Understanding early years and childcare attraction and recruitment in Wales and the role of WeCare Wales

Gofal Cymdeithasol **Cymru**
Social Care **Wales**

Social Care Wales is responsible for regulating and developing the social care workforce in Wales, as well as setting priorities for research, supporting innovation and gathering data. It is funded by the Welsh Government and was established in 2017.

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WeCare Wales aims to raise awareness and understanding of social care, early years and childcare and attract more people with the right skills and values to work in caring roles with children and adults. It is part of Social Care Wales and has been running since 2019.

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Meeting our challenge

This report is part of a wider research programme to generate insights into how workforce challenges in the social care and child care sector can be addressed. It consists of five reports and two additional resources. This document is highlighted.

Five reports on attraction, recruitment, and job-seeking in the social care and child care sector:

Understanding attraction and recruitment in the Welsh social care and child care sector and the role of WeCare Wales **Main report**	Understanding job-seeking behaviours: insights for social care **Main report**	Understanding attraction and recruitment in early years and childcare in Wales and the role of WeCare Wales **Main report**
Understanding attraction and recruitment in the Welsh social care and child care sector and the role of WeCare Wales **Summary report**	Understanding job-seeking behaviours: insights for social care **Summary report**	

Two additional resources to support care employers and the sector:

Social care and child care: attraction, recruitment and retention **A guide for employers**	A resource for social care employers to personalise job-seeking **User personas toolkit**

Executive summary

This report examines the attraction and recruitment challenges for early years and childcare (EYCC) settings in Wales with a focus on the role of WeCare Wales. It aims to understand the current challenges faced by EYCC settings, and to understand how WeCare Wales can better support EYCC moving forwards.

Evidence from desk-based reviews and engagement with employers and other stakeholders in the Welsh EYCC context is presented with recommendations intended to improve the state of attraction and recruitment.

Recommendations

Table 1: Recommendations for helping the attraction and recruitment crisis in EYCC settings

Recommendations for WeCare Wales	Priority
Expand advertising and campaigning activities.	Immediate
Develop more resources for the website.	Immediate
Develop a clearer identity.	Immediate
Support EYCC settings to professionalise from within.	Medium-term
Continue engaging and supporting the local system.	Medium-term
Support employers to understand the importance of diversity, equality and inclusion.	Long-term

Recommendations for employers and settings	Priority
Get involved with local and national discussions.	Immediate
Seek out local and national funding.	Medium-term
Adapt attraction and recruitment practices.	Medium-term

System changes needed	Priority
A sector-wide uplift in pay.	**Immediate**
Longer-term capital investment into WeCare Wales.	**Immediate**
A redesign of benefits systems.	**Medium-term**
A greater commitment to co-production of policies and approaches.	**Medium-term**
Multi-sector collaboration to develop a future supply of workers.	**Long-term**

Understanding the EYCC context

Recruiting new staff and retaining existing employees is a challenge across EYCC settings in Wales. It is estimated that there are around 1,000 vacancies[1].

In 2022, Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Club invited all Out of School Childcare Clubs in Wales to respond to a survey. A total of 273 settings responded to this, representing 33% of all settings in Wales. The survey showed that 80% of respondents found recruitment and retention to be a key challenge[2].

Further, according to CWLWM in 2021, 54% of EYCC settings had to replace staff, and 77% of these services found recruitment challenging[3].

National policy commitments to expand access to childcare, particularly for early years, add pressures to existing recruitment challenges.

EYCC recruitment and attraction: the current situation

EYCC employers face a series of complex challenges and obstacles when attracting and recruiting staff.

Lack of diversity

Ineligible applicants

Public and political awareness

Meeting quotas of qualified staff

Navigating qualifications

Low pay

External challenges

Increase in demand

Recruitment challenges

Attraction challenges

Figure 1: Key attraction and recruitment challenges in EYCC settings

Although there are issues in attraction, most challenges arise in the recruitment phase. Across the engagement with employers, many reported that there are enough willing applicants, but restrictions applied by regulatory forces mean that most are not eligible to work. In other cases, existing employees may not be motivated to undertake additional training and qualifications.

Issues have also seemingly intensified in recent years, with many employers certain that the challenges are worse now than they have ever been. It appears this is a combination of external factors such as COVID-19, Brexit and the cost-of-living crisis.

Increasing pay is highlighted as the most important strategy to improve attraction.

The role and value of WeCare Wales

Overall, WeCare Wales is viewed as a positive force for EYCC in Wales.

Respondents believe WeCare Wales is a useful platform, appreciating its resources and campaigns. Respondents also enjoy being included as part of the wider sector. This is important given EYCC often receives less attention than social care.

WeCare Wales has brought significant value to EYCC in terms of providing support and resources to employers and applicants. In particular, employers appreciate its investment in outreach and engagement, and in raising awareness and changing public perceptions about EYCC.

This report

The research for this report was undertaken by Urban Foresight as part of a larger project examining the entire social care and child care sector – social care, social work and EYCC – in Wales. This report summarises findings focused on the EYCC case.

Methods included desk-based reviews of EYCC policies, and of peer reviewed and grey literature concerning attraction and recruitment of workers in EYCC and related settings. Online interviews and engagement at online forums engaged 24 EYCC employers and 13 individuals working in supporting roles to understand the current challenges. Findings were fed back via sense checking workshops.

The main report – *Understanding attraction and recruitment in the Welsh social care and child care sector and the role of WeCare Wales* – provides additional contextual detail about the sector and about lessons that can be learnt from elsewhere. Given the inclusion of social care, it also provides a more expansive list of recommendations for the broader sector.

An additional report is also intended to accompany this research. *Understanding job-seeking behaviours: insights for social care* provides an evidence synthesis on what is known about job-seeking behaviour.

This report is structured as follows:

1 **Introduction** – Provides an overview to the attraction and recruitment crisis, an introduction to WeCare Wales, and an overview of the methods and approach taken.

2 **Understanding the context** – Provides information about the EYCC context, key stakeholders, and relevant policies.

3 **Current attraction and recruitment challenges in Wales** – Draws on findings from the qualitative stakeholder engagement to examine strengths and challenges faced in attracting and recruiting EYCC workers.

4 **The role and value of WeCare Wales** – Reviews the impact of WeCare Wales, including awareness and perceptions of the programme overall and specific activities.

5 **Recommendations** – Lists and provides detail about the recommendations that have emerged from this research.

6 **Conclusion** – Summarises the report and provides reflections on its wider implications.

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1

Introduction

Introduction

Across Wales, early years and childcare (EYCC) settings have been facing challenges in attracting and recruiting workers. It is estimated that there were around 1,000 vacancies in EYCC positions in 2021.

The challenge facing EYCC

Given ongoing challenges recruitment and attraction challenges in the Welsh social care sector, in March 2019, Social Care Wales launched WeCare Wales to raise the profile of the care workforce and enhance employment attraction. WeCare Wales runs local and national campaigns, develops online resources, and provides support to jobseekers and employers[4].

According to CWLWM, in 2021, 60% of EYCC settings had recruited in the last 12 months, while 12% had tried yet failed to recruit. Of those recruiting 77% found it challenging[5].

National Day Nurseries Association (NDMA) Cymru national workforce survey in 2019 further reported that more than 85% of respondents experienced at least one member of staff leaving in 2018-19[6]. The NDMA further estimates that 5.5% of jobs in EYCC are currently vacant. This amounts to around 1,000 vacancies, based on the Welsh Government's estimate of 15,000 childcare workers[7].

This report

Urban Foresight have been commissioned by Social Care Wales to undertake a review of WeCare Wales and its role in attraction and recruitment in the social care and child care sector including social care, early years and childcare, and social work.

This report is prepared with a special focus on early years and childcare. It provides understanding of the attraction and recruitment challenges faced by EYCC settings, presents strategies employers adopt to address such challenges, and evaluates the impact of WeCare Wales. The report then presents a series of recommendations aimed at WeCare Wales and EYCC settings.

The main report *Understanding attraction and recruitment in the Welsh social care and child care sector and the role of WeCare Wales* – provides additional contextual detail about the sector and about lessons that can be learnt from elsewhere. Given the inclusion of social care, it also provides a more expansive list of recommendations for the broader sector.

An additional report also accompanies this research – *Understanding job-seeking behaviours: insights for social care*. This offers an evidence synthesis on what is known about job-seeking behaviour.

Project aims and approach

Two overarching aims have driven the project:

1. What is the current recruitment, attraction and retention landscape in EYCC settings in Wales and what is the role of WeCare Wales within this landscape?

2. How could WeCare Wales better understand and support EYCC recruitment, attraction and retention in Wales moving forwards?

Primary and secondary data was collected between December 2022 and February 2023. This includes:

- Desk-based reviews to understand the Welsh EYCC policy context and relevant literature concerning attraction and recruitment challenges and solutions elsewhere.

- Online interviews and/or discussions at online forums with 24 EYCC employers.

- Online interviews with 13 individuals representing five organisations involved in supporting roles in the social care and child care sector, including those working at WeCare Wales and Social Care Wales, other organisations that support care workforces, and regional connectors.

