduce this proportion.

There is some evidence for reductions in inequalities in attendance and academic attainment, and evaluation is important to confirm that these are achieved in Wales. There is some evidence for reductions in inequalities in children's health, but this is highly dependent on food quality and uptake, which may be difficult to measure. There are opportunities to reduce inequalities between communities through encouraging local procurement arrangements, but these are likely to depend on leveraging local spending power, long-term planning and effective links with national policies on the foundational economy. There are opportunities to reduce inequalities between the school catering workforce and other sectors, but this will depend on the degree to which fair working practices can be consistently embedded across the sector.

Specific inequalities, a summary of the evidence of the relationship between UPFSM on those inequalities and an assessment of the impact of the policy are set out below.

5.1.1 Economic inequalities between families

Whilst 23% (63,614) of primary school children were entitled to free school meals in April 2021³, modelling has suggested that up to an additional 40,000 primary school children are in poverty (i.e. with a family income less than 60% of the median) but are not currently eligible²¹. There is evidence that food insecurity is rising in Wales, especially for families in poverty with younger children²². An estimated 13% of children currently entitled to free school meals in Wales do not take up the offer²⁰.

Evaluation of UIFSM in England suggested that a family with two primary age children who became entitled to free school meals would save around £20 per month in term-time¹⁹.

Costs for those who pay for meals varies by local authority and there is a risk that these may rise in the short term and potentially over a longer period. The policy is likely to reduce geographic inequalities and its impact is likely to mitigate the impact of price rises related to the current cost of living crisis. This assumes funding is adequate. Those with no recourse to public funds often experience the highest levels of poverty and are expected to particularly benefit from this policy.

UPFSM is expected to have a positive impact on inequalities between those currently experiencing deprivation but not receiving free school meals and those not experiencing deprivation.

The policy will make free school meals available to a large number of families who can afford to pay for meals. Other families (of pupils in primary years only included later in implementation in the short term and of secondary school pupils in the long term) will not benefit. **UPFSM may increase inequalities between those experiencing deprivation and currently eligible and those who are not.**

Evaluation of UIFSM in England showed only a very small increase in take-up amongst those currently eligible but not receiving a meal¹⁹. However, given the proportion currently entitled, but not taking up a free school meal there may also be an opportunity to reduce inequalities by increasing uptake amongst this group.

It is not clear that those most in need would benefit from UPFSM to a greater degree than they do under the present system. **Increasing uptake amongst those currently eligible on income grounds alone but not taking up a meal should be an area of focus.**

However, the other benefits associated with implementing a high quality UPFSM as a universal service suggest the risks of some increase in relative inequalities in the economic space may be balanced by fewer inequalities in other areas, at least in relation to primary school children. Reduction of stigma, removal of barriers to access that are disproportionately experienced by disadvantaged groups and supporting social cohesion are all examples of these non-economic benefits.



5.1.2 Inequalities in health and well-being between children and families

UPFSM offer an opportunity to increase the number of children who receive a hot, nutritious meal. The expansion of UPFSM is therefore expected to improve nutrition across primary school children, and so improve health. The quality of food provided was consistently identified in the literature and by stakeholders as being central to achieving health benefits, especially for those living with deprivation^{19,23,24}.

Typically only a very small number of packed lunches (less than 2%) meet all the guidelines for healthy eating²⁵. Guidelines for school meals and nutrition are currently being updated. Evaluation of the UIFSM pilot in England suggested that universalising eligibility was associated with improved nutrition amongst those newly eligible²⁶.

The clearest nutrition related evidence on primary school children's health is on obesity, which shows a gradient by deprivation at 4-5 years in Wales, with a rate of 20.9% in the least deprived quintile and 30.2% in the most deprived in 2018-2027. These rates increase over the course of the primary years.

Evaluation of UIFSM in England suggested that it had reduced inequalities in obesity between the second most deprived quintile and the least deprived (likely to be those who were most in need but were not eligible)²³. However, there is a lack of evidence on long term health impacts, which may take many years to emerge.

Evidence from England and Scotland suggests that implementing UIFSM improved nutrition, as packed lunches with relatively low nutritional content were replaced with healthier school meals, and that this improvement in lunchtime nutrition was more marked for children from lower income families²⁴.

There is uncertainty over the degree to which providing a healthier meal changes eating patterns at other points in the day. Stakeholders identified a risk that children, especially those in families living with deprivation may be less likely to have a cooked meal in the evening and/or that unhealthy eating (e.g. crisps in packed lunches) may also be consumed at another point. No evidence for reduction in meals outside school was located; evaluation of UIFSM in England and Scotland suggested an overall reduction in fat intake from unhealthy snacks, particularly amongst those living with deprivation, but no change in overall sugar consumption or in consumption of fruit and vegetables²⁴.

It is suggested that healthier school meals may support healthier eating in families. There was no clear evidence for this, but the findings on changes in eating habits for children²⁴ suggest this has happened only to a limited extent in other areas.

There was considerable discussion from stakeholders on differences between food selected by different groups of children, especially those living with deprivation. School meals were seen as an important opportunity to give children who have limited access to healthy food outside school the opportunity to develop wider and healthier tastes.

We could not identify any evidence in the literature on differences in meal choice or consumption between different groups of children. Catering staff we spoke with noted that these children were more likely to refuse food items with which they seemed unfamiliar, particularly healthier items. They also noted that they were sometimes able to encourage children to make healthier options and/or to put aside 'favourite' items and combinations for these children. There was concern that with a substantial increase in the number of children receiving meals, this would become more difficult, removing an opportunity to address inequalities.

There were also concerns expressed by stakeholders, including children themselves, over portion sizes, which are typically set by guidelines and do not make a distinction between children with different needs or of different ages. Again, there is the possibility that implementation may reduce the capacity of catering staff to understand and address these inequalities.

The reduction of stigma associated with means-tested free school meals is expected to improve the mental health of children and parents. The impact of this stigma is well described in research literature²⁸, but difficult to quantify.

'Whole school' approaches to healthy eating were identified by stakeholders as having potential to develop broader understandings of nutrition, food skills and wider issues such as sustainability. Implementation of UPFSM may offer opportunities to enhance delivery of messages about healthy eating.

Stakeholders noted the 'Big Bocs Bwyd' project²⁹ as an example of how this had been carried out effectively. The Welsh Network of Healthy Schools Schemes and the implementation of the new curriculum were also identified as potentially providing opportunities to link UPFSM with healthier eating. However, there was also some concern that children may feel they are expected to advocate for healthier eating within families that struggle to afford good quality food, increasing their levels of stress.

UPFSM is expected to improve health outcomes related to nutrition, in particular amongst those most in need but not previously eligible. However, the benefits may be evident at particular points in the distribution of inequalities (e.g. between the second to bottom quintile of deprivation and the highest quintile) which may be hard to identify with standard measures. The most important outcomes on nutrition and health may take a long time to emerge and may be difficult to associate directly with the policy.

UPFSM does introduce some risks that current relationships between catering staff and pupils become disrupted by high numbers of additional newly eligible pupils and that may increase inequalities.



5.1.3 Inequalities in academic attainment and attendance between children

School attendance in primary education is negatively associated with deprivation, although the relationship is not straightforward, and is characterised by relatively small numbers of persistently absent pupils³⁰.

The mechanisms by which free school meals could improve attendance and academic attainment are not clear. There is an assumption that free provision will incentivise parents to send children to school, that lower absence levels will improve attainment and that the reduction of hunger may improve concentration and therefore academic attainment. However, robust evidence of causal links between free school meals and attainment is limited.

Evidence from evaluation of UIFSM in England has suggested that the policy was associated with reduced absence rates in infants of 8-10% amongst those previously eligible for free school meals, but not amongst infants newly eligible¹⁹.

Inequalities in academic attainment show a deprivation gradient on school commencement and this increases throughout primary education³¹. Evidence from evaluation of UIFSM pilots in England suggested that it was associated with improved attainment at 7 years old, that the benefits were greatest amongst those from the least affluent families and with the lowest prior attainment, that reductions persisted at later stages and that there was no impact on absences²⁶. The differences were relatively small, but may make substantial differences across the whole population.

Evidence from evaluation of UIFSM in England has suggested take-up within a universal offer for infants is associated with attainment at ages 5 and 7; the attainment of those previously eligible appeared to have improved relative to their newly eligible peers at age 5, but this was reversed at age 7¹⁹. Evidence from Wales on free breakfasts for primary age children did not find any association between provision and academic attainment³². International evidence has suggested associations between universalising school lunches and academic attainment³³, but these are characterised by weaker designs and measures. There are also issues with methods in UK studies, including challenges in designing effective studies, the use of free school meals as a deprivation marker (making it difficult to see how this policy would impact on those not currently eligible) and complexity in findings.

Overall we considered that, whilst there was some indication that UPFSM would have a positive impact on attendance and academic attainment and an intuitively credible mechanism for how the policy would affect inequalities in these areas, the evidence was limited in this area.





The Welsh Government's focus on the foundational economy within the context of the Economic Action Plan may create opportunities for these approaches, and the fact that provision of school meals is not contracted out in the majority of local authorities suggests some preconditions are in place

5.1.4 Inequalities within/between local communities

School meals represent a considerable expenditure. Encouraging focus on local providers and supply chains has been identified as an opportunity to reduce inequalities between communities³⁴.

