



Welsh Parliament Equality and Social Justice Committee

## **Childcare and Parental Employment: The Pandemic and Beyond**

Joint Response by South Riverside Community Development Centre, Together Creating Communities, and Comunidade Da Lingua Portuguesa Wrexham.

### **About the Contributors**

This response has been developed by five community leaders who are working in partnership with the Bevan Foundation to bring the experiences and views of migrant communities to influence policy decisions in Wales. You can find out more about the project here:

<https://www.bevanfoundation.org/current-projects/lived-experience-migration-wales/>

- **South Riverside Community Development Centre (SRCDC)**

South Riverside Community Development Centre (SRCDC) is a registered charity established for the purpose of benefiting the communities in the Riverside, Canton and Grangetown areas. It aims to advance the education of the public in matters related to mental, physical, cultural, and social welfare; and relieve poverty.

You can find out more about SRCDC here: <https://www.srcdc.org.uk/>

- **Together Creating Communities (TCC)**

TCC is a registered charity that tackles social injustice by supporting diverse communities to gain the power they need to enact change. This is achieved through community organising: bringing together local groups, supporting them to set their own agenda, take action, and improve their communities.

You can find out more about TCC here: <https://www.tcc-wales.org.uk/>

- **Comunidade Da Lingua Portuguesa Wrexham (CLPW)**

CLPW is a registered community interest company which promotes educational, social, and cultural integration of Portuguese-speaking diaspora in Wrexham and North Wales. CLPW enriches North Wales through building bonds between residents and creating opportunities to share and celebrate different cultures.

You can find out more about CLPW here: <https://www.facebook.com/clpw.uk/>

### **Our Response**

This joint response is based on the views of 22 women with lived experience of migration in Wales: 13 in Cardiff and 9 in Wrexham. These views were shared during a series of four

group discussions as well as through written and oral responses to a questionnaire which was translated into three community languages – Portuguese, Somali, and Arabic.

**The extent to which current childcare provision in Wales, including the Childcare Offer, sufficiently supports parents, particularly mothers, to enter, remain and progress in employment.**

1. In general, childcare provision in Wales is insufficient to support all parents, particularly mothers, to enter, remain and/or progress in employment. Some of the general barriers faced by parents in relation to childcare are:
  - Childcare is expensive, particularly if you have three or four children.
  - The location of formal childcare providers is often far away from work / college / home. This is problematic for two reasons. First, public transport is unreliable. A bus that doesn't turn up can mean a parent is late for work and suffers a loss of income. Second, travelling such distances can be expensive. For parents in low-paid work, particularly single mothers, it is easy to end up spending all earnings on childcare (provision + travel).
  - Few childcare providers are open during the weekend, evenings, early mornings, and bank holidays. This is problematic, especially for Black and ethnic minority workers who disproportionately work shifts outside the 'usual' 9-5 Monday to Friday.
  - There is a lack of 'on site' childcare provision in workplaces and education settings. University creches often fill up more than a year in advance. For nursery places, people have to register even before the birth of a child (which is impossible for families who arrive in Wales with young children). One significant benefit of on-site childcare is that it can alleviate parents' fears about leaving their child/ren with a formal provider by enabling them to check in on their child regularly. The other, more fundamental issue is that parents often can't access local / affordable formal childcare, and therefore they must rely on on-site provision if they are to enter into education, training or work. Parents, particularly mothers, who want to further their education and/or enter into work are prevented from doing so if there is no on-site childcare. Moreover, funding cuts have resulted in the shutting of childcare facilities in further education colleges and community learning centres where many Black and ethnic minority and migrant parents go to learn English. This means that in addition to being a barrier to accessing work, training, and further education, this lack of on-site provision also has a significant impact on mothers' integration and chances of progressing in the job market, as they are unable to access English classes.
  - Funding cuts have also had a negative impact on childcare workers, who report that zero-hour contracts and instability of employment is the norm. This can itself lead to poverty, unemployment, and mental health difficulties within the profession (mainly women). When experienced childcare workers leave the profession because they are unable to find secure and sufficient employment, this has a knock-on effect on the quality of childcare that can be provided, given the loss of skills that workers gain through working with their

communities over a long time (e.g. additional languages, giving advice and signposting, knowledge of how systems work). This loss impoverishes communities.