This report uses 'stakeholders' to refer to all interviewees. Where something applies to just employers or those in supporting roles, this is made clear.

A SWOT analysis was undertaken to understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing EYCC settings. Findings were presented in two sense checking workshops. See Appendix I for a detailed methodology.

2

Understanding the Welsh EYCC context

Understanding the Welsh EYCC context

It is important to understand the context in which EYCC sits to understand the workforce challenges. This section outlines the key components of the Welsh EYCC system, and the policy context.

The main report *Understanding attraction and recruitment in the Welsh social care and child care sector and the role of WeCare Wales* – provides additional information about the employment landscape in Wales.

Takeaway messages

1	The EYCC landscape is complex, comprised of a diversity of types of settings and a range of actors.
2	National policy commitments to expand access to childcare, particularly for early years, add pressures to existing recruitment challenges.

Defining early years and childcare

In Wales, EYCC refers to services provided to children aged zero to 12 years that support their learning and development outside of formal education[8] (although it should be noted that many services run in education settings, such as afterschool clubs). There are a variety of types of setting that operate under the EYCC umbrella.

EYCC includes nursery and day care for pre-school children, after school and holiday clubs, as well as childminding services. There are approximately 6,073 registered EYCC services in Wales[9]. Definitions of the different types of EYCC settings are summarised in Appendix III.

The Welsh Government defines early years as zero to seven years of age and childcare to include children up to 12 years of age. Children's development during these years is extremely important. It has been demonstrated that making early investments has a positive impact on children's future success. Childcare is a key way to support learning and development at this stage[10].

There are various types of EYCC settings and services:

- Childminding is the act of paying a person to take care of a child under the age of 12 on domestic premises, e.g., their home.

- Day care is care provided for children on premises other than domestic for more than two hours in any one day. Playgroups, crèches, day nurseries, and open access provisions, such as soft play centres, are included in day care services[11].

- After school and holiday clubs support children aged up to age 12 in after school and holiday club settings.

Additionally, although play work – the act of providing spaces and opportunities for children and youth to play freely and confidently[12] – is not included within EYCC, in practice, there are many overlaps. Play work employers are engaged in EYCC forums and discussions, and as such some of their responses are included in this report.

Number of registered services by each EYCC setting

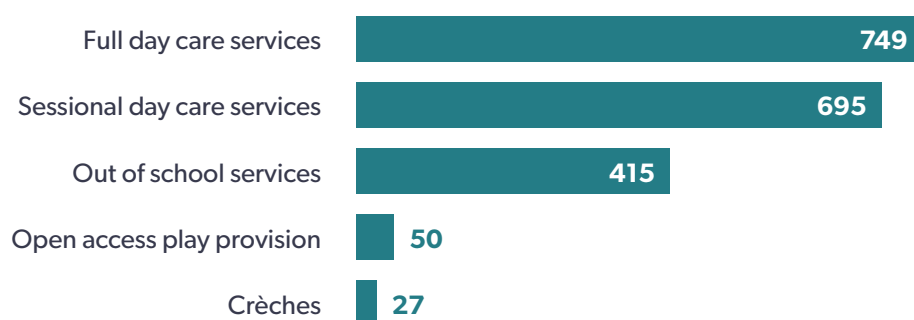| Setting	Number
Full day care services	749
Sessional day care services	695
Out of school services	415
Open access play provision	50
Crèches	27

Figure 2: Number of registered services by each EYCC setting

Registered and unregistered services

Settings can either be registered or unregistered. Registered settings are inspected to ensure their safety and quality by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW)[13], and must meet minimum standards. There are 1,936 registered children's day care services and 4,137 registered childcare and play services in Wales[14].

Registered services should maintain a quota or ratio of qualified versus unqualified staff. At least 80% of staff must hold a Level 2 qualification under the national minimum (NMS) standards. A Level 2 qualification allows employees to work unsupervised in full day care or sessional care settings. At a minimum, half of the Level 2 qualified staff must also hold a Level 3 qualification[15]. Level 3 employees can also work unsupervised in Flying Start settings, and with two years' experience are eligible to manage full day care or sessional settings[16].

Services that cannot meet these levels may operate under The Child Minding and Day Care Exceptions (Wales) Order 2010, often referred to as the 'Exceptions Order'. This sets out eight circumstances, relating to the type of premises and period of care provision, that exempt settings from the qualification requirements[17].

Key actors and stakeholders

There are several organisations with central roles in the Welsh EYCC landscape.

Two key organisations have responsibility over regulating EYCC settings:

- **Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW)** – Regulates registered childcare and play services[18].

- **Estyn** – Inspects maintained and non-maintained settings that offer the New Curriculum for Wales. Joint inspections are being piloted by CIW and Estyn[19].

The following organisations also play a crucial role in Wales's current EYCC landscape:

- **Social Care Wales** – Acts as an operational delivery partner for EYCC in areas such as qualification development and resources to support employers, and offers training opportunities.

- **CWLWM** – Unites five of Wales's leading childcare providers to provide a bilingual integrated service that will ensure the best possible outcomes for children and families throughout Wales. This includes: Early Years Wales, Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs, Mudiad Meithrin, National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA Cymru), and PACEY Cymru[20].

- **Local authorities (LAs)** – LAs are required to ensure there is sufficient childcare in their area through providing workforce development and assistance to local childcare settings[21].

- **Early years and childcare workforce development network** – A forum for EYCC (0–8 years) in Wales to discuss strategic factors concerning the workforce such as recruitments, retention, training, and qualification development. These meetings are held three times a year and Social Care Wales acts as the secretariat[22].

The policy context

Across the policy landscape, the drive to improve the accessibility and affordability of childcare and commitment to improve quality increases the demand for EYCC workers.

Early years and childcare are identified as priority areas in Welsh Government policies and strategies such as 'Prosperity for All'[23] and 'Taking Wales Forward'[24] and programmes such as Flying Start. Together these demonstrate the Welsh Government's recognition that the childhood phase is foundational to later life chances, and its commitment to supporting this period through assisting parents and developing strong early years and childcare systems.

- **Prosperity for All** – A national strategy that aims to ensure Wales is "prosperous and secure, healthy and active, ambitious and learning, and united and connected" in the long-term. The strategy identifies five priority areas including housing, social care, mental health, skills and employability, and early years. The impact of childhood experiences in shaping future life outcomes is recognised by the strategy and seen as a key area of potential for future improvement[25].

- **Taking Wales Forward** – Aims to create more and better jobs, and a stronger and fairer economy to improve public services. The ultimate vision is for "a united, connected and sustainable Wales". The strategy operated between 2016–2021, and key themes included prosperity and security, a healthy and active population, ambition and learning, and unity and connection. The need to support children and young people was recognised in the theme of health and activity, and the theme of ambition and learning. Experiences in early years in terms of childcare and education are seen as critical to shaping healthy behaviours, supporting learning, and creating positive life chances[26]. These themes are also highlighted in the Welsh Government's 10 Well-being objectives[27].

- **Flying Start** – A Welsh Government programme designed to benefit families with children under four living in Wales's most disadvantaged areas[28]. The programme aims to provide quality, part-time childcare for children aged two to three years old. It offers two and a half hours a day for five days each week for a total of 39 weeks. Provision is also available for the family during the school holidays covering a minimum of five sessions[29].

Other key policies and schemes are listed in Appendix IV. Across these documents, it is recognised that EYCC is a key national priority. There is emphasis on the importance of attracting high quality and qualified recruits and raising standards and skills, as well as noting the need to increase the accessibility and affordability of early years settings to parents and guardians. There are also clear commitments to ensure equality of care and opportunity across Welsh and English language settings.

Section summary

The Welsh EYCC landscape is complex, with a variety of types of settings and services as well as a diversity of actors and stakeholders. Political ambitions to expand access to early years and child care and improve the quality, as well as internal moves to raise standards and minimum qualifications requirements, are placing increased pressure on EYCC settings. This is further complicated by the fact that EYCC settings are already experiencing challenges in recruitment. The following section provides evidence about the current challenges facing the EYCC in Wales.

3

Current attraction and recruitment challenges in Wales

Current attraction and recruitment challenges in Wales

The combination of external factors – COVID-19, Brexit and the cost-of-living crisis – as well as the effects of regulation, such as meeting quotas of qualified staff, mean that for many EYCC settings, attraction and recruitment issues are worse now than they have ever been before. This section provides in-depth insights into the challenges faced by EYCC settings.

Takeaway messages

1. EYCC settings seem to face most issues in recruiting as opposed to attracting workers. Many employers reported that there are enough willing applicants but restrictions applied by regulatory forces mean that most are not eligible to work.

2. Attraction challenges include pay, increase in demand and public awareness.

3. Recruitment challenges include ineligible and uninterested applicants, diversity, quotas, qualifications and external pressures.

4. As professionalisation and regulation progress, unintended consequences have been experienced in terms of attraction, recruitment and retention. The suggested 'care trilemma' is proposed as a tool for analysing these challenges more clearly.