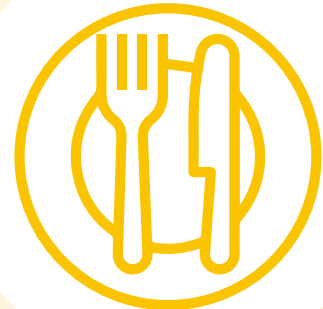
At a recent roundtable, those involved in implementing free school meal policies in Scotland described efforts to encourage local supply of food, stressing the importance of maintaining control over provision (i.e. avoiding or minimising any contracting out of services) and thinking long-term to maximise benefits, encourage sustainable practices and minimise waste³⁵.

The Welsh Government's focus on the foundational economy within the context of the Economic Action Plan³⁶ may create opportunities for these approaches, and the fact that provision of school meals is not contracted out in the majority of local authorities (similar to Scotland but in contrast to England) suggests some preconditions are in place.

However, it is acknowledged that the structure of food production and distribution in Wales makes it challenging to encourage involvement from local Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)³⁷ and rapid implementation may also risk developing dependence on larger, private sector providers.

UPFSM introduces opportunities to rethink provision of school meals in ways that reduce inequalities between communities. However, there are also risks of negative impacts if implementation results in larger companies with centralised purchasing and distribution taking an increasing share of local markets.

Evidence from catering managers and staff confirm those who work in school catering are predominantly women, often working short lunchtime shifts with relatively low hourly wages, even in comparison to the general catering workforce



5.1.5 Inequalities between school catering workforce and other workers

We were unable to identify specific data on the school catering workforce. Evidence from catering managers and staff confirm those who work in school catering are predominantly women, often working short lunchtime shifts with relatively low hourly wages, even in comparison to the general catering workforce.

A UNISON survey of the workforce in 2017 reported that 64% agreed with the statement 'I enjoy my job' but just over a third (35%) felt excluded as a member of the school. Workload (46%), pay (41%) and job security (25%) were all cited as issues³⁸. School catering can offer a route into the workplace for those with fewer qualifications, particularly women who have childcare responsibilities but are able to work during school lunch hours.

There was some concern expressed by catering staff we spoke with that new arrangements might increase inequalities between catering staff and other workforces, particularly if shift patterns changed or workloads increased. There were reports of offers of one hour shifts (rather than the more usual two hours) which offered considerably less benefit to workers once travel and preparation time was taken into account. Complex issues with benefits, such as the tapering of Universal Credit in relation to hours worked also create concern.

Welsh Government has previously legislated in relation to contract conditions for some sectors employing substantial numbers of workers in essential roles, where these have been seen as unfair and harming recruitment and retention³⁹.

There were also concerns that the relationship between catering staff and pupils might suffer as more pupils needed to be served within a shorter period of time. The Social Partnership and Public Procurement Bill has been noted as relevant in terms of mitigating risks and improving working conditions for this group.

There are clear risks that without action, implementation could result in changes to working conditions that increase inequalities.

5.2 Addressing inequalities, high level themes

5.2.1 High uptake is essential and demands inclusive and high quality provision

A precondition of addressing many of the existing inequalities is for high levels of uptake, in particular amongst those groups currently experiencing the greatest inequalities. The impacts on inequalities described in evaluation of UIFSM in England were in the context of a rise in uptake from 30-40% to 80-85% for those who were not previously eligible and from 84% to 87% amongst those who were previously eligible¹⁹ (although

it is important to note that this relates to free school meals provided to infants). This suggests that reducing inequalities depends on high uptake amongst those not previously eligible but also that there is scope for further improved outcomes for those previously eligible who continue not to take-up the offer, with an estimated 13% of all schoolchildren in Wales not currently taking up a free school meal to which they are entitled²⁰.

Uptake of free school meals, currently and following UPFSM is related to inequalities in a number of specific ways:

- ✓ The benefits identified, by definition, depend on actual consumption of high quality meals
- ✓ Stakeholder evidence noted that free school meals are seen as carrying a stigma for parents and children, even in primary education. Low uptake amongst the newly eligible would signal that school meals were of low value
- ✓ Specific marginalised groups have typically had lower uptake because their religious and cultural preferences, or their dietary needs are not (well) catered for
- ✓ There is potential to increase uptake amongst those currently eligible but not receiving a free school meal, but there may also be risks of uptake falling

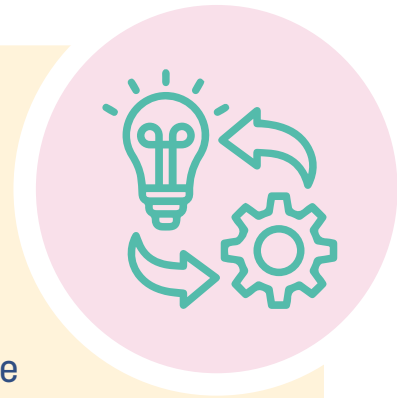
A number of areas of focus were identified to support increased uptake in ways that address inequalities:

- ✓ **Maintaining and where possible increasing the quality of food available** was consistently identified in the literature and by stakeholders as important to both parents and children, to encourage uptake for those newly eligible and maintain and increase uptake (and its benefits) amongst those currently eligible
- ✓ **Increasing choice** is one of the changes most consistently identified by primary school children we spoke to and by stakeholders working with children and families. Some children described particular days on which they hated mealtimes because they did not like the dish on offer and some disliked school mealtimes because they didn't feel they had any control over the menu. Increasing choice is likely to be challenging in implementing the policy, but it is very relevant to uptake, particularly amongst those experiencing the greatest inequalities²⁸
- ✓ **Ensuring those with dietary needs, including those with food intolerances and from minority backgrounds, have appropriate food available**
- ✓ **Monitoring uptake for those previously and newly eligible**
As UPFSM is implemented, systems are in place to continue recording which pupils would have been eligible for free school meals. Increasing uptake amongst this group would reduce inequalities. Understanding the specific impacts of UPFSM on those previously and those newly eligible will be an important measure of effectiveness
- ✓ **Taking a whole school approach**, including through the curriculum and existing structures such as the Wales Network of Healthy Schools Schemes. This approach has the potential to create positive feedback loops where healthy school meals and in-school support encourage tasting of a wider variety of foods in schools, widening preferences for healthier eating at home, which encourages more engagement with healthy food in schools. However, stakeholders also noted that school activities around food can be stigmatising for those that cannot afford to bring in food to cook, and that children can experience pressure to be critics of family food choices over which they have little control

- ✓ **Involving children in the planning of menus and mealtimes.**
This is particularly important to ensure support through universal provision can address higher needs through more specific understanding
- ✓ **Strong communication with parents,** in particular those who are new to eligibility. This has been identified as a factor supporting uptake for those newly eligible²⁶

Recommendations

- ✓ Maintain and where possible increase the quality of food available
- ✓ Ensure those with dietary needs, including those with food intolerances and from minority backgrounds, have appropriate food available
- ✓ Monitor uptake for those previously and newly eligible
- ✓ Take a whole school approach, linking school meal provision to wider teaching and health and well-being activities related to healthy eating
- ✓ Involve children in the planning of menus and mealtimes
- ✓ Plan clear communication with parents on availability and quality of school meals



5.2.2 Opportunities to socialise and play are central

As part of our work, we carried out a school visit and asked primary age children to describe their experiences of school meals. They consistently began with detailed critiques of systems for queuing and seating. These were often described as producing competition and stress, with some children developing sophisticated strategies to maximise perceived benefits within a system that often feels hurried and not designed around their needs and preferences. This was consistent with the experiences of stakeholders with direct experience of working with primary age pupils.

Stakeholders consistently described a shortening of the time available for pupils to have lunch, and there is evidence that shorter lunchtimes are associated with deprivation levels of the school's location, although this is more marked for secondary schools⁴⁰. Evaluations of the impact of UIFSM in England and Scotland have noted that lunch needs to be delivered in an environment where pupils are comfortable with sufficient time to eat if benefits are to be fully realised^{19,23,24}. The importance of play in general is recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which are central to Welsh Government's policies relating to children⁴¹, and adequate break times, including sufficient time to eat, play and socialise is also recognised in the Education Wales Framework guidance relating to emotional and mental well-being⁴². Primary school children particularly value play and may skip meals or prefer to take packed lunches to maximise their play time. Barriers on pupils receiving school meals and those bringing in packed lunches sitting together have also been identified as a factor in pupils refusing school meals. These issues pre-date COVID-19 but has been intensified by the response to the pandemic, which saw school catering minimise social contact by maximising efficiency and throughput. These systems have often been retained.

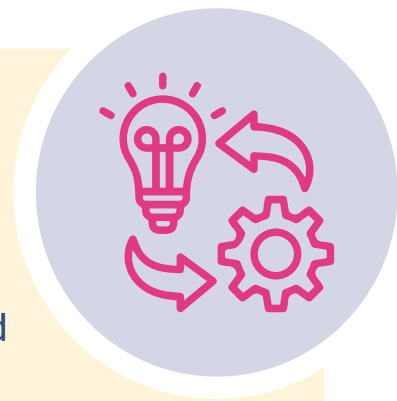
The stresses associated with these arrangements have impacts on inequalities. Pupils with particular developmental needs, such as those with disabilities or on the autistic spectrum are more likely to find school lunch settings difficult to negotiate. Catering staff also reported that those with stronger food preferences, often pupils from more deprived backgrounds, worry that their preferred items will be unavailable. By increasing the number of children accessing free school meals, these policies risk reducing the capacity of catering staff to identify and support those with particular needs. This risks such pupils finding lunchtime less enjoyable: an important determinant of uptake but also an important measure of well-being in itself.

The wider impact of lunch arrangements on opportunities to play were also noted. The importance of play in child development and the inequalities that school play addresses are well-established and reflected in Welsh Government's ambition for Wales to be a 'play friendly country'⁴³.