- There is a lack of multi-cultural and multi-lingual childcare providers. This means that the communication from school and nursery to parents is often in English, which can be a significant barrier (more on this in para.10). While interpreters can be used for meetings, they don't always turn up and parents are often unaware of their right to request an interpreter.
  - There is a lack of reliable, local, and trusted childcare providers. The importance of trust in influencing parents' decisions about childcare cannot be understated. A lack of trust in formal providers often means parents choose to leave their children with extended family members or trusted neighbours. That said, some parents do not have this option either, so mothers, in particular, have no choice but to stay at home.
  - Nurseries vary immensely in the quality of their provision. Some educate children, while others solely look after them. The quality of food and hygiene is also variable – with some feeding a lot of processed foods to the children. There needs to be higher minimum standards for all nurseries.
2. The Childcare Offer, specifically, is invaluable for some parents and has helped mothers into work. However, many people are unaware of the Childcare Offer and/or how to apply. This is especially true for individuals and families from migrant backgrounds who are unfamiliar with their rights and the childcare/schooling system in Wales. It is a complicated system to navigate which requires IT literacy and a good grasp of the English/Welsh language.
  3. Moreover, the Childcare Offer is not flexible enough and forces many parents – mothers especially – to change their ambitions. In particular, it fails to cater for parents who work early morning/ late night/ weekend shifts through limiting the hours during which childcare provision can be claimed.
  4. Additionally, the Childcare Offer's eligibility requirements are too restrictive. The Offer does not help parents who want to train or further their education in college or university. Often, undertaking training or further education is necessary before individuals can enter into employment, especially those with no qualifications, or those with international qualifications which are not currently recognised by employers in Wales.

**How childcare arrangements have affected parental employment during the coronavirus pandemic, particularly in relation to mothers. What lessons might be applied to provide better support during any future lockdowns or increased restrictions.**

5. Shutting childcare facilities and restricting family visits during the lockdowns meant that working families had nowhere to turn for childcare. This had a profound impact on many mothers' ability to work, particularly those in 'key worker' roles and where there is no on-site provision (e.g. care and retail industries).
6. Moreover, by implementing these restrictions, the children of key workers were put at greater risk of catching COVID-19 due to the high levels of exposure in the parents'

work settings. Although some children were able to attend schools, this differed between schools and localities. There was minimal access to formal childcare for younger children (nursery age).

7. Generally, there was a lack of support for children and parents who were struggling during the pandemic – both in relation to emotional support and support around abusive behaviour, as well as support with IT and home-schooling.
8. There was, however, a positive development: an improvement in free school meal provision. This should be sustained beyond the pandemic.
9. In terms of lessons learned, it is important that if restrictions have to be re-introduced, the following preparations are made:
  - a. Increase provision of fitness and outdoor activities.
  - b. Ensure childcare providers whose staff have been vaccinated can continue to offer services.
  - c. Ensure support services for parents stay open and improve communication about where / how this support can be accessed.

**Whether Welsh Government-funded childcare provision is flexible enough to support employment of parents, particularly mothers, in different demographic groups and experiencing different circumstances.**

10. Language, Black and ethnic minority and migrant families: There is a lack of staff / providers who speak languages other than English / Welsh. This can cause a significant barrier for migrant families, especially those who are newly arrived in the country. There is lack of communication, or miscommunication, between the provider and family, and this leads to decisions being made about children without the informed consent of parents. This disproportionately affects Black and ethnic minority families.
11. A lack of cultural awareness or willingness to accommodate different cultural requirements among formal childcare providers is sometimes a barrier for people from Black and ethnic minority and/or migrant backgrounds.
12. Disability: For parents who have children with disabilities or additional learning needs, it can be almost impossible to find an appropriate childcare provider. Children with additional learning needs may be best suited in a mainstream setting with additional 1:1 support; specialist setting provision may not always be in the best interests of the child. However, parents often have little choice in the matter as there is not the additional support built into mainstream settings that is necessary to support the child.