This section first outlines key learning from other sectors and settings. It then draws on findings from the stakeholder engagement to address:

- Attraction strengths and challenges.

- Recruitment challenges.

- Variations between different settings.

- Future threats.

The final section presents a new model to understand attraction and recruitment challenges in the social care and child care sector – the care trilemma. The care trilemma highlights how to improve attraction without reducing the status of the sector or the quality of care, and evidences that increasing pay should be a key priority.

Lack of diversity

Ineligible applicants

Public and political awareness

Meeting quotas of qualified staff

Navigating qualifications

Low pay

External challenges

Increase in demand

Recruitment challenges   Attraction challenges

Figure 3: The attraction challenges (light shade) and recruitment challenges (dark shade).

Learning from recruitment campaigns elsewhere

Other EYCC settings and care systems, both in the UK and internationally, experience similar issues in terms of attracting and recruiting staff. A range of approaches have been used to overcome this challenge. Learning from elsewhere can be useful to reflect on the breadth of strategies available.

The main report includes a series of case studies summarising interventions and strategies that have been used to address attraction and recruitment elsewhere. Overall, improving pay and ensuring it matches levels of professionalisation, reforming the system, and adopting a long-term approach are important for success. It is also useful to learn from beyond the sector. Here, developing innovative and targeted social media campaigns and improving and showcasing benefits are key.

Attraction strengths and challenges

Across the stakeholder engagement, it was noted that EYCC settings seem to be attractive to certain groups of people, particularly women. Nonetheless, challenges exist – a lack of public awareness, increasing demand, and attracting candidates from diverse backgrounds.

Most stakeholders reported a high level of interest from women of all ages to join EYCC settings and that it is usually easy to find willing applicants. Additionally, the flexibility of the role was discussed as a benefit and challenge to attraction.

"Some people really want to enter the sector. It's attractive to all ages – schoolgirls and women in their 50s."

"The 50 plus age group tend to have caring experience and may find the work more rewarding than factory work and similar."

"The only thing we don't struggle with is apprentices – they come in their masses. They're mostly school leavers."

"Some people really like the flexibility, and it makes it more attractive to them, but it doesn't work for others."

Public and political awareness

Stakeholders believe a lack of public and political awareness about EYCC is a challenge to attraction. A lack of understanding about what EYCC is, where it sits in terms of other services and sectors, which children it supports, why the work is important, and why the work may be interesting or personally fulfilling were all highlighted as challenges.

"Public perceptions of childcare are poor."

"There's a lack of understanding on the positives of working in EYCC."

"Political understandings of childcare are limited – people think it stops after four years, so attention is mainly on nursery settings."

"There's uncertainty as to whether EYCC is health or education."

"The perception from a very large grant funder is that out-of-school childcare is no longer needed."

It was also noted that there is a lack of awareness about the value of registered services in comparison to childcare options that run under Exceptions Orders. This presents a challenge in terms of attracting people who want to use EYCC services rather than employees, but demonstrates the lack of understanding of the importance of the work.

"Parents don't understand actual value of play work – 30% from our parents' survey didn't know the difference between registered and non-registered services."

Low pay

Low pay was raised as a key issue. For entry level workers, pay is low in comparison to other sectors, and other issues may be deemed more pressing. For more qualified staff, however, pay is considered low given the qualifications needed for the work. Table 2 highlights these two pay issues.

Table 2: Main pay issues

Pay as a barrier to attracting entry level workers	Pay as a barrier to attracting qualified workers
"The national living wage across comparable sectors means that EYCC is no more attractive than retail."	*"If people get their level 3, 4, or 5, then where is the financial renumeration?"*
"It's lower pay than retail options, sometimes £3 to £4 [an hour] less."	*"Level 5 qualifications are not suitable for most workers, as there's no financial reward."*
"Level 3s are leaving for better paid work in health and education."	*"Level 3s need a supervisory role which is counterintuitive, people become Level 3 but aren't needed to supervise and aren't paid more."*
"Minimum wage is going up, that's great but [EYCC] workers can be on the same or less as people in retail."	*"[EYCC] doesn't have nationally agreed pay scales for different levels of qualification as what happens in youth work – it's different between companies, between LAs – there's a lack of consistency."*

Increase in demand

Employers are concerned about the increasing need to attract more staff to match demand created by policy interventions aimed at supporting parents. This is already beginning to impact settings, and they believe this will grow as an issue in the coming years.

"An extra 4,000 places [for Flying Start]? Where are the staff coming from, especially for Welsh provision?"

Attracting candidates from diverse backgrounds

Ensuring EYCC workforces reflect the diversity of society is important to give every child the best start. Some settings are actively trying to recruit more diverse workforces, particularly Welsh language speakers, but face various challenges in doing so.

- **Welsh language speakers** – Employers make active efforts to attract and recruit Welsh speakers, but find there are few, if any, applicants.

  "Welsh language clubs find it particularly hard to find staff and it adds to their recruitment burden."

  "It's hard enough to find English speaking staff, let alone Welsh speakers."

  "Half of the staff in Welsh settings don't speak Welsh."

  "Recruitment and retention of Welsh language speakers has always been more difficult."

- **Older workers** – Although employers find older workers are attracted to the work, in some cases, technical and digital aspects of the role may put older candidates off applying.

  "Over 50s struggle with the technical and digital aspects of the role, [such as using] iPads in nurseries and Zoom to communicate with parents."

- **Lack of work experience students from colleges** – various stakeholders also noted a lack of work experience students as a key challenge to attraction.

  "Colleges are not sending students to day care for work experience, or [if they do] they get two weeks only. Nurseries need to use colleges more – the students are the next workforce. We would happily employ them straight out of college, but we're not getting this stream."

"If workers don't represent the diversity of Wales and elsewhere, then some children will have poorer experiences."

Recruitment

EYCC employers note that recruitment is one of the biggest current and future challenges facing EYCC settings. Key recruitment challenges include difficulties in meeting quotas of qualified staff and navigating qualifications, alongside dealing with ineligible and uninterested applicants that present a drain on resources. External pressures such as the cost-of-living crisis further add to the challenge.

> In 2022, Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Club invited all Out of School Childcare Clubs in Wales to respond to a survey. A total of 273 settings responded to this, representing 33% of all settings in Wales. The survey showed that 80% of respondents found recruitment and retention to be a key challenge.

Meeting quotas of qualified staff

Difficulties in attracting qualified workers lead to significant challenges when it comes to recruiting workers to specific services. This is by far the biggest challenge raised by EYCC employers.

For many employers, unqualified staff are relatively easy to attract; the challenge lies more with recruiting staff who meet the necessary qualification requirements. Employers must also encourage existing staff to gain qualifications, which can be time consuming and further impact their ability to meet quotas of qualified staff.

"It is challenging to find candidates with suitable qualifications."

As Table 3 shows, when services reach their quota of unqualified staff, there are various consequences that have significant implications for recruitment and the quality of care.

Table 3: Consequences of having to meet quotas of qualified staff

Consequence of having to meet quotas of qualified staffs	Evidence
Settings recruit anyone with the required qualifications regardless of concerns about quality	"Many nurseries are at their quota of unqualified staff, meaning they must accept anyone with qualifications, regardless of the person's quality."
	"People have the qualifications but not the qualities for the work."
	"There are questions about quality of Level 3 students who have had no or limited experience. They may have a license to practice, but whether they are safe to practice is a different question."
	"Qualifications means turning people away with the right skillset."
	"We had to lower expectations in qualifications from Level 3 to Level 2, now we are employing an apprentice."
Experienced staff become unqualified	"The changes to qualifications mean long-term, decent staff are deemed unqualified."
	"CIW only recognise qualified and unqualified staff – what about those training?"
Settings struggle to replace qualified staff at higher levels	"It's very difficult to replace at Level 3, particularly like-for-like in terms of experience and quality."
	"The CIW qualifications from September – they're good in theory, but it's hard to replace qualified staff."
	"It takes a long time to get a high-quality staff member."
Settings lose or risk losing their registered status	"The new guidelines from the Government which state that students cannot complete their training earlier than the duration of the course has added another layer of delay. The reason is that there is only a dozen registered open access settings, people struggle with bureaucracy with registration and qualifications, especially for seasonal – massively reduced registered settings. It increases [the number of] loopholes."
	"Places are closing or reducing services as they can't staff them appropriately."
Settings lose money	"There's not enough qualified staff and we cannot maintain ratios. This stifles revenue and therefore profit."
Training requirements make it difficult to manage shifts	"We can't get people to work Fridays – they're always asking for time off to do NVQ work."
	"More time is spent by management supporting the childcare team in the rooms and covering staffing gaps."
	"The requirement for 16 hours in a setting for qualification is difficult when services are closing down."

Navigating qualifications

Stakeholders further report that navigating the qualifications is difficult for employers, potential applicants, and the existing workforce. Table 4 highlights the various ways this happens.