There is a risk that the expansion of eligibility for free school meals further shortens lunchtimes, makes lunch settings more stressful and reduces chances to play. Policy development should consider how to ensure that lunchtime breaks reflect commitments in other strategies and policies, such as rights-based approaches, to ensure lunchtimes include sufficient opportunities to enjoy lunch and socialise in a relaxed environment and sufficient time to play.

Recommendations

- ✓ Ensure that lunchtime breaks provide sufficient time to eat lunch and to play
- ✓ Ensure the lunch environment allows pupils to eat in a relaxed and social environment



5.2.3 Learn from out-of-school food programmes

There have been a number of school holiday programmes in Wales that have provided lunchtime meals for children living with deprivation. Both the evaluations of these programmes⁴⁴ and the experiences of stakeholders suggested these had been effective in reducing inequalities. However, there were concerns that, as a targeted programme, these were not well integrated with universal provision.

Reasons for their success are consistent with many of the factors identified here for reducing

inequalities related to provision of free meals in schools. Encouraging socialisation and making eating a pleasant experience, seeing food and opportunities to play as linked, supporting children to try new foods and involving families were all identified as contributing to this success.

Learning from these schemes may support more effective implementation to reduce inequalities, particularly where local knowledge and networks have been developed.

Recommendations

- ✓ Identify how local schemes have used local knowledge and networks effectively

5.2.4 Sustainable provision that supports and builds local foundational economies requires long term planning and commitment

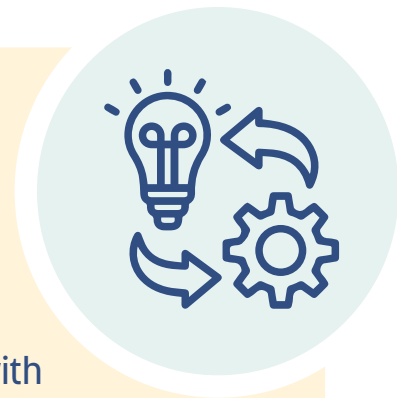
The expansion of free school meal eligibility offers opportunities to invest in local foundational economies in ways that improve sustainability. A number of models have been identified that may support this, including Community Wealth Building⁴⁵ and developing schools as local 'anchor institutions', with some examples of work in England noted. Further work would be needed to clarify which models might be effective and relevant to policy in Wales. What is clear from the

evidence, in particular from Scotland, is that long-term planning and commitment to partnerships with local suppliers are essential to build sustainable, local provision over time.

Sustainable provision requires long-term commitment to partnerships and planning. Models for engagement with local foundational economies need to be assessed and could be piloted.

Recommendations

- ✓ Support long term commitment to partnerships and planning in local foundational economies to supply food for school meals
- ✓ Identify and pilot the most effective models of engagement with local foundational economies (e.g. anchor institutions; community wealth building)



5.2.5 Embed fair working practices in school catering

There is a risk that UPFSM stretches school catering workforces, especially as the cost of living crisis and associated inflation increases pressures on budgets. However, the policy also represents an opportunity to embed fair working practices in school catering workplaces. Methods to achieve this might include increasing the negotiating power of workers through union membership, setting contract standards and committing to hourly rates that reflect the living wage. Evidence suggests that maintaining provision 'in house' rather than outsourcing will support fair working practices. These approaches are likely

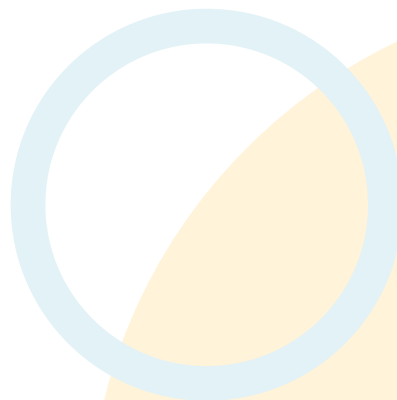
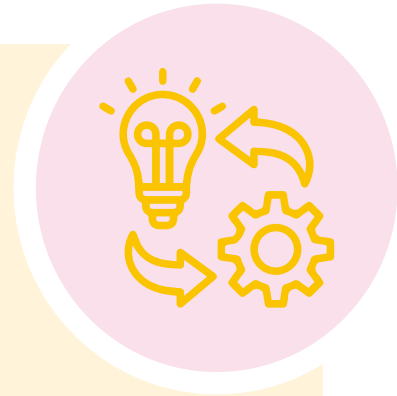
to be challenging in the context of economic uncertainty and fiscal constraints, but maintaining and developing a committed and professional staff is also a key factor in maintaining quality of provision.

Provision for school meals should be kept in-house. Fair working practices should be embedded within school catering environments through setting contract standards, committing to hourly rates that reflect the living wage and supporting increased negotiating power of workers through union membership.



Recommendations

- ✓ Maintain food preparation within schools to support fair working practices and provision of fresh, healthy meals
- ✓ Fair working practices should be embedded within school catering environments through setting contract standards, committing to hourly rates at the real living wage and supporting increased negotiating power of workers through union membership and social partnership



06 EARLY YEARS CHILDCARE

6.1 Evidence on equity outcomes

Overall, there was strong consensus from research, evaluation and stakeholder evidence that extending eligibility for childcare for 2-3 year olds via expanding Flying Start and extending the Childcare Offer to those in education or 'on the edge of work' will reduce inequalities, particularly for families experiencing deprivation who are not already able to access provision.



However, there is a risk that some families with the greatest needs will continue to be excluded. The impact on inequalities experienced by workers may be positive if pay and conditions are improved, but there is a risk that expansion will leave some (especially childminders) struggling and have a negative impact on an already stretched workforce. This may have a knock-on effect on inequalities amongst children and families, particularly those experiencing deprivation or living in rural areas. The evidence gives rise to concerns around the impact of extending availability on the sustainability of settings including specific impacts on inequalities.

Risks to specific groups related to uptake of the expanded programmes are described in the next section.





In 2019-20 in Wales only 31% of parents of 0-4 year olds classified as unemployed were accessing childcare, compared to 69% of those employed

6.1.1 Economic inequalities between families

The mechanism by which the expansion of early years childcare policies reduce economic inequalities between families is by enabling parents who would otherwise be unable to afford childcare to access work or to increase the hours they work.

Data from 2016-17 suggested that 47% of parents accessing paid childcare for 0-4 year olds found it 'difficult' to afford. For those in households categorised as 'in material deprivation' the proportion was 72%. For those in the second most deprived quintile (i.e., those targeted in the initial expansion of Flying Start) it was 60%⁴⁶. In 2019-20 in Wales only 31% of parents of 0-4 year olds classified as unemployed were accessing childcare, compared to 69% of those employed⁴⁷.

The cost of childcare in the UK is high compared with other countries, and has risen quickly in recent years⁴⁸. Evaluations of the Childcare Offer in Wales and comparable offers elsewhere in the UK have consistently reported that 30 hours per week of free childcare improves access to work, family finances and quality of family life, with those on lower incomes reporting the greatest benefits^{5,49}. Despite concerns that the Offer might increase economic inequalities by offering support to families with high earnings¹⁵, the evidence from evaluation suggests that the median gross salary of individuals accessing the offer is below the national median, with 27% of parents accessing in 2020-21 earning less than £16,000⁵.

The most recent evaluation reported that the Offer had enabled many parents to increase earnings despite the impact of the pandemic, particularly for those with lower incomes⁵. Evaluations of Flying Start have suggested that it supports those with low incomes to access work⁵⁰.

The limits of the current Childcare Offer and Flying Start provision to address inequalities in access to work through providing childcare to those who are not in employment (and therefore more likely to be economically disadvantaged) have been described in detail¹⁵ and the expansion of eligibility for the Childcare Offer to parents not currently in work is expected to address some of these concerns.

The definitions adopted by the Childcare Offer for parents 'in education' and 'on the edge of work' (and how they evolve over time) will have an impact on inequalities. The current definition includes parents enrolled on higher and further education courses, but Welsh Government has indicated that additional cohorts of learners may be enrolled over time⁵¹. The definition may mean that some of those living with the highest deprivation, who are likely to face the greatest barriers to accessing work and education, are not eligible. This may reduce economic inequalities in some parts of society but increase inequalities for those most in need.

The geographical expansion of Flying Start on the basis of area-level deprivation will mean that many families living with deprivation in other areas will continue to lack access, increasing the inequalities they experience as others in less need receive services. Currently local authorities are able to provide outreach to families outside of core areas based on need. This may provide opportunities to mitigate or reduce inequalities, but will depend on integrating local knowledge into implementation.

The relationship between professional childcare and informal support from family, friends and within communities was noted by stakeholders as having a number of dimensions in relation to inequalities.

Provision of childcare may reduce economic inequalities by 'freeing' friends and family members from childcare responsibilities and enabling them to find (better) work. However, no evidence was identified that would allow this theory to be tested, and it is not clear that those currently providing such care or would seek employment.

6.1.2 Health inequalities between children

Policies that deliver universal support related to health, including prevention, early identification of health conditions, access to services and health improvement are likely to reduce health inequalities. This is because children and families who are marginalised or living with deprivation typically have worse health outcomes than the general population⁵³ and have the greatest potential to benefit from these services.

However, this depends on those with the greatest needs being able to take advantage of those services, which their experience of marginalisation and deprivation may make them less able to do. It is important that the move from targeted to universal provision does not erode the effectiveness of services to meet the specific requirements of those with the greatest needs. Patterns of uptake are therefore extremely important to the success of the policies in addressing health inequalities.