**The impact of extending formal childcare provision on tackling inequalities.**

13. Extending entitlement to childcare is essential to tackle inequalities, particularly in relation to children with disabilities, Black and ethnic minority communities, families whose home language is not English or Welsh, and families on low incomes. However, more flexibility is needed in the types of childcare provision that is funded. For some families, formal provision may be the most suitable option; but for others, it

may be better to pay trusted friends / members of the community to look after their children.

14. There is also a need to look at childcare beyond the early years and improve the government-funded provision for older children (e.g. extracurricular activities and youth services, particularly in the summer holidays). Older children often have to be left home on their own due to work commitments. However, parents are often worried for their children when they transfer into secondary school – this is a stage in children’s life that can be turbulent, and without constructive activities outside of school hours, some young people may be led into trouble.

## **Our Recommendations for Change**

The Committee asks what changes might be needed to improve the effectiveness of childcare provision in supporting parents, particularly mothers, to enter, remain, and progress in employment, and to tackle inequalities. It is our view that the following changes would help to achieve these aims:

15. Simplify the application process for the Childcare Offer and have a tick-box option for language or IT support.
16. Extend the eligibility criteria for the Childcare Offer to include students and people in training.
17. Ensure that a wide variety of childcare provision is funded under the Childcare Offer, so that the needs of all children and families can be met. For an example of childcare provision that responds to the needs of families, see the SRCDC mobile crèche – Young Children’s Parent Project – and Women Connect First’s childcare service.
18. Increase and improve advertising of rights and access to childcare so that families do not have to rely on word of mouth or misinformation. The information should be easily accessible (e.g. videos, website) and available in different community languages. It would be helpful to have this information in one place, alongside information about other services / rights such as healthcare, education system, taxes, social welfare benefits, *etc.* Health Visitors should share this information with new parents and support them to understand how to access their rights.
19. Expand the provision of employer based on-site childcare – there should be an expectation that if there is a certain number of people working at a place, then the employer should provide childcare.
20. Provide childcare alongside other adult education classes like IT. This is vital to ensure Black and ethnic minority women and migrant women have access to bridging opportunities and re-training to utilise their skillsets most effectively in Wales.
21. Increase the salary for childcare workers and stop using zero-hour contracts. Childcare is a responsible, skilled, and essential job and this should be reflected in the salary.
22. Employers should seek to ensure that staff contracts contain provisions for working from home, where this is possible. This would help women to remain in work and will also reduce the costs of childcare.
23. The Government should consider funding options for this vital work including taxation, so that high quality childcare can be accessed by all at a low cost.
24. The Government should support people to set up their own childcare provision as part of entrepreneurship promotion.

25. Childcare Training Providers should place more value on people's **skills** than English / Welsh language ability. They should allow people who do not yet speak English / Welsh to register on the training courses and offer English classes as part of the course. Having speakers of other community languages within the childcare profession will help to break down barriers and promote integration, learning about different cultures, and encouraging mother tongues to be spoken and valued.
26. Childcare Training and Initial Teacher Training should include / strengthen education on how to support children from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Once qualified, staff should be expected and enabled to attend further training to continue to 'upskill' – and these courses should be available in different languages.
27. Childcare Providers should contract more staff from Black and ethnic minority communities.
28. The opening hours of childcare centres / providers should be increased so that they can cater for those with early morning / late night / weekend shifts, as well as bank holidays.
29. The Government should fund services that are open to older children as well as early years.
30. Community adult education with on-site childcare should be enabled to take place in local schools / community centres – spaces in which people often feel safe and comfortable attending, and which are practical to access from a travel time and cost perspective.