

## CYPE(5)-01-20 – Papur i'w nodi 4

### **Comments on the response of the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee regarding Early Childhood Education and Care**

The response of the Deputy Minister and the accompanying Written Statement from Welsh Government on their approach to Early Childhood Education and Care is likely to be welcomed across the sector in providing some clarity to what has become in recent years, a particularly confused and complex policy area.

The letter and accompanying Statement sets out a number of clear principles and it is encouraging to see a commitment to long-term change (10 years+) as opposed to the short-term view of ECEC that seems present in the current election campaign (see [LSE Blog 'Free' childcare: the party manifestos and the extensive privatisation of childcare'](#)). Nonetheless (and understandably) the response is currently short on detail around how the many aspirations will be taken forward. However, there are a number of themes evident within the Statement that require closer scrutiny and in some cases, clarification or questioning.

#### **1. Children's Rights**

The Statement makes a brief reference to early years policy and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It also refers to systems that are 'child centred' and services that focus on child development. This does provide some insight into Welsh Government's view of childhood, but it could be argued that this is not necessarily a full commitment to a children's rights approach to policy where for example, young children are actively involved in decisions that affect them (Article 12).

The Statement seems to support children's rights *to* ECEC but it might be argued does not go far enough in supporting the rights of the child *in* ECEC. Certainly, access and participation are key planks in the Statement, and Article 29, which says children have the right to achieve their educational potential, should provide a strong argument for free, universal provision of early childhood services. Yet, while there is a focus on quality of provision and child development within the Statement, these could be seen as things that are *done to children*, rather than things that *children participate in*.

#### **2. Early Childhood Education and Care**

Possibly the most fundamental change set out in the Statement is the use of the term *Early Childhood Education and Care* to describe what have previously been the policy areas of 'childcare' and 'early education'. This unified approach with equal status given to 'care' and 'education' has the exciting potential to change attitudes and foster a whole-child approach across services. However, it would be helpful to have a clear interpretation of Welsh Government's definition of ECEC (see [Research Paper 1](#), p.2) that clarifies the services included, and any excluded (e.g. informal carers, home educators, unregistered settings operating for less than 2 hours) from policy intervention. In particular, the sentence in the Statement that *'The type of setting they attend is irrelevant if they are being supported and*

*nurtured as they need'* (page 2, para 1) requires a clarification that sets out the responsibility of the state and the responsibility of families in supporting and nurturing young children.

While the Statement mentions a 'single approach' to ECEC there is no detail around what a single approach will look like, particularly in its governance. While the approach to 'provider neutrality' and a 'single funding' framework is essential in developing a coherent approach to ECEC in Wales, the current position is highly complex involving two government departments, two regulators, 22 local authorities with varying policies, and a myriad of provision operating within a number of legislative frameworks. However, it is encouraging to see that in principle the Deputy Minister seeks to remove *'...artificial divides between education and care'* and the Statement is clear that there will be no 'schoolification' of the early years with education dominating the agenda.

### **3. Quality**

The Statement makes a number of welcome commitments to the provision of quality across ECEC, and the main policy announcement contained in the Statement is to develop a much-needed Quality Framework.

As set out in [ECEC Briefing 2, p.11](#), *'...the evidence that poor quality ECEC provision offers very few benefits to children, families and society – and could actually have a negative impact – makes it important for policy makers to focus on the characteristics of provision that are associated with good quality.'*

Steps to agreeing a Quality Framework will need to bring about a clearly defined model of quality that is recognised, agreed and understood by all ECEC stakeholders. As the Statement suggests, this needs to be the centrepiece of developing ECEC in Wales but will need to incorporate a number of strands including ECEC pedagogy, workforce development, quality assurance and incorporation of quality across all areas of ECEC policy.

Ideally this would see changes to the law, although it could exist within separate legislative frameworks should policy leadership and a shared value system bring the divergent approaches together.

### **4. Access to services**

The Statement accepts that in Wales the availability of ECEC services is highly variable and that *'...parents are restricted in where they can access early education and childcare.'* However, the subsequent commitment *'...to ensure all providers can choose which services they offer, and parents can have a full and open choice of where to access those services'* will not necessarily address the geographical inequalities in current ECEC service provision across Wales (see [Briefing Paper 3 p.7](#)). This is likely to require a fundamental re-evaluation of how ECEC is funded and a move away from the current demand-driven approach to the childcare market which has been shown to create less provision, especially in less well-off areas.

The commitment to ensuring that children with additional needs can access ECEC without any inequalities is to be welcomed given [evidence](#) that many ECEC providers currently find it difficult to afford the additional support children may require.

### **5. Welsh Language**

Welsh Government's Statement commits to increasing the amount of Welsh-medium and bi-lingual ECEC settings, but only '*...to ensure parents can access ECEC in the language of their choice.*' (my emphasis).

Many across the sector would like to go further (see [ECEC Symposium Communiqué](#)) in aspiring to standardised bi-lingual ECEC programmes across Wales. While this might be a long-term aspiration, as a first step – and as recommended by the Welsh Language Commissioner – consistent definitions and data regarding current language provision are needed in order to make realistic policy judgements.

## **6. Funding of ECEC**

Despite evidence suggesting that the best outcomes for children – especially those from the most disadvantaged homes – do better when ECEC provision is mixed and universally available, neither the response nor the Statement sets out what Welsh Government sees the eventual reach of state-supported ECEC to be. The Deputy Minister says that in principle, Welsh Government want to make it '*...easier for parents and families to navigate the complex and wide range of provision of support available to them*'. In the short-term parents certainly need additional support and guidance in accessing funding, but a clearer statement about how Welsh Government sees ECEC being funded in the longer-term is critically important – especially given the breadth of ambition set out in the Principles. This is unlikely to be the same as the 'single funding model' referred to in the Deputy Minister's letter (although some clarification would help). While it is understandable that Welsh Government is currently unable to commit long-term spending plans, some security in knowing how ECEC is to be funded in the future will be crucial in getting existing stakeholders on-board across a period of what will be extensive and significant change.

## **7. Building on existing structures**

The Deputy Minister's response is clear in looking to build on existing successful structures, high quality provision and good pedagogical practice including the Foundation Phase. Yet, in many cases there is a knowledge vacuum around what works well, and what does not in early years practice. There is also a lack of evidence to discern what quality is, and means to different stakeholders across ECEC. For the principles outlined by the Deputy Minister to become practice, policy development therefore needs to be accompanied by robust research and evaluation.

In summary, the Deputy Minister's response and accompanying Welsh Government Statement is a constructive step in developing a much more positive environment for ECEC in Wales. It undoubtedly provides a good starting point for discussions with a broad range of stakeholders that will help shape the development of progressive ECEC policies.

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