Childcare may also have to 'compete' with informal care networks, and this may vary between communities. For example, some communities may prefer to maintain informal care networks that reflect their cultural preferences rather than access state funded or provided care. This may limit the possible economic benefits of expanding childcare to specific communities.

Stakeholders noted a general perception that those living with deprivation are more likely to rely on informal care networks, because they can afford less childcare, require more flexibility to meet the demands of precarious working patterns and are less likely to move away from families for education or work. However, there is concern that these informal networks may be less robust for many with the greatest needs than is often assumed⁵².

The expansion of Flying Start and the Childcare Offer are expected to reduce economic inequalities between families. However, there are risks that some families with the highest needs will continue to be unable to access these programmes.

Enhanced health visiting and access to high quality childcare are expected to increase the likelihood that children's health issues will be identified promptly, that they will access healthcare services early and that they will benefit from preventative programmes such as vaccination. There are also potential benefits to health from access to nutritious food, play and exercise in childcare settings.

Support for better parenting may reduce health problems related to accidents and mental well-being of children. The most recent evaluation noted that the Childcare Offer had supported mental health and well-being for children and families during the pandemic⁵. Whilst these benefits were reported across all income levels, the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on those living with deprivation⁵⁴ mean that this is likely to have reduced health inequalities and suggests childcare provision may be of particular value during times of economic turbulence.



Those in communities that are marginalised or living with deprivation are expected to benefit more from support to use services and availability of health-promoting settings, as they are more likely to face barriers to access. However, some of these positive impacts may be lessened if new facilities cannot secure good quality premises, with good indoor and outdoor play and proximity to green space. Evaluations of Flying Start have suggested that ethnic minority families in particular value the support they receive to access services more promptly⁵⁰.

On average children receiving enhanced health visiting were seen 5.1 times per year by a health visitor and a further 2.1 times by members of wider health team, although there is considerable variation between local authority area⁴. Emerging findings based on analysis of linked data from the Swansea local authority area has suggested a possible association between Flying Start and reduced A&E visits and hospital admissions, but this needs further investigation⁵⁵.

Evidence from England suggested hospitalisations were higher for children in Sure Start areas in the early years, but reduce from primary age onwards compared with non-Sure Start areas with comparable deprivation. Reductions were driven by reduced infections, injuries, and mental health problems and the research suggested the operating mechanisms were stronger immune systems, safer parenting practices and home environments, and improved emotional and behavioural development⁵⁶.

No evidence was identified related to primary care access, which is particularly important for prevention and early intervention, although health visiting is expected to address these areas for pre-school children.

The Healthy and Sustainable Pre School Scheme is a national accreditation scheme which recognises settings that promote physical, mental, social and emotional health. The WNHPSS provides a mechanism for supporting current and new settings to build the knowledge, leadership and family and community engagement to maximise opportunities to improve health.

The expansion of Flying Start and the Childcare Offer are expected to reduce health inequalities between children, provided that uptake is high amongst those most in need and the quality of service can be maintained, in particular for those eligible for Flying Start. Staff numbers, availability in areas of highest deprivation and quality of care are of particular importance. Gaps in the evidence demand further evaluation to clearly identify the mechanisms involved (i.e. what is down to association and what is cause and effect) and identify opportunities to further address inequalities.

6.1.3 Inequalities in development, individual progress and longer-term educational outcomes between children

Policies to expand high quality childcare from a young age and support with specific areas of development for those identified as having needs in these areas are expected to narrow inequalities, particularly experienced by those living with deprivation who do not currently have access to Flying Start or who are not currently eligible for the Childcare Offer. There are a number of mechanisms expected to reduce inequalities.

Details of Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) provision within Flying Start identifies some characteristics associated with families living in deprivation (e.g. fewer reading occasions) for which SLC support can compensate, narrowing gaps in development before children begin early education³¹.

Qualitative research also found that parents believed Flying Start had a positive impact upon their children's speech, language and communication skills and their development, social skills and behaviour⁵⁰.

Parenting support can improve parenting skills, with confident positive parenting associated with better development, and longer term academic attainment⁵⁷.

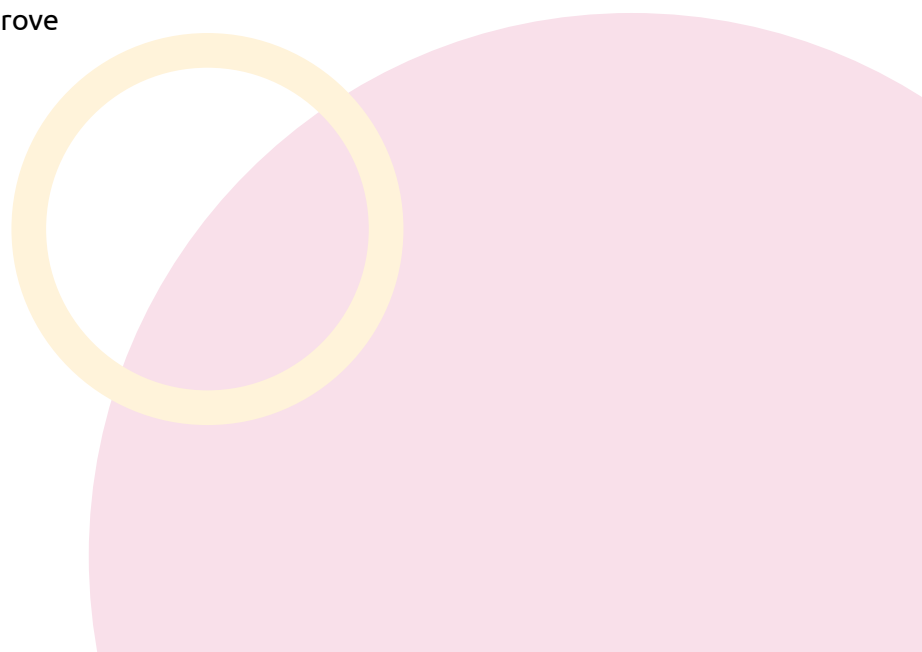
Families living with deprivation find it more difficult to provide a positive environment and model positive parenting behaviours, due to financial constraints, long and non-standard working hours and lack of support⁵⁷. High quality childcare is assumed to reduce inequalities because it enables children from families living with deprivation to gain skills that they are more likely to lack than those less deprived and also because families have opportunities to improve

parenting skills. Evaluation of Sure Start in England found evidence for both these outcomes for families living in more deprived areas⁵⁸. These families also find it more difficult to access high quality childcare in a commercial market.

This model sees inequalities as created by issues in the wider socioeconomic environment leading to a lack of time and energy to develop and implement parenting skills. To address inequalities, it is important that childcare settings are supportive of parents and avoid judgement towards those most in need. The need to be attentive to strategies for inclusion, such as consistent and supportive use of language (to describe what is meant by 'parenting' for example) were identified as important to maximise the impact of Flying Start in particular on developmental and educational outcomes.

This model also assumes that the universal offer will be delivered in a 'proportionate' way, with staff able to focus more intensively on those with higher needs.

Children from families living with deprivation are considerably more likely to have impoverished speech, language and communication skills on starting school, and inequalities in school attainment between those with different language abilities at this age persist and grow over their school career and translate into inequalities in employment^{30,57}.





Children from families living with deprivation are considerably more likely to have impoverished speech, language and communication skills on starting school, and inequalities in school attainment between those with different language abilities at this age persist and grow over their school career and translate into inequalities in employment

Analysis of linked data from the Swansea local authority area has compared assessments at school entry between 2015-16 and 2017-18⁵⁹. This analysis found that a lower percentage of children from Flying Start areas achieved their expected outcomes at on-entry assessment compared with those from non-Flying Start areas but children in Flying Start areas with high childcare attendance were more likely to achieve their expected outcomes compared to those with low attendance⁵⁹. This descriptive study provides some evidence for the effectiveness of childcare in supporting children in preparation for early education, but more robust statistical analysis would be required to confirm the findings.

Evaluation of outcomes between 2007-15 comparing Flying Start areas pre- and post-expansion reported that the average number of unauthorised absences (for pupils with at least one unauthorised absence) fell from 17.2 to 14.3 days before and after Flying Start was available in their area. However, for those in areas without Flying Start availability, the comparable figures were 13.4 and 11.9. These findings are consistent with those reported from analysis of linked data for pupils in Swansea for 2011-12 to 2015-16⁶⁰. This suggests Flying Start may have reduced absences for these children relative to those to whom it was not available, but the context of falling absences for both groups suggests other factors may have been involved and further analysis is needed to confirm findings.

The same evaluation suggested that Flying Start may contribute to early identification of Special Educational Needs (SEN^b)³⁰, which is a further mechanism by which Flying Start may contribute to reducing inequalities.

The same study suggested attainment at age 7 was also higher for those from Flying Start areas and that those with SEN may be more likely to be identified if they access Flying Start, mitigating the inequalities³⁰.

Recent evaluation of the Childcare Offer suggests that the number of pre-school children identified with Additional Learning Needs (ALN^c) has increased during the pandemic, with stakeholders suggesting this is due to the negative impact of lockdowns on learning and development⁵.

The most recent Welsh Government review of the childcare sector in Wales in 2018 noted that Welsh medium settings typically reported particular difficulties in recruiting staff and that this was an issue likely to need careful management over the long-term⁶¹.

The expansion of Flying Start and the Childcare Offer are expected to reduce inequalities in development and school attainment between children, particularly those from families living with deprivation. However it is important that services are inclusive, that parents feel supported to overcome barriers, and not judged for having obstacles to overcome.