Table 4: Difficulties caused by qualifications

Difficulty caused by qualifications	Evidence
Understanding which qualifications are suitable Variation in types of qualifications and routes to becoming qualified are difficult to understand for employers, potential applicants, and the existing workforce. In some cases, even those with university degrees can be deemed unqualified if they do not have the required level of experience under observation. However, in other cases, employers spoke of meeting applicants who had taken online courses run by seemingly illegitimate providers.	*"You can have a university degree but if it didn't include observation, you're not qualified."* *"Having many different qualifications makes it more confusing."* *"Many places take money for courses that are not even recognised. There needs to be more regulation on what they can put on their websites – it's false advertisement."*
Loss of interest The requirements for qualifications push interested and suitable applicants into additional training such as step courses or skill training. Long courses can make potential applicants lose interest and become more likely to seek better paid options where they can work immediately such as retail.	*"There are lots of people who would be good, but they miss the entry level and so do a year of skills training and lose interest. They often go into retail."* *"Where students must do step courses, they are more likely to lose their passion for EYCC and leave for other sectors."*
Costs and length of training It was also noted that expecting people to pay for training before being recruited into a role is unfeasible for many, particularly where training takes substantial time.	*"The main issue is [having to do] qualifications before starting a role, because training is not rewarded financially."* *"Qualifications can take a long time – it used to be a year, now it's over 18 months."*
Difficulties in providing hours for qualifications Many employers also reported difficulties in providing staff who are going through qualifications with the 16 required hours contact time needed to achieve Level 2.	*"The 16-hour issue means removing hours from some to get others qualified."*
Perceptions that qualifications are becoming more difficult A minority of employers believe that the more demanding nature of qualifications is a challenge.	*"The new NVQ is more demanding. It's never been an issue before."*
Lack of motivation to become qualified Given the nature of many EYCC settings, part-time work is standard. However, some groups of part-time workers such as students may not have the desire to undertake qualifications for temporary roles. In other cases, existing staff are not motivated to become qualified.	*"People doing it part time or when finishing degrees don't want to be qualified"* *"For the unqualified staff, the NVQ assessor puts them off – the work, exams, time [...They] don't want to do the training."*

Ineligible and uninterested applicants

Almost all employers reported that over the last few years, they have seen an increase in applications from individuals who are ineligible, unsuitable, or in some cases uninterested in the roles. This places additional strain on already stretched resources as employers sift through applications.

"We've used local job search engines and social media. But find that while we do get responses, 80% are not suitable and the other 15% do not show up for interviews, which leaves 5% who do."

"We get a low response rate from qualified people from [online] job advertisements."

"People don't turn up for interviews. It's wasting time and resources."

External factors

There are also a series of external factors that complicate the ability of EYCC settings to recruit and retain its staff. These range from transport issues, complications in the benefits system, the impact of COVID-19 and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

- **Transport issues** – Given much of the existing and aspiring workforce are young and low-paid, car access is not a given. In rural areas, a lack of public transport options harms recruitment.

  "Poor public transport has a huge impact, especially for younger people."

- **Complications in the benefits system** – People who work irregular hours each week face significant difficulties in navigating the UK benefits system. Employers also find this difficult to navigate and there were clear misconceptions held about recipients of benefits.

  The issue here arises when employees cannot be guaranteed regular hours at either lower than or above 16 hours per week[30]. Employers reported that some employees will refuse to work above 16 hours to avoid losing Jobseeker's Allowance or that employees seek more stable options elsewhere if 16 hours cannot be guaranteed and they are at risk of losing Working Tax Credit.

  "The 16-hour thing is always a balancing act."

- **The impact of COVID-19** – COVID-19 caused a variety of challenges for EYCC settings that appear to be longstanding. COVID-19 led to challenges in retention, increasing the need for new staff, and has led to delays in workers undergoing training and qualifications.

  "The delay because of COVID with training also has an impact as this means there is a backlog of students who have not been able to complete their training."

  "There's been an exodus of qualified and experienced staff during and since COVID – people are going to lower-hour, lower-responsibility work."

- **The cost-of-living crisis** – Increasingly, both settings and their staff are feeling the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis.

  "The cost-of-living crisis means services cost more to run."

  This also affects the ability of services to ensure people to become qualified.

  "Getting people qualified means 16 hours in the setting, [but we] can't do that, we haven't got enough children and hours because of the economic climate."

Differences within early years and childcare

It is important to recognise that the challenges identified vary based on the specific contexts in which settings operate. There are both geographic differences and differences according to the specific type of setting.

Place-based differences

In Wales, a key challenge is its rural nature. Rural locations face difficulties recruiting workers due to transport issues and low population densities.

"Between the [town] centres there's massive green spaces. It's hard to staff in terms of meeting ratios and national minimum standards."

"Sometimes the workforce isn't within a viable travelling distance."

The place-based context further complicates attraction and recruitment challenges in three ways:

1. Settings in densely populated urban areas have a higher demand. More rural locations may not have enough demand to justify continuing services.

2. There is geographic variability in institutions that provide courses and engage settings, which directly impacts the numbers of qualified people within an area.

3. Areas with low levels of Welsh speakers struggle to recruit Welsh speakers.

Differences between settings

As discussed earlier, there are various types of EYCC settings that each face some unique challenges.

On the one hand, whereas early years settings are facing increasing demand, largely from the introduction of Flying Start, childcare settings are beginning to report a reduction in demand. Holiday clubs in particular appear to be under threat as the cost-of-living crisis reduces parents' willingness to pay for registered childcare services.

"Across the 32 settings for Flying Start, some will buy places in pre-existing childcare settings, but for an extra 4,000 places? Where are the staff coming from, especially for Welsh language provision?"

On the other hand, holiday clubs and afterschool settings seem to struggle more in attracting people to the shift patterns – evenings, holidays, and weekends. Early years settings, particularly day care settings, tend to be able to offer more regular hours and times.

Differences between types of settings in terms of attraction and recruitment strengths and challenges are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5: Differences between types of settings in terms of attraction and recruitment strengths and challenges

Setting type	Specific attraction and recruitment challenges	Specific attraction and recruitment challenges
Early years settings	Policies that increase access to early years care increase recruitment demands.	Regular shift patterns during standard working hours. Tend to do well in attracting college/school students.
Holiday clubs	Irregular pattern of hours. Particularly difficult recruiting qualified workers and settings may become unregistered. Many settings operate under the exemptions order leading to an uneven playing field.	Potential to recruit those working in education such as Teaching Assistants.
Afterschool care	Unsociable hours – early mornings and evenings.	Potential to recruit those working in education such as Teaching Assistants.

Future threats

Stakeholders also referred to a series of future threats that they believe will create further challenges in recruitment and attraction:

- **Lack of interest from college students** – Employers mentioned a lack of interest from college students. They are concerned that it might get worse as it appears that colleges are having trouble getting the best students to enrol.

  "The lower take-up on courses now, means the issues will be worse in 18 months – some [courses] are seeing 50% fewer enrolees."

  "Colleges are taking bums on seats. They're not getting the best people enrolling."

- **Exceptions Order** – Many employers shared concerns about the impacts of the Exceptions Order on both public perceptions of EYCC and on their ability to maintain registered services.

  While a threat to all settings, holiday club settings were particularly concerned with the increase in leisure centres operating under the Exceptions Order. Increased competition from places that can offer much cheaper services due to lower ratios of staff can "stop holiday clubs being viable." There are concerns that the lack of qualified workers and potential safeguarding issues in settings that operate under the Exceptions Order may give the impression that early years and childcare is low-skilled and poor quality.

  "Leisure centres are able to take children during holidays despite a lack of qualifications, poor safeguarding ratios, and poor quality. But it's a cheaper cost."

- **Cost-of-living crisis** – As noted, there is evidence that the cost-of-living crisis is already impacting EYCC settings. Stakeholders fear that as the crisis intensifies, services will become more expensive to run, parents will be less likely to seek paid childcare options, and pay will become a bigger issue in attraction.

  "The cost-of-living crisis means many parents are turning to other cheaper options for childcare. Some services are seeing demand drop, particularly in the holidays."

  "If demand reduces due to the cost-of-living crisis, then services will shut."

  "Parents increasingly can't afford care."

The care trilemma

This research has highlighted that policy interventions, though designed with good intentions, can inadvertently create new issues.

Improving the status of EYCC roles and the quality of services through the registration of services and increasing the qualification level of the EYCC workforce makes it more difficult and therefore less attractive, to enter the EYCC sector.

It is proposed that understanding the EYCC system via the lens of the care trilemma is useful to better understand the relationship between attraction, status and quality.

The challenge of increasing regulation and professionalisation

Employers and those in supporting roles are in favour of increased regulation and moves towards professionalisation within EYCC settings, and many also believe becoming more professional is key to attracting more workers.

For example, it was reported in discussions with EYCC stakeholders about the possibility of employee registration, that employers were in favour of such moves as a "a positive development to acknowledge the vital role of childcare workers".