^b Note that the Special Educational Needs (SEN) framework was replaced by the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) framework in 2018, which has a similar definition. The term in the report or research cited has been used in the text

6.1.4 Inequalities between the childcare and early years workforce and other workers

There is considerable evidence that the childcare sector as a whole experiences a range of inequalities compared with some other sectors, including relatively low pay, poor working conditions and an undervaluing of their role¹⁵.

A recent survey of the childcare workforce by Early Years Wales reports that on average 2.4 staff members (15%) in each setting were employed on zero hours contracts. Around half of staff have term-time-only contracts, with more than 50% of settings using sessional contracts and 59% of providers have staff with second jobs or income⁶².

These are issues recognised across the UK and they have been exacerbated by COVID-19. The impact of reduced hours and work during the pandemic and continued lower income means morale is considered extremely low¹⁸.

Stakeholders expressed particular concerns that childminder numbers have fallen sharply in recent years and they may struggle to remain viable as a result of the expansion if standards for settings (e.g. qualification levels) make it difficult for childminders to be involved in the expansion of the Childcare Offer. As this is a role that allows many women who need flexibility in work and may find it difficult to find other jobs, this risks increasing inequalities.

Recruitment and retention are also issues within the sector¹⁵, with 77% of childcare settings surveyed in Wales in 2022 reporting difficulties in recruiting to available posts⁶². Expanding availability within a tight labour market may result in more workers moving to relatively more affluent areas which can offer better pay and conditions. This may be a particular issue for Flying Start settings, which require higher qualifications and will expand to less deprived areas. There is a risk that provision becomes more uneven in areas with greater needs, increasing inequalities between children and families.

The same survey reported that non-supervisors qualified at the level required to work in Flying Start settings received an average of £9.30 per hour, with those less qualified in other settings earning between £7.80 and £8.70. This average is below the 'real living wage' of £9.90 and it is possible that a substantial number of workers in these settings may be receiving considerably less than this figure.

Welsh Government has committed to the requirement that workers in social care receive the real living wage⁶³. The Scottish Government has committed to funding this hourly rate to workers as part of its expansion of early years childcare provision¹⁵, although it is important to note that the early years landscape in Scotland is very different from Wales, with closer alignment between day nurseries and schools and greater influence over pay and conditions for local authorities and the Scottish Government.

Low pay, insecure contracts and poor working conditions have a well-established impact on health inequalities⁶⁴. A survey of the childcare sector in England in December 2021 suggested that 16% of settings believed that a lack of adequate staff made it likely that they would have to close within 12 months, with lack of funding for childcare places a key factor⁶⁵.

Welsh Government have also intervened to regulate contracts in the social care sector, banning 'zero hour' contracts³⁹. These interventions require very detailed planning to understand the consequences in a complex market, but may offer an approach to reduce inequalities for workers in the childcare and early years sector.



One context for concerns regarding staff is the overall sustainability of the sector. Data from England shows a 19.6% fall in the number of early years childcare providers between 2017 and 2022⁶⁶. Whilst provider number falls were comparable in the most and least deprived areas, the number of spaces fell slightly (-0.8%) across the ten most deprived local authorities but grew by 4.4% in the ten least deprived⁶⁶. One interpretation provided by those gathering the data is that settings in less deprived areas are expanding to meet demand, but those in more deprived areas are forced to restrict places due to capacity.

There is an opportunity for the expansion of Flying Start and the Childcare Offer to improve pay, conditions, career progression and recognition for workers, reducing economic and health inequalities. There are also opportunities to raise the profile and highlight the contribution of workers in this sector. But there is a risk that the expansion results in higher demands on staff, increased use of low-paid sessional and insecure contracts, increasing inequalities compared with other workers and within the sector. There is also the risk that these issues are distributed unevenly across Wales, leading to a knock-on effect for inequalities between families and children living in more deprived or rural areas.

6.2 Addressing inequalities, high level themes

6.2.1 Consistent quality of care is maintained as provision is increased

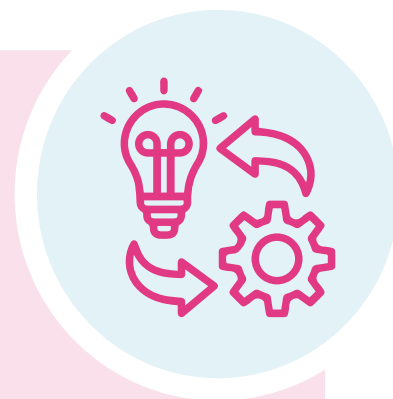
Reducing all of the inequalities described will require high quality childcare. The expansion of provision creates a number of risks in this respect. A range of evidence suggests that the labour market for childcare is already tight, and these pressures may particularly affect Flying Start settings which require higher levels of qualifications relative to the sector as a whole. Expansion, particularly as it will increase provision from the most deprived areas to include those less deprived, may add to these pressures and encourage staff to move away from areas with the greatest needs, which may risk the closure of settings that become unviable. Those areas may need to recruit less experienced staff and/or face even greater shortages. It is also possible that staff may be stretched, especially in areas of higher need, giving them less time to work with children who could most benefit. The evidence of higher needs amongst children post-pandemic is an additional factor creating risks of increasing inequalities. This is particularly important given that an approach that addresses inequalities will require that support within universal provision is available more intensively to those with the greatest needs.

Labour market issues may also create inequalities in relation to provision of Welsh medium childcare, a core aspect of the policy. The importance of ensuring an early years childcare workforce sufficiently confident working in Welsh has been identified in the Childcare, Play and Early Years Workforce Plan¹⁴ and Welsh Government has indicated the early years childcare commitments in the Programme for Government will see investment in expanding the Welsh speaking workforce, improving Welsh language skills across the workforce and opening new Welsh language settings across Wales.

Careful consideration needs to be given to how expanding provision will impact on sustainability of settings, especially in relation to staff availability in areas of highest need. Co-ordinated efforts to support recruitment and retention in those areas may be required, especially where there is high demand for Welsh medium provision.

Recommendations

- ✓ Careful consideration needs to be given to how expanding provision will impact on sustainability of settings in areas of highest need
- ✓ Co-ordinated efforts to support recruitment and retention in those areas may be required, especially where there is high demand for Welsh medium provision



6.2.2 Embed fair working practices in early years childcare settings

The pressures that the tight labour market place on quality of care during expansion, especially during a cost of living crisis are described in the previous section. A related but distinct theme is the impact on staff working in childcare settings. There is a risk that recruitment and retention issues are exacerbated by increasing provision and that staff, already often reporting high levels of stress due to work overload and difficulty in managing financially, experiencing worse working conditions.

Expansion of provision creates opportunities to embed fair working practices in early years childcare settings. These may include setting contract standards, committing to hourly rates that reflect the living wage and supporting increased negotiating power of workers through union membership.

Recommendations

- ✓ Fair working practices should be embedded within childcare environments through setting contract standards, committing to hourly rates that reflect the living wage and supporting increased negotiating power of workers through union membership and social partnership

6.2.3 Equity in provision and response to local needs

Addressing inequalities by expanding childcare through Flying Start and the Childcare Offer depends on high rates of take-up by families with the greatest needs. Inequitable take-up of the current Childcare Offer has been identified as an issue¹⁵. Flying Start access is more consistent between areas⁴. The sharp fall in the number of families taking up Flying Start in 2020-21 is associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is not clear how patterns of take-up (for example, between families with different incomes or ethnicity) were affected, or what the longer-term impact of the pandemic experience may be on take-up. There are therefore significant risks of more inequitable distribution during the expansion.

One issue, already highlighted, is the potential for the expansion of services in a tight labour market to incentivise workers to move to more affluent and urban areas, reducing equality of provision. This may compound issues already faced by those in rural areas who already face multiple issues with accessing childcare including longer travel times and fuel costs and uncertainty in current job markets⁶⁷. The concentration of those who speak Welsh as a first language in rural areas means this group may also see increased inequalities as the expansion is rolled out.

Families who would most benefit from the support offered by Flying Start and the Childcare Offer often work (or are likely to be entering work) in jobs with non-standard hours and precarious working conditions. Childcare settings that are not available at these times may exclude those most in need. This is a challenge for the expansion of the offer, as provision outside standard working hours is likely to increase costs of provision. Welsh Government has previously funded a project that has made childcare in non-standard hours available (it was reported to the Group that demand was not sufficient to sustain provision in this case) and colleagues in Scotland have noted that a pilot project with a community organisation has been established as part of their expansion of provision, although evaluation is not yet available.

Families who are experiencing the greatest inequalities in terms of access to work are likely to be furthest from work and education. Flying Start, as a programme that does not condition access on current education or closeness to work may have a more substantial impact on inequalities than the Childcare Offer.

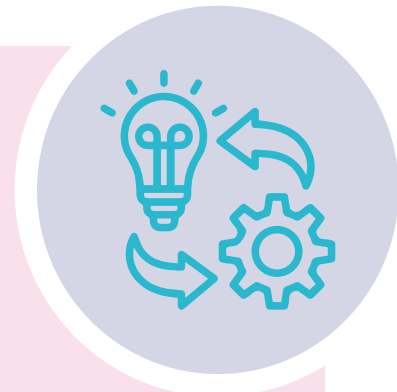
Current uneven take-up amongst those from ethnic minority communities was identified by stakeholders, with concerns that expansion could exacerbate this issue if provision does not reflect the preferences of local communities. The lack of representation of ethnic minorities in the childcare workforce was also noted, and has been identified by stakeholders in previous evidence gathering¹⁵.

Areas of focus to address these risks to inequalities include:

- ✔ **Consider support needed for those on low incomes who are further from education and work and therefore not eligible for the Childcare Offer**
- ✔ **Involving local communities in the co-production of planning of childcare provision**
- ✔ **Piloting and evaluating projects with non-standard opening hours.** It is important that learning from current and previous pilots of projects offering non-standard childcare hours supports any further work in this area
- ✔ **Monitoring the profile of childcare staff and encouraging recruitment amongst those from ethnic minorities to reflect local communities**
- ✔ **Clear and high profile communication of what is available to parents.** Insufficient profile and understanding of the Childcare Offer in particular has been identified as a factor in uneven take-up¹⁵

Recommendations

- ✔ Consider support needed for those on low incomes who are further from education and work and therefore not eligible for the Childcare Offer
- ✔ Involve local communities in the co-production of expansion of childcare provision including through involvement in Local Authority Childcare Sufficiency Assessments
- ✔ Ensure childcare settings are able to support families in which parents are working non-standard hours
- ✔ Monitor the profile of childcare staff and encourage recruitment amongst those from ethnic minorities so that childcare provision reflects local communities
- ✔ Clear and high profile communication of what is available to parents



6.2.4 Transitions between childcare and school provide consistency

The links between different childcare provision and schools are another dimension of integration. Current provision, in particular the lack of clear links between Flying Start and the Childcare Offer introduce complexity for parents which can be a barrier to consistency of provision¹⁵, that is of greatest importance to those who are working or seeking work. Simple integrated childcare is central to the 'Nordic approach' of childcare⁶⁸ which supports high levels of employment and is considered an important model by Welsh Government¹⁵. Those experiencing inequalities, especially economic inequalities are more likely to have instability in their working lives (e.g. entering the workforce, changing jobs, changing working patterns). Therefore clarity and continuity in services will reduce inequalities they experience.

Stakeholders also noted that there were generally poor links between childcare and schools, meaning that knowledge of children's needs was usually lost during transition. Those with developmental needs would benefit from consistency in early support and are more likely to be from families experiencing deprivation.

Ensuring different offers and provision for early years childcare work together effectively and are understood by those who could most benefit from them is important for reducing inequalities. In the longer-term, a single, integrated and offer would maximise effectiveness in addressing inequalities. Better support for transition between school and childcare settings is also likely to reduce inequalities and options such as creating a universal template for communication and hand-over between childcare and schools should be considered.

Recommendations

- ✓ Ensure that different offers and provision for early years childcare work together effectively and are understood by those who could most benefit from them
- ✓ Explore options for a single, integrated early years childcare offer to families
- ✓ Improve links between school and childcare settings, exploring options such as a universal template for communication and hand-over



6.2.5 Staff and services working across early years are able to support children to be healthy and to access a range of appropriate health and social services

Evaluations of Flying Start⁵⁰ and stakeholder opinion saw the integrated nature of the programme to be a key strength, improving access to specialist provision through the programme (e.g. parenting support) and through links with other health and social care services. This was particularly recognised by those from groups who may find it difficult to negotiate services for a variety of reasons related to inequalities, including English language skills and lack of confidence or knowledge in navigating 'the system'.

It is important that the capacity to offer this kind of support is valued and sustained through the expansion of Flying Start. Stakeholders also noted that childcare workers, as trusted professionals with frequent contact with children, were also well positioned to facilitate access to developmental support. Stakeholders also noted that a wide range of networks exist within many localities to provide health and social care support. These include the contacts built up informally by teams of health visitors and GP Cluster Social Prescribing

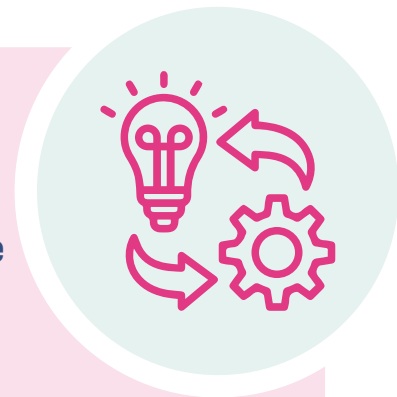
networks. The work of the Healthy and Sustainable Pre School Scheme in accrediting settings that work to promote physical, mental, social and emotional health also provides a mechanism for improving knowledge, leadership and engagement to improve health.

The value of including local communities in planning, already noted, is relevant here, to build consistent understandings of what services are valued and used locally. Local Authorities' responsibility to produce Childcare Sufficiency Assessments may provide a framework to incorporate these views.

Support to map formal and informal networks locally and for childcare workers and settings to access those networks may reduce inequalities. Continued support for the Healthy and Sustainable Pre School Scheme is likely to reduce health inequalities if the scheme can engage effectively with settings in areas with higher needs.

Recommendations

- ✓ Provide tools and support for childcare workers and settings to map and access formal and informal health and social care networks such as local primary care social prescribing
- ✓ Continue to support the Healthy and Sustainable Pre School Scheme to work with current and new settings to build knowledge, leadership and family and community engagement around healthy living



6.2.6 Parents feel services are supportive and responsive

Those working directly with communities experiencing inequalities noted the importance of the way that language was used by policymakers and those managing and delivering childcare. Many of the mechanisms by which inequalities can be addressed within childcare settings depend on building trust. Stakeholders spoke about the importance of parents feeling from the start that a service was 'on their side' and would not judge or stereotype. For example, stakeholders noted that it was not always clear what terms such as

'positive parenting' meant and they can be taken as a way that services categorise parents as 'good' or 'bad', rather than an attempt to describe kinds of behaviours in neutral terms.

It is important that communication of childcare provision and benefits, and guidance for professionals on supporting parents, uses clear and consistent definitions and that these avoid stigmatising those who are most in need.

Recommendations

- ✓ Communication of childcare provision and benefits, and guidance for professionals should use clear, consistent and non-stigmatising definitions developed with stakeholders



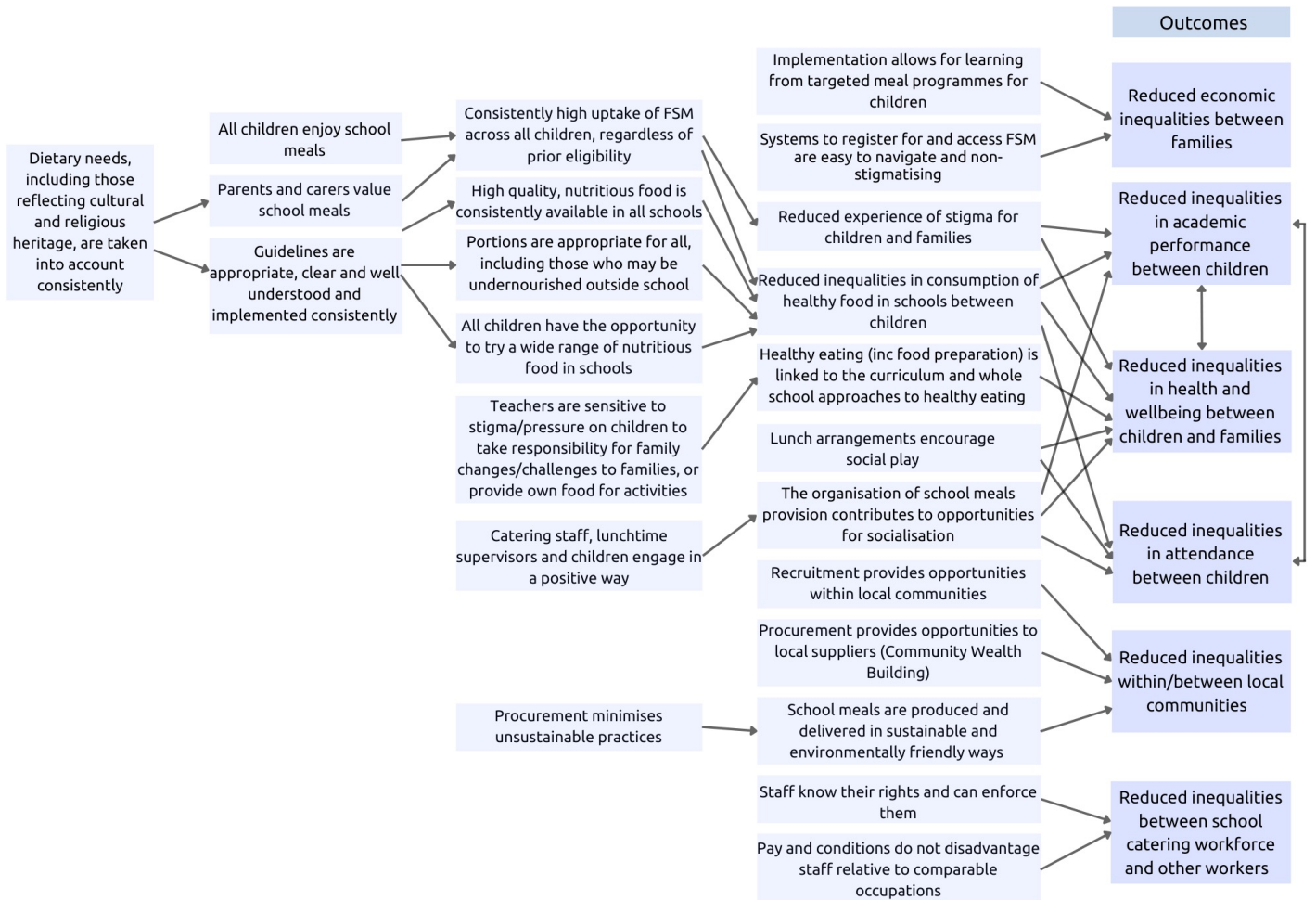
07 THEORIES OF CHANGE

A Theory of Change is a model of desired outcomes and the conditions that have to be present for the outcome to be achieved. It involves a rigorous participatory process with stakeholders to model the outcomes and conditions as a causal network. Participants also consider assumptions, indicators, interventions and approaches to bring the outcomes about. The complete Theories of Change for each policy area were developed with the Task and Finish Group, have been shared with policy colleagues in Welsh Government during development and the final versions are available separately.