However, across the findings, meeting quotas of qualified staff stands out as the biggest issue discussed. This is particularly the case for those in later life, as well as those who have other commitments and view EYCC work as a part-time option, such as students and parents. These groups are key components of the existing workforce. Making EYCC settings less attractive to these groups has clear consequences.

EYCC settings report real and growing concerns about the unintended consequences of professionalisation and regulation on both the attractiveness of EYCC settings and the quality of care provided. In meeting quotas of qualified staff, settings are choosing between employing people who may not be quality EYCC workers, or risk losing their registered status. This is a hard decision for any setting to make.

The components of the care trilemma

This analysis of professionalisation and regulation leads highlights the complexity of the social care and child care system. Changes in one element can lead to unintended consequences in another.

The research suggests that three main interconnected elements must be considered in policymaking and strategy decisions:

- **Status of the work** – How EYCC work is perceived by existing and potential employees and the general public. Moves to professionalise EYCC settings are intended to increase the status.

- **Quality of care and support** – The standards of care provision across EYCC settings. Moves to regulate settings are intended to increase quality.

- **Attractiveness of sector** – How attractive EYCC settings are for jobseekers. The development of programmes such as WeCare Wales are intended to increase the attractiveness.

Figure 4 shows how these factors are interconnected via the care trilemma.

Figure 4: The care trilemma

Using the care trilemma

The care trilemma is a visual mental model intended to sharpen thinking about policy trade-offs by simplifying the main relationships. In the care trilemma, status, quality and attractiveness are outputs of other policies; factors like pay, training, regulation or quality improvement are policy inputs which shape those three elements.

Although public bodies have a range of tools to understand impact, communicating trade-offs can be challenging. The care trilemma is designed to help show the potential impact of policies in a format that decision makers with a range of leadership styles and backgrounds will understand.

For example, by intending to improve the quality of care through increasing minimum qualification requirements, as is happening now (see Figure 5), the resulting increase in entry barriers makes EYCC settings less attractive. Further, as is beginning to happen, difficulties recruiting qualified workers then risks the status and quality of EYCC as settings risk becoming unregulated.
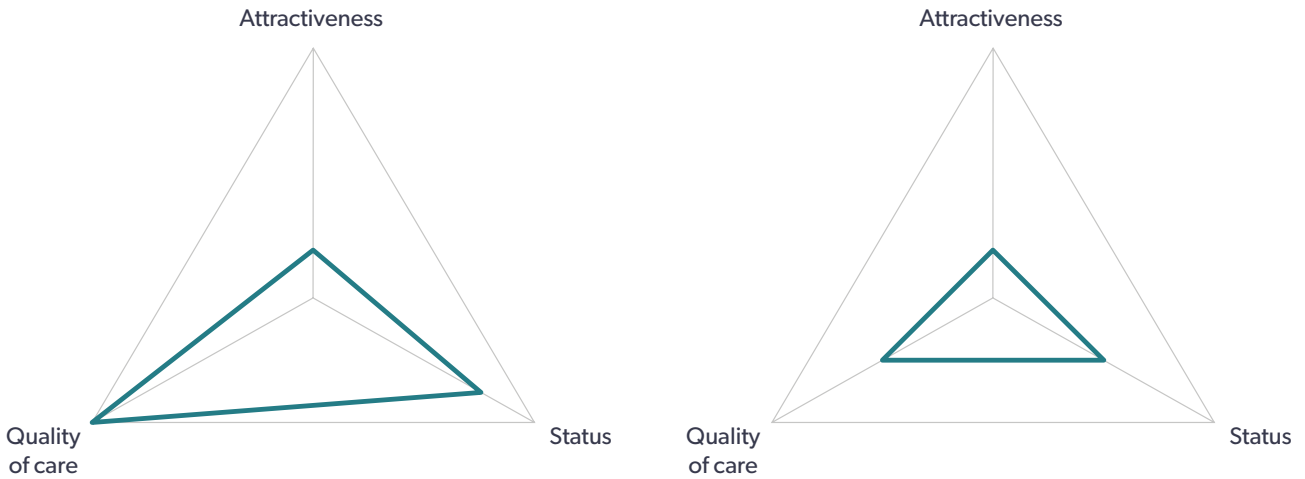
Figure 5: How moves towards professionalisation affect the care trilemma. 5a shows how at the beginning, quality improves and attractiveness decreases. 5b shows that when attractiveness is low, status and quality can decrease.

If pay is increased (Figure 6), however, then EYCC becomes associated with higher-wage work and may be perceived as higher status. It becomes easier to motivate the potential and existing workforce to engage in qualifications, and the work may become more attractive, including to a more diverse group of people. Ensuring the implications of the trilemma are considered before decisions are made is important to reduce the likelihood of unintended consequences.

Figure 6: How increasing pay can improve the care trilemma.

Section summary

EYCC settings face significant, complex, and at times contradictory challenges when attracting and recruiting people into roles.

Longstanding issues such as low pay and poor public awareness remain key challenges, but more recent issues relating to qualifications and quotas, as well as external issues such as COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, are increasingly creating obstacles for both employers and applicants.

Understanding decision-making in EYCC through the lens of a care trilemma may be useful to ensure future changes do not negatively affect attraction efforts.

4

The role and value of WeCare Wales

The role and value of WeCare Wales

Employers and those in supporting roles identified a series of complex challenges faced in attracting and recruiting social care and child care workers. Pay, professionalisation and regulation are major obstacles. This section explains the key challenges in attraction and recruitment.

Takeaway messages

1   Employers find the role of WeCare Wales to be useful and are largely aware of the existence of WeCare Wales. However not all employers are aware of their activities.

2   The work of WeCare Wales involves the WeCare Wales website, raising awareness and changing perceptions, outreach and engagement work and supporting potential applicants.

3   While the website is beneficial, a need to improve the user's experience and job portal as well as strengthening branding was reported.

Perceptions of WeCare Wales

Overall, WeCare Wales is viewed as a positive force for EYCC. Stakeholders believe that it is a positive platform, with useful information and case studies, and effective campaigns. It seems that this is because EYCC have traditionally been marginal to wider social care discussions and that stakeholders very much appreciate the new attention.

EYCC employers engaged as part of the research were largely aware of WeCare Wales. However, it must be noted that most were involved in national or regional forums that were attended by Social Care Wales representatives.

WeCare Wales EYCC activities

WeCare Wales have a series of activities that support the wider care sector as well as some that are specific to the case of EYCC. Its activities are promoted via its website, its engagement with the sector through national and regional forums, and its engagement with the general public and jobseekers through advertising campaigns and outreach events.

Where employers are aware of the activities, they are very complimentary. However, not all employers are aware of all activities. This suggests there is scope for WeCare Wales to further extend its engagement.

The WeCare Wales website

The WeCare Wales website is a multi-functional site, consisting of a free job portal, training courses and informative pages on sectors and WeCare Wales's latest news. Respondents appreciate having a single site where such information is held, and particularly appreciate the resources included.

Key downsides reported concern the user experience. Many stakeholders mentioned that the website is unclear and complicated, with some of the information being held in places that are not easy to find. Several also reported technical issues using the website, particularly when using the job portal. Employers also seem to find the job portal impractical as it is very time consuming for them to post a job advertisement. Given national EYCC actors also provide free job portals (i.e., Mudiad Meithrin), it is difficult to see where the value of WeCare Wales's portal lies.

A further issue is the homepage. Large banners obscure key information and there is a lack of branding or identity of WeCare Wales. It is not clear from this homepage what WeCare Wales is, what it is trying to achieve, nor who it is aimed at.

Raising awareness and changing perceptions

Information pages on the website provide resources, advice and basic information about what it means to work in different EYCC settings and what role descriptions mean. They also include positive case studies from the perspective of EYCC workers and those receiving care and support.

WeCare Wales has developed a series of campaigns since its inception including general campaigns about the broader social care and child care sector, and specific campaigns about EYCC. Campaigns often follow employees across a typical day or moment in their work. All videos and materials are developed in English and Welsh.

They are all shared on WeCare Wales's various social media profiles – YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. Many are also played on national TV and radio or printed in national and local media outlets. The campaign 'Make a difference in a child's early years' has been particularly successful in reaching a wide audience with almost 200,000 views.

Respondents were particularly positive about the information pages and campaigns. They believe they are important in busting myths, raising awareness and improving the image of the social care and child care sector and of specific EYCC roles.

Outreach and engagement work

WeCare Wales facilitates and runs an extensive programme of outreach and engagement work. These activities are intended to provide jobseekers and potential applicants with information, advice, and support to increase attraction and recruitment.

This outreach and engagement work is primarily conducted via WeCare ambassadors – existing employees who volunteer their time to share experiences – and regional care career connectors that are funded by Social Care Wales to engage employers, employees and potential applicants across the Welsh regions. WeCare Wales have further developed a stakeholder toolkit, a package of resources that can be used by education providers to supplement social care and EYCC teaching and resources.

EYCC employers particularly appreciate the engagement with school-aged children as schools often don't have the capacity to deliver high-quality, accurate information about EYCC roles. Importantly, in engaging children, there are opportunities for messages to be passed onto adults. Employers and those in supporting roles also appreciate that engaging school children should provide longer-term solutions to the attraction and recruitment crisis.

Further, all employers who had engaged with their regional connector were very positive about their experience.

Supporting potential applicants

WeCare Wales has also developed a series of schemes and courses designed to make it easier for people without knowledge of and experience in EYCC settings to find employment. In providing tailored support for applicants, WeCare Wales is making important steps to better prepare applicants for the realities of the work.

Of particular note here is the Introduction to Childcare course that began in late 2022. This is a short, usually online, three-day course that is free of charge. It is intended to introduce people to what EYCC is and to the specific demands of the role. Topics such as communication, safeguarding and working practices are covered by the course. WeCare Wales now delivers this course at the Coleg Menai as a part of its employability programme for adult learners.

They have run a total of five courses so far, and plan to create new partnerships for the next phase such as colleges and underrepresented groups, expanding on the success with Coleg Menai. The next phase will also include linking the people who have completed the programme to local employers signed up to the Guaranteed Interview Scheme (GIS).

Section summary

WeCare Wales has brought significant value to EYCC in terms of providing support and resources to both employers and applicants. In particular, stakeholders appreciate its investment into outreach and engagement, and into raising awareness and changing public perceptions about early years and childcare. While the website is appreciated as a useful place to hold resources, improving the user experience and ensuring a clear identity would further allow WeCare Wales to support EYCC settings.

5

Recommendations

Recommendations

Recommendations to address the attraction and recruitment challenges faced by EYCC settings are provided for WeCare Wales, and by extension Social Care Wales, as well as for EYCC settings and employers.

However, this research has shown that without more meaningful and joined up collaboration with providers, regulators, workers, the education sector, the public, and the government, the ability of WeCare Wales (and by extension Social Care Wales) and EYCC employers to create change is limited.

Because of this, after the recommendations, six areas where system reform is needed are outlined.

What can WeCare Wales do?

For the most part, WeCare Wales should keep doing more of what it already succeeds at – campaigning, engaging jobseekers and employers, and developing resources. Six recommendations are suggested. All six are considered essential, and most are low-cost, easy to implement solutions.

Table 6 outlines the six recommendations for WeCare Wales and their priority level. As many of the recommendations are to continue and expand existing activities, they are categorised as reconsider how to do, keep doing and start doing. Details about each of the WeCare Wales focused recommendations follows.

An additional four recommendations for WeCare Wales are provided in the main report – *Understanding attraction and recruitment in the Welsh social care and child care sector and the role of WeCare Wales*.

Table 6: WeCare Wales recommendations to support EYCC settings

Recommendations for WeCare Wales		Priority
Keep doing	Expand advertising and campaigning activities.	**Immediate**
Keep doing	Develop more resources for the website.	**Immediate**
Reconsider how to	Develop a clearer identity.	**Immediate**
Start doing	Support EYCC settings to professionalise from within.	**Medium-term**
Keep doing	Engage and support the local system.	**Medium-term**
Start doing	Support employers to understand the importance of diversity, equality and inclusion.	**Long-term**

1. KEEP DOING: Expand advertising and campaigning activities

With few exceptions, EYCC settings are overwhelmingly positive about WeCare Wales's existing advertising and campaigning, although there is scope to adapt approaches or develop new ones.

The key element here is ensuring campaigns educate the public about the importance of EYCC work in children's development, and about the importance of registered services. Employers stress the need to showcase EYCC as being a vital part of Welsh society that helps children to have the best start in life and supports local and national economies.

2. KEEP DOING: Develop more resources for the website

WeCare Wales should develop new resources to support EYCC settings and potential applicants (see Table 7).

Employers requested that additional and more up-to-date case studies are provided, and that information is presented in easy-to-read formats as employers don't have the time to read extensive documents and watch the videos.

Developing and keeping resources up to date is a difficult task, particularly when resources refer to policies and schemes that are not directly relevant to EYCC, such as the benefits system. However, the current system of signposting people to other sites and resources where information is held is not working. In most cases, information elsewhere is difficult to understand for employers and applicants and creates challenges in attraction and recruitment.

Table 7: List of resources WeCare Wales should develop

Resource	Description	Target audience
Guide to understanding training and qualifications for EYCC roles	A very clear overview of minimum and preferred training and qualification requirements for EYCC. Employers note that existing resources are not clear enough.	Applicants.
Guide on EYCC qualifications	More clarity on accepted qualifications is needed to support those interested in joining the sector, applicants and employers in navigating the various qualification options that exist.	Ideally two standalone resources should be developed, one for employers and one for applicants.
Guide to navigating the benefits system for EYCC workers.	A focus on understanding Jobseeker's Allowance, Working Tax Credit and Universal Credit for those working around 16 hours per week is essential.	Ideally two standalone resources should be developed, one for employers and one for applicants.
Guide to supporting people in returning to work	There are various schemes and opportunities in the UK aiming to engage people in returning to the workforce such as the Return to Work Programme and Re-Start Scheme. Providing guidance as to how these schemes work in practice would be useful.	Ideally two standalone resources should be developed, one for employers and one for applicants.
Marketing guide	Few settings have in-house marketing expertise and find it difficult to know how to navigate marketing, including how to use social media and how to target campaigns to specific audiences.	Small and medium- sized settings.
Guide to work experience and work placements	Even settings with strong relationships with local schools are unclear how work placements and experience could operate in practice. Updating the existing guide to offer more clarity about the process and key things to consider would be useful.	Ideally two standalone resources should be developed, one for employers and one for schools.

3. RECONSIDER HOW TO: Develop a clearer identity

WeCare Wales needs a clear identity. It needs to have absolute conceptual clarity over what it is trying to do, and which system dynamics and groups of people it is addressing/working with. This should also help to improve awareness.

As website changes are currently underway, now is a good time to develop this identity and to clarify what WeCare Wales stands for.

The website should have a clear homepage that explains what WeCare Wales is and how it supports EYCC settings. It is important that playwork continues to be included.

An About Us section would also be useful, perhaps featuring the Regional Connectors and Work Coaches that employers and applicants may encounter.

4. START DOING: Support EYCC settings to professionalise from within

There are some clear benefits in professionalising the EYCC workforce, but this needs to be done in a way that is more sensitive and responsive to the concerns of employers. It is also important to ensure employers and employees feel they have ownership over the process and that moves to professionalisation do not impact on their autonomy.

Supporting EYCC settings to standardise and professionalise from within is key to paving a smoother path to professionalisation. Given the connections with employers and applicants, WeCare Wales are well positioned to do this. This can involve:

- Working with organisations in localities and regions to promote streamlining and standardising of processes.

- Working with education providers to ensure applicants are directed towards appropriate courses and qualifications. There is potential to develop a seal of approval to award to courses.

- Supporting employers to understand and appreciate registration and qualification.

- Supporting applicants to understand and appreciate qualifications, perhaps by providing a forum or live chat option on the website.

- Continue developing transitional or top-up courses to support people with qualifications in related areas such as education and social work to become qualified for EYCC settings. In particular, a top-up course aimed at Teaching Assistants so that they could extend working hours into the evenings and/or holidays would be useful.

5. KEEP DOING: Engage and support the local system

Engagement and outreach with schools, job centres and other local employment focused organisations is perceived as one of the key strengths of WeCare Wales's work. This work needs to continue and grow.

The following forms of engagement have been identified as key priorities by employers and other stakeholders:

- **Work placements** – Support settings to engage schools in work experience and work placements. Giving younger people a taster of working in EYCC settings may be useful to increase motivation to apply later.

- **Continue developing resources for schools and colleges** – The lack of expert social care and child care teaching in schools and colleges makes it difficult for the sector to control its messaging in education settings.

Developing resources that schools and colleges can use that give more realistic understandings and expectations of EYCC roles is key.

There is also scope to engage people working in schools – primarily teaching assistants – as potential recruits to EYCC. One employer suggested "a training inset day for school staff to whet their appetite for working outside of the school day." This could be a useful activity for the regional connectors.

- **Universities** – Given many universities provide EYCC-relevant courses, and/or have existing careers services that support students in gaining part-time employment and work placements, there is clear scope to engage universities and their career services. Many have student-facing internal job boards that could be used to display WeCare Wales job postings. There are also large careers events that regional connectors can attend.

6.   START DOING: Support employers to understand the importance of diversity, equality and inclusion

There is a lack of motivation from employers to actively increase diversity in hiring. However, the findings from the research suggest that adding further pressures on providers to build diversity into their recruitment practices would be counterproductive.

The lack of motivation to increase diversity stems from the wider challenges employers face in hiring anyone. For the most part, they do not have the time, resources, ability, or motivation to engage in such work.

However, there is significant evidence that more diverse, inclusive, and equal workforces are more attractive to jobseekers[31]. Further, care workforces that are representative of their users can provide better quality of care. Finally, the widespread use of gendered and ageist language to describe the workforce can make it unattractive to those who do not identify with such terms.

This means it is important to ensure diversity is not overlooked. WeCare Wales should promote the benefits of diversity, provide resources and advice to support providers, and provide support to applicants from more diverse backgrounds. It is not recommended that WeCare Wales attempts to 'preach to' employers – but rather works with them.

What can EYCC settings do?

EYCC settings have been very active in discussing, developing and implementing solutions to their attraction and recruitment challenges. There are three main areas where settings can adapt their practices, building on successes of other settings (see Table 8).

Table 8: Recommendations for EYCC employers and settings

Recommendations for employers and settings		Priority
Must do	Get involved in local and national discussions.	**Immediate**
Should do	Seek out local and national funding.	**Medium-term**
Could do	Adapt attraction and recruitment practices	**Medium-term**

1. MUST DO: Get involved with local and national discussions

There are many opportunities for employers to actively engage with, and give their views on, local and national discussions about the future of the sector.

Those that engage with their regional connectors and local and national stakeholder forums tend to be more positive about their ability to address attraction and recruitment challenges. They are also more aware of WeCare Wales's activities, and are more likely to be signed up to the GIS and other schemes.

Employers must be active in their engagement. In particular, they should engage with and keep informed about the ongoing work of WeCare Wales. They should use the national campaigns as an opportunity to share their own local messages, adapt resources for their own purposes, signpost potential applicants to the website, and engage with local and regional events and forums.

2. SHOULD DO: Seek out local and national funding opportunities

EYCC settings should actively seek out schemes, funding opportunities and support available to employers in Wales and the UK that could support their recruitment efforts.

This type of support includes schemes and funding that support workforce recruitment and development, such as the Re-Start Scheme and Return to Work Programmes or Returnships (an internship designed to support people re-entering the workforce).

It can also include support given to employers to reduce carbon emissions and meet net zero goals, to address local and national transport challenges to support driving roles, to explore the use of digital technologies, or train workforces in digital skills.

3. SHOULD DO: Adapt attraction and recruitment practices

EYCC employers reported finding success using a range of strategies to adapt their attraction and recruitment practices. Many of these may be relevant for other employers. Table 9 highlights key strategies.

Table 9: Strategies EYCC settings can employ to improve attraction and recruitment

Strategy and description	Specific actions and evidence
Showing the importance of the work Affirming the importance of the job by inviting parents and applicants in and connecting with them. This was particularly important for settings including playwork services.	*"To recruit people in, we need to be able to make people see what we do and how beneficial it is for parents, children and people who work for us."* *"We invite parents in to play and connect and see the importance of what is done."*
Engaging jobseekers and students Approaching students and jobseekers as well as targeting different groups of people.	*"We've been hosting careers days, workshops, etc to keep the interest there for younger people."* *"We use small pots of funding to train sixth formers to level 2 so they can work during the holidays."* *"Student ambassadors, super ambassadors and volunteer communities can continue to attract more volunteers."*

Strategy and description	Specific actions and evidence
Engaging those in the education sector Engaging those working in comparable roles in education such as teaching assistants.	*"We attend teaching assistant conferences to attract teaching assistants to train in play. Training in play improves their CVs in schools, but also open them up to extending the day or coming back for holidays."* *"We engage with teaching assistants and trying to cross-train people."*
Engaging formal and informal local networks This involves engaging with local communities to reach jobseekers.	*"Usually don't have much trouble finding people who want to work in sector through local contacts, Facebook etc."*
Providing paid training Using small funding pots to provide training, especially for Welsh language courses. There is also scope to provide digital skills training aimed at older applicants.	*"For Welsh language, we offer courses and pay for courses in the evenings."*
Change working patterns to support those undergoing training Allowing staff to work while levelling up their qualifications.	*"We let Level 2 staff have temporary supervisory roles (i.e., one day per week) to get their Level 3"*

What system changes are needed?

Small wins in attraction are possible – but to fundamentally improve recruitment and attraction, wider system reform is needed. To do so, an aligned approach across the sector with all partners is required. Five priorities for system change are suggested (Table 10).

Table 10: Recommendations to the Welsh Government to support EYCC settings

System changes needed

1   A sector-wide approach to pay

2   Longer-term capital investment into WeCare Wales

3   A redesign of benefits systems

4   A greater commitment to co-production of policies and approaches

5   Multi-sector collaboration to develop a future supply of workers

This research has highlighted that policy interventions, though designed with good intentions, can inadvertently create new issues.

Although public bodies have a range of tools to understand impact, communicating trade-offs can be challenging. The interconnected nature of social care challenges can lead to political paralysis.

Supplementing existing impact assessment methodology and modelling with the care trilemma can help show the potential impact of policies in a format that decision makers with a range of leadership styles and backgrounds will understand.

Policy proposals can be stress-tested for their impact on each aspect – and rare policies that hold all three goals in balance, such as increasing pay, can be identified.

1. A sector-wide uplift in pay

The importance of pay is a consistent theme in the literature, in this project and in most policy discussions. There needs to be a long-term, sustained commitment to improve pay for EYCC roles.

As the care trilemma demonstrates, additional funding for the sector that is targeted at increasing pay would likely have a material impact on care recruitment and retention. Indeed, increasing pay is the only obvious solution that would not negatively impact attraction, status or quality of care.

Welsh Government officials are well aware of the underlying financial challenges in social care – and the basic relationship between this situation and recruitment. We suggest that Welsh Government continue to develop policy with this understanding. In particular:

*   Findings from this research can inform the implementation of fair pay practices

*   Consideration into minimum requirements on pay and parity with NHS roles or pay bands must continue

*   Work must continue to be done to set consistent expectations and limits to local authorities regarding the cost of care packages.

2. Longer-term capital investment into WeCare Wales

WeCare Wales currently receives a relatively low amount of funding on a fairly short-term basis. Short-term and variable budgets make it difficult for Social Care Wales to develop long-term strategic plans. This means much of WeCare Wales's work has been reactive rather than proactive.

Additional and longer-term funding would allow WeCare Wales to expand its activities and build on its success, providing additional support for the sector and growing its attractiveness.

3. A redesign of benefits systems

Addressing complications around the 16-hour mark for legacy benefits is important.

Although most benefits are UK-wide, some are within the Welsh Government's influence. In particular, council tax discounts and the Discretionary Assistance Fund are devolved. These should be designed to support entry into work and progression within work, particularly in avoiding sharp withdrawal rates or incentives to reduce hours.

There is also a lively ongoing debate around UK-wide devolution of wider benefits – for example, the ability of the Scottish Government to vary elements of Universal Credit– and how far other UK-wide benefits should be devolved.

As this debate unfolds, the implications that any changes to benefits can have on recruitment and retention issues should be considered.

4. A greater commitment to co-production of policies and approaches

Ultimately, for wider change to be successful, the sector needs to support policies and approaches. There is currently a strong sense that government does not always listen to the needs of the sector.

It is necessary to work with EYCC settings to understand how best to assess quality in a way that does not harm attraction, recruitment and retention. In particular, there is a need to:

- **Reconsider quotas of qualified staff.** Given the difficulties faced in recruiting staff with qualifications, it may be useful to introduce a lower requirement where workers only need a DBS and to have attended mandatory induction training (i.e., safeguarding) to count towards quotas. Ideally, the Introduction to Childcare course would be an approved course.

- **Support employers to meet 16-hour training requirements.** Working with education providers to ensure they are not graduating students who do not have the required hours is important. This in turn would provide extra workers to EYCC settings in the form of student placements, and, for example, could be targeted to fill gaps on days where existing workers complete NVQ work.

- **Carefully consider the implications of individual registration.** If individual registration is intended, there is a need to learn from and not repeat challenges that have arisen after the social care register expanded.

Co-designing approaches will ensure settings and employers feel they have a sense of ownership over any changes and that potential unintended consequences can be identified earlier on. It also contributes to wider Welsh Government aims.

5. Multi-sector collaboration to develop a future supply of workers

The previous suggestions would lead to short- and medium-term improvements in attraction and recruitment. However, there is also a need to ensure a constant supply of future employees. While increasing pay will be important here, it is unlikely to be enough.

Many of the suggestions for WeCare Wales are aimed to improve the future supply of potential care workers. However, there is also a role for the Welsh Government, the education sector, and careers services here. Options include:

- Better demonstrating the importance of EYCC in the curriculum of the citizenship agenda.

- Adding a range of care-related experiences to the Skills Challenge Certificate element of the Welsh Baccalaureate.

- Adapting the Young Person's Guarantee so that people aged 16-21 would have to take six months of national service in a sector including social care and child care.

- Further exploring the use of volunteering roles in the sector. This could also support in return-to-work initiatives.

- Developing systems to allow portable experience (based on existing Social Care Wales databases rather than demanding additional information from employers and employees), so that employees can more easily move between roles in the system and/or accept roles at multiple settings (i.e., after school and holiday clubs).

6

Conclusion

Conclusion

The attraction and recruitment challenges facing EYCC settings in Wales are complex, changing according to geographic location and type of provision.

There are many highly engaged employers and those in supporting roles who are actively working to improve the image of EYCC settings and attract people to it. Employers have implemented a range of strategies to alleviate their challenges in local spaces, while WeCare Wales supports EYCC settings from a national and regional level.

However, EYCC settings continue to struggle, particularly but not only in recruiting qualified workers, in meeting quotas for qualified staff, and in ensuring staff are trained to the necessary standard.

Long-standing issues of low pay and low public awareness about the value of EYCC work further cause challenges, while political commitments to increase access to childcare services are increasing the demand for services and the need for additional workers.

Many other challenges are beyond the scope of individual organisations to address – such as those relating to the UK benefits system, issues with training and qualifications providers, and the effects of the cost-of-living crisis.

Wider system change is therefore needed.

Appendices

Appendices

Appendix I: Methodology

The project was structured across four key phases.
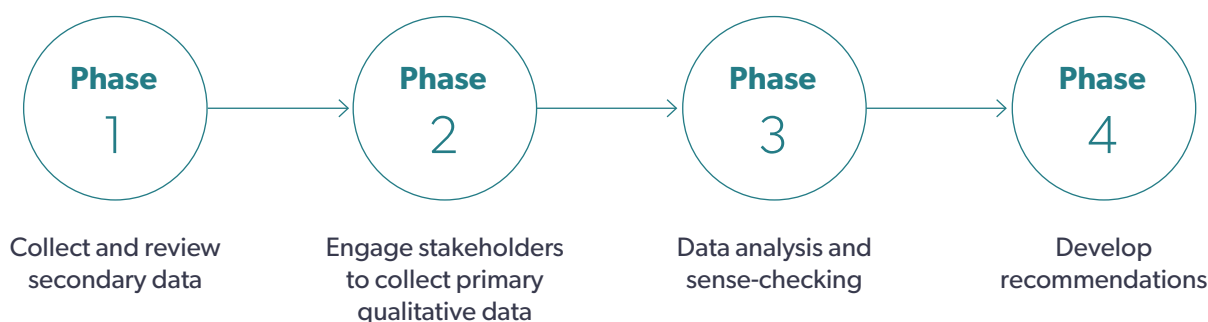Data collection took place from January-March 2023.

Phase 1 → **Phase 2** → **Phase 3** → **Phase 4**

Collect and review secondary data | Engage stakeholders to collect primary qualitative data | Data analysis and sense-checking | Develop recommendations

Figure 7: Project structure

Data collection and analysis methods

Table 11: Project data collection methods

Desk-based methods	Engagement with stakeholders
Literature review of peer reviewed and grey research relating EYCC, policies in Wales and the UK, as well as a review of data already collected by Social Care Wales.	Online interviews and engagement at online forums with 24 employers from all types of EYCC settings across national and local scales, except for childminders.
Best practice review to explore the broader landscape of early years and childcare recruitment beyond Wales and review of attraction and recruitment approaches in non-care sectors.	Online interviews with 13 individuals representing five services involved in supporting roles in the social care and child care sector.
Extensive strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats (SWOT) exercise involving two main levels of analysis. 1. Notes from the desk-based reviews and stakeholder engagement were coded, generating over 20 pages of evidence. 2. Codes were categorised into broad thematic areas, such as 'regulation' or 'application process', generating 27 broad thematic areas or codes.	Key findings and recommendations were presented back to the social care and child care sector across two sense-checking workshops held in March 2023.

Appendix II: Key stakeholders in the EYCC context

Table 12: Key stakeholders in the EYCC context

Organisation	Description	Type of service	Scale
Mudiad Meithrin[32]	Mudiad Meithrin, a voluntary organisation, provides Welsh-medium early years care and education.	Welsh medium providers.	Wales
Early Years Wales[33]	Its main purpose is to enhance the development and education of pre-school children in Wales by encouraging their parents to provide for their needs through high quality pre-school provision.	Mainly playgroups but not limited to this.	Wales
Clybiau Plant Cymru / The Kids' Clubs[34]	Through its out of school childcare club network, Clybiau Plant Cymru/ The Kids' Clubs promotes, develops, and supports communities in Wales.	Out of school childcare.	Wales
National Day Nurseries Association[35]	In Wales, NDNA Cymru is a membership association that provides support, information, advice, guidance, and training to employees working in childcare, early years, and nurseries.	The private sector (Nurseries).	UK
Professional association of childcare and early years (PACEY)[36]	It is the mission of Pacey Cymru to provide support to people who work with and care for children in Wales. Assisting members and childcare workers in Wales to provide the highest standard of child care is one of Pacey Cymru's top priorities.	Mainly childminders but not limited to this.	UK

For play work, Skills Active are the skills council and Play Wales and Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids Club are the key bodies in Wales. Welsh Government is in the process of conducting an independent play review which will, amongst other things, address whether Skills Active will continue to be the skills council for play work in Wales. Play Wales are negotiating for this role to sit within Social Care Wales, but no formal decisions have taken place.

Appendix III: Types of EYCC settings

There are many different types of early childhood settings, but the most commonly used terms are maintained and non-maintained settings. The term 'maintained settings' refers to school-provided services whereas non-maintained provision encompasses support provided outside of schools such as care and support provided by childminders or day care services.

Table 13: Types of EYCC settings

Sub category	Definition
Crèches for children	Occasional day care for children aged from birth up to the age of 12 years on non-domestic premises. They need to be registered where they run for more than two hours a day and more than five days a year, even where individual children attend for shorter periods.
Full day care services for children, e.g., nurseries	A day care setting for children under the age of eight years on non-domestic premises for more than two hours in any one day and more than five days per year.
Open access play provision services for children, e.g. playschemes	Staffed Open Access play provision operating for over two hours a day for children up to the age of 12 years can be permanent or temporary provision, located in a variety of settings with or without premises and can include holiday play schemes. This provision usually caters for a wide age range of children, normally aged five years and over.
Out of school services for children, e.g., after school club, holiday club	Settings that support children aged up to 12 years for no more than two hours in any day and that operate for more than five days a year. It refers to childcare outside of the child's full-time school day and includes care provided before school, after school and during the school holidays. It does not include wrap around care and the Welsh Government free breakfast in primary schools scheme.
Sessional day care services for children, e.g., Cylch Meithrin or Playgroup	Childcare for children from the age of two years and onwards on nondomestic premises which is for less than a continuous period of four hours in any one day. The service is mainly used by children aged from three to five rather than babies or toddlers, although some may admit two year-olds. Where two sessions are offered in any one day, children must not attend more than five sessions per week. There must be a break between sessions with no children in the care of the provider[37].

[ ] Early Years/Childcare   [ ] Playwork

Appendix IV: Policy documents affecting the EYCC context

Key policies that affect EYCC are listed in alphabetical order.

Table 14: Policy documents affecting the EYCC context

Childcare, play and early years workforce plan (2017, Welsh Government)

Outlines the Welsh Government's aim to create a skilled childcare and play workforce, and ensure that this sector is regarded as a desirable career pathway that contributes towards supporting child development. Three key themes include 'attracting high quality recruits, raising standards and skills, and investing in building capacity and capability'.

Curriculum for Wales/Successful futures (2019, Welsh Government)

Also known as the Donaldson review (Curriculum reform and new curriculum three to 16 years from September 2022), the new update has replaced the current Foundation Phase Curriculum in Early Years.

Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers (2017, Welsh Government)

Sets out the ambition of achieving one million Welsh speakers by 2050 and doubling the use of the Welsh language, particularly among children. Recruiting more Welsh speakers in the health sector is a priority.

Early years outcomes: framework (2015, Welsh Government)

A framework to allow the Welsh Government to identify the impact of policies and programmes in early years and childcare.

Flying Start (2007, Welsh Government)

A Welsh Government funded programme which is targeted at children aged zero to three years 11 months and their families who live in certain areas of Wales defined by post code. Flying Start helps families with children under four years old in disadvantaged areas of Wales.

Foundation Phase (2022, Welsh Government)

The statutory curriculum in Wales for children aged between three to seven years. It is delivered in the maintained and non-maintained sector. It is available from the term following a child's third birthday and focuses on learning through play and experiential learning.

More than just words – Five year plan (2022-27, Welsh Government)

This strategy follows on from existing strategic frameworks. It aims to improve the quality of care for individuals living in Wales by recognising the concept of language needs in a bilingual country. A key objective is providing an Active Offer which "means providing a service in Welsh without someone having to ask for it". One of the key priority groups identified in frameworks and action plans is children and young people. Three themes structure the approach covering planning and policies, Welsh Language skills of the workforce, and sharing best practice.

Ministerial Review of Play (2019, Welsh Government)

In 2019, the Welsh Government announced their intention to carry out an independent play policy review. With the changing landscape of the early years, childcare and playwork sectors, it is an opportune time to focus on play policy in Wales and review the policy, vision and direction for this part of the sector.

Prosperity for All: economic action plan (2017, Welsh Government)

Outlines how Wales aims to grow in a way that is inclusive, promotes well-being and spreads opportunity. Five key priority areas are identified in terms of well-being that includes early years