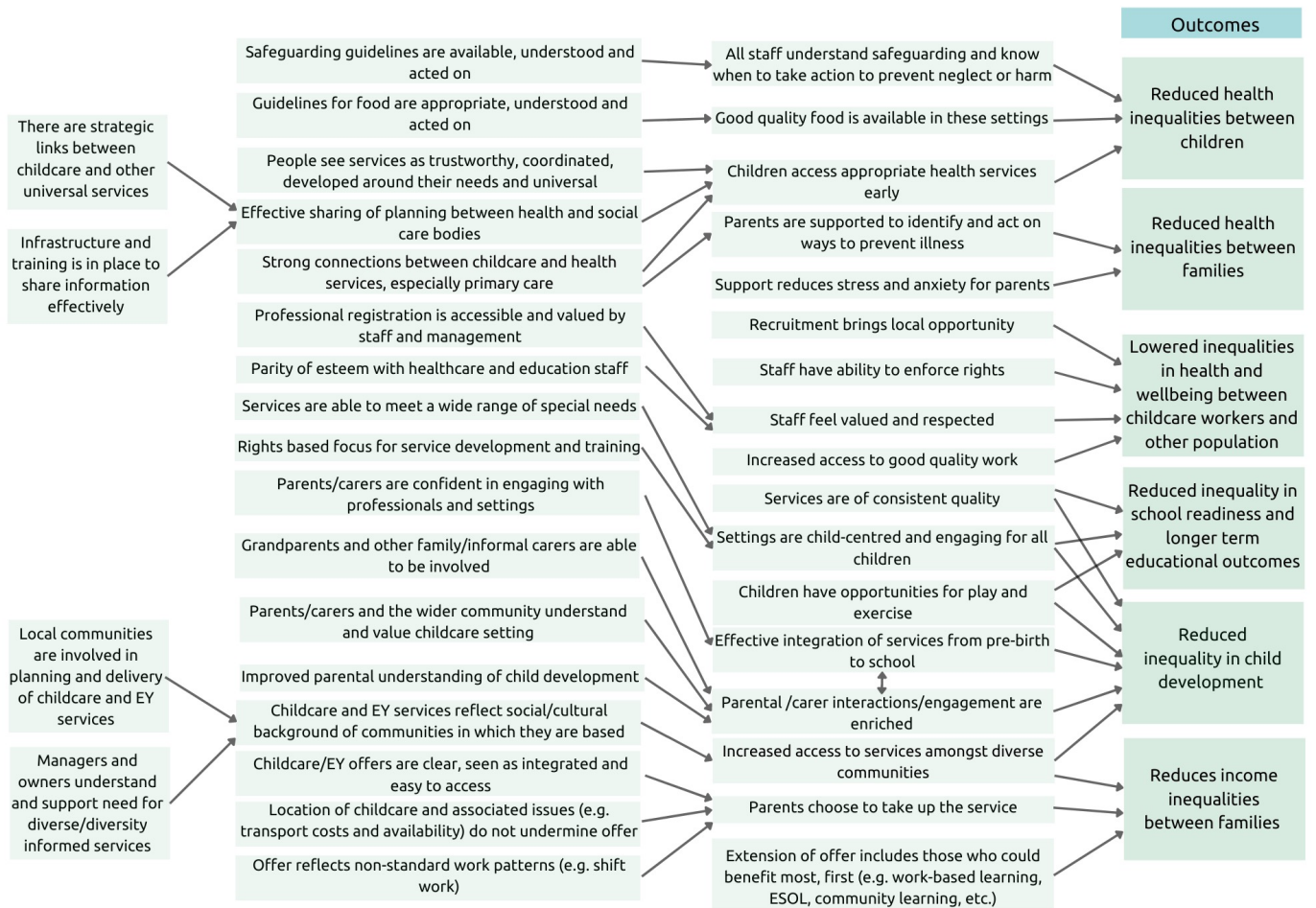
The outcome maps for the Theories of Change are shown in the following sections.



7.1 Universal Primary Free School Meals



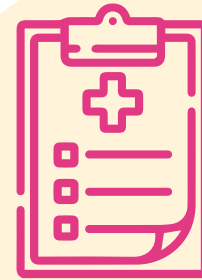
7.2 Early years childcare provision





08 HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) were carried out with the support of the Wales Health Impact Assessment Unit (WHIASU), WHO CC Directorate, and Public Health Wales. Population groups likely to be positively or negatively impacted by the policies were identified by the Task and Finish Group. The Group then identified organisations that represented or advocated for those population groups to contribute to the stakeholder workshops. Workshops were carried out on 17 June (Universal Primary Free School Meals) and 23 June (Early Years Childcare).



Evidence was gathered from:

- ✓ Evaluations of Flying Start and the Childcare Offer
- ✓ Evaluations of comparable programmes in Wales and other parts of the UK, including provision of free breakfasts in schools in Wales, Sure Start in England and the introduction of Universal Infant Free School Meals in England and Scotland
- ✓ Evidence reviews carried out by the Public Health Wales
- ✓ Evidence Service on the impact of free school meals and enhanced health visiting on inequalities
- ✓ Relevant evidence reviews carried out within Welsh Government
- ✓ Research and reports identified by Task and Finish Group members.

Summaries of the key findings of each HIA are presented in the following sections.

8.1 Universal Primary Free School Meals

There was a consensus amongst participants that those living with deprivation were the group most strongly affected and that the impact was expected to be positive. It was recognised that a substantial number of children not currently eligible are in need and would benefit strongly.

The shift to a universal service would particularly benefit some groups with particularly high needs, including those with no recourse to public funds and looked after children.

The policy will provide food to a large number of children whose families currently, or could, pay for a meal. The differential impact on this group and those living with deprivation is difficult to predict, although evaluation evidence suggests overall there is a narrowing of inequalities across a range of measures.

Other groups assessed as being affected were:

- ✓ Children and parents in families currently eligible (likely to experience moderate to major benefit)
- ✓ Children and parents in families newly eligible and not in need (likely to benefit, but with a minimal to moderate negative impact on inequalities)
- ✓ Children from ethnic minority backgrounds (risk of moderate negative impact)
- ✓ LGBTQ+ children (minimal: opportunity to benefit but also risk of negative outcomes)
- ✓ Children with disabilities and those with autism spectrum disorder (minimal negative impact)
- ✓ School catering workforce (major impact: opportunities for benefit, but also risk of negative impact)



For parents and families the assessment suggested reducing the cost of childcare for more families would reduce income inequalities and that increasing availability of childcare would enhance capabilities to access and exercise choice over work, education and other services



Universal provision was considered very likely to reduce stigma: this is anticipated to have clear benefits in relation to mental well-being and possible benefits in school attendance and attainment for those in need.

Current provision is often experienced as stressful: with requirements for rapid turnaround limiting opportunities to play, socialise and enjoy meals. The evidence suggests this creates inequalities and there is a risk that a substantial increase in the numbers of children eligible for FSM may increase these inequalities.

Implementation matters: there are clear opportunities for the policy to have a positive impact on inequalities in areas as diverse as the school catering workforce, the local foundational economy and community sustainability were identified, but there are also risks in these areas.

8.2 Early years childcare provision

The evidence indicates that increasing eligibility for the Childcare Offer and for childcare provision for children aged 2-3 as part of the expansion of Flying Start is likely to reduce inequalities between children and families for those in need and newly eligible.

For children the assessment suggested there will be a **reduction in inequalities associated with development and socialisation.**

For parents and families the assessment suggested **reducing the cost of childcare for more families would reduce income inequalities** and that **increasing availability of childcare would enhance capabilities to access and exercise choice** over work, education and other services.

Continuity and flexibility are particularly important to meet the needs of parents working non-standard hours and in precarious employment.

Planning childcare services to reflect local needs may enhance the positive impacts and reduce or mitigate risks of negative impacts for specific groups, including those in rural areas, those with a preference for Welsh medium childcare and those from ethnic minority groups.

The expansion of provision risks increasing inequalities between the workforce and other sectors and between rural and urban and more and less deprived areas, especially given current economic uncertainty.



Other groups identified include:

- ✓ Children with disabilities, children with additional learning needs and their families (probable moderate benefits but also possibility of moderate negative impacts)
- ✓ Children and families from ethnic minority backgrounds (probably moderate positive impact, but also possible moderate negative impacts)
- ✓ LGBTQ+ families (possible minimal positive and negative impacts)
- ✓ Welsh speaking families (possible major benefits; also possible risk of moderate negative impacts)
- ✓ Families living in rural locations (probable major benefits; also possible risk of moderate negative impacts)

09 MONITORING AND EVALUATION

These policies reflect a major investment by Welsh Government that will affect a substantial number of children and families in Wales. They also position Wales at the forefront of policies on school meals and early years childcare. It is important that implementation is accompanied by robust monitoring and evaluation to understand their impacts on the population and to guide phased development and roll-out.

Given the complexity of the programmes we suggest a Monitoring and Evaluation Subgroup is formed to support Welsh Government development of a monitoring and evaluation programme.



Recommendations

- ✓ A 'Monitoring and Evaluation Subgroup' is formed to support Welsh Government development of a monitoring and evaluation programme

9.1 Approach

To support effective monitoring and evaluation of the policies in terms of inequalities we have aimed to:

- ✓ Identify models and designs used by evaluations of comparable programmes
- ✓ Identify key outcomes for evaluation, based on the Theories of Change
- ✓ Identify required data
- ✓ Identify relevant data currently available
- ✓ Identify relevant data not currently available

We have worked with colleagues and partners to gather insights into key issues and approaches, including:

- ✓ Policy and evaluation teams in Welsh Government
- ✓ Research and evaluation colleagues in Public Health Wales
- ✓ Academic partners in Wales
- ✓ Evaluation teams in other parts of the UK with relevant experience evaluating comparable programmes

9.2 Outcomes

Work in relation to inequalities has focused on evaluating outcomes, typically in the longer-term (3-5 years). This focuses on longer-term impacts related to the objectives of policies such as reducing economic, health and educational inequalities. There are also areas in which process evaluation is performed, to describe

the outputs such as uptake of services in the short-term (0-2 years). The focus of this work has been on options for outcomes evaluation. However, it is important to identify opportunities for integration to maximise the value of evaluation and minimise overlaps.

High-level outcomes which this programme is seeking to address in relation to inequality have been set out in Sections 5 and 6:

For UPFSM:

- ✓ Economic inequalities between families
- ✓ Inequalities in academic attainment and attendance between children
- ✓ Inequalities in health and well-being between children and families
- ✓ Inequalities within/between local communities
- ✓ Inequalities between school catering workforce and other workers

For early years childcare:

- ✓ Economic inequalities between families
- ✓ Health inequalities between children
- ✓ Inequalities in development, preparation for early education and school and longer-term educational outcomes between children
- ✓ Inequalities between the early years childcare workforce and other workers

The theory of change also identifies outcomes and outputs that are relevant to evaluation. Welsh Government policy teams working on UPFSM have also shared their logic model work. Agreeing the primary and secondary outcomes and refining and integrating logic models will be priorities for this work.

9.3 Evaluation design

In past studies, evaluation of outcomes of current or comparable programmes have taken two broad methodological approaches:

- ✓ **Area level outcomes.** These consider the impact on the target population to whom the policy/programme was available, regardless of whether they took advantage (i.e. received a school meal or participated in Flying Start or the Childcare Offer). This reflects the policy aim of a population level intervention and is particularly important given ambitions to move towards universal availability in the longer-term. It is also important to capture effects that may act at a population level, such as perceptions of school meals
- ✓ **Individual level outcomes.** These consider the impact on individuals actually taking up the offer. This approach focuses on the 'active ingredients': for example, having a nutritious school meal or experiencing childcare within Flying Start

The majority of relevant evaluations have taken an area based approach. This reflects the aims of evaluation, but often also a lack of the linked data necessary to identify individuals. Within these programmes area level monitoring and evaluation is expected to be the most useful approach as the population level is understood to be the most

important level on which these policies operate to address inequalities. However, individual-level evaluation may offer insights into household and longer-term outcomes that support development of the policies to be most effective in addressing the needs of particular groups.



9.4 Comparator groups and evaluation design

Robust evaluation of outcomes over time typically depends on being able to compare a group that has the benefits of the policy available and one that does not. Differences in the timescales of roll out of universal provision across the two policy areas mean that different evaluation designs may be appropriate in each area.

There are a number of approaches to designing evaluation to provide comparator groups.

At an area level, **the most robust evaluation is possible where implementation of policies can be randomised by area.** Choosing areas to receive and not receive the policies at random is the most effective way to minimise biases that can affect comparisons between groups.

It is recognised that randomisation is difficult for a number of reasons, including perceptions of fairness and operational demands of implementation. However, we believe it is worth exploring options, in particular in relation to the expansion of Flying Start, which is likely to be implemented over a longer period.

A second approach is to compare either areas before and after randomisation, or to compare areas that receive the expansion at different points. This approach depends on implementation offering clarity on what is available, when, to whom and in which area and when they are consistent in terms of what is available.

This approach typically depends on having consistent existing datasets to draw on. Where routine data are not available for areas prior to implementation, some evaluations have used data from research cohorts such as the Millennium Cohort Study. This depends on a cohort of sufficient size and with data gathered over an appropriate period being available. It also introduces additional complexity, as the data gathered on those cohorts may not exactly match the data desired by the evaluation.

As evaluation develops, clarity over comparator groups and the issues associated with gathering relevant data need to be considered.

9.5 Data and linkage

Scoping data requirements and availability at the earliest possible stage and taking steps to capture and share essential data where possible is critical to supporting effective evaluation. To be able to ascertain impact on primary outcome, and differences between groups across Wales, **the development and implementation of a centralised, systematic approach to the collection of a standardised minimum dataset is a priority.**

The data requirements, frequency, and method of reporting need to be proportionate to the evaluation aims. The need for information must be balanced against the logistical challenges of data collection in a primary school environment.

Opportunities to use data linked at an individual level are also relevant to evaluation strategies. The Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) databank contains a large number of datasets linked at an individual level. A number of these datasets are relevant to evaluation of these policies, including educational attainment, care records, hospital admission and emergency department attendance.

Data on those eligible and receiving provision varies between the different programmes:

- ✓ For school meals, data on eligibility is available at an individual level. Although provision will now be universal, Local Authorities continue to maintain records of children who would be eligible and to encourage parents to register eligibility under previous thresholds, as this allows them to access other grants
- ✓ For the Childcare Offer, individual level data is gathered by local authorities but only a small number of data items (date of birth and postcode) is consistently available. It is not clear that these data could be linked
 - Local Authority level data for the Childcare Offer has been entered into SAIL for specific evaluation projects. Therefore local evaluation may be possible, but it is not anticipated that linked data on a national scale will be available within a relevant timescale
- ✓ For Flying Start, individual level data is gathered by local authorities and aggregate data is available to Welsh Government
 - Welsh Government have worked with a number of local authorities to make individual-level data available within SAIL, and work is ongoing to scope options for making this data more widely and consistently available. However, it is not anticipated that national data will be consistently available in the near future
 - Cwm Taf Morgannwg Public Service Board has also worked to bring local authority data including Flying Start into SAIL in their role as a pathfinder as part of the Early Years Integration Transformation Programme

There are a range of data that are not currently available at an individual level that are required to evaluate identified outcomes. These include family income and family and children's assessments of their well-being. Large scale evaluations in the UK have typically used fieldwork amongst a sample of those eligible for the comparable programmes. It is likely that a similar approach would be required to address some of the key outcomes for these policies.

10 CONCLUSIONS

This report has used many sources of evidence, and perspectives from multiple disciplines and agencies in Wales, to identify ways in which policies to extend free school meals to all primary school children and make early years childcare universally available can be implemented to avoid, mitigate and reduce inequalities.

Theories of Change demonstrate pathways that affect equity for children, families, workers and wider communities. Health Impact Assessments have identified how these policies can have different impacts on different groups.

We identified inequality themes including the cost of living crisis, addressing inequalities within complex systems and gender inequalities. Evidence on equity outcomes related to free school meals included economic, health, educational attainment and attendance and workforce inequalities, along with inequalities within and between communities. Evidence on equity outcomes related to early years childcare provision included economic, health, child development, later educational attainment, and workforce inequalities.



We have outlined four strategic priorities for addressing inequalities when implementing these policies:

- ✓ **Proportionate universalism should guide planning**
- ✓ **High quality provision is essential**
- ✓ **Co-production should be central to local implementation**
- ✓ **Children's current health and well-being is valued at least as highly as their health and well-being as adults**

Putting these principles at the core of implementation will be essential to the effectiveness of these policies in addressing and not increasing inequalities.

In addition, we make recommendations relating to each policy area, as well as for evaluation. These policies position Wales at the forefront of policymaking on free school meals and early year's childcare. Robust and resourced monitoring and evaluation will be essential to demonstrating their impact and ensuring that the people of Wales get the most benefit from these policies and that learning is shared.

Informed by many sources of evidence and perspectives from multiple disciplines and agencies in Wales, we believe that how these policies are implemented will be key to their impact on equity.

11 APPENDIX 1: TASK AND FINISH GROUP MEMBERSHIP AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Jason Rawbone	Welsh Government
Judith Stone	Wales Council for Voluntary Action
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We would like to thank those organisations who contributed to the Health Impact Assessments:

Barnardo's
Child Poverty Action Group
Clybiau Plant Cymru
Early Years and Childcare, Carmarthenshire County Council
Early Years Wales
Enfys Network, Public Health Wales
Flying Start Policy Team, Welsh Government
Healthy and Sustainable Pre-School Scheme
National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Cymru
National Deaf Children's Society
Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) in Wales
Race Council Cymru
Stonewall Cymru

We are also grateful to the following, who provided advice and support during the development of this work:

- ✓ Liz Green, Nerys Edmonds, Lee Parry Williams, Kathryn Ashton, Laura Evans and Michael Fletcher of the Wales Health Impact Assessment Support Unit, WHO CC Directorate, Public Health Wales
- ✓ Alisha Davies, Hannah Shaw and Dr Kirsty Little of the Public Health Data, Knowledge and Research Directorate, Public Health Wales
- ✓ The staff and pupils of Ysgol Cwm Brombil, and the Child Poverty Action Group for facilitating the visit
- ✓ Professor Kevin Morgan, Cardiff Business School
- ✓ Mike Brewer, Resolution Foundation
- ✓ Eleanor Messham and Cathrine Winding for support with report editing and infographic development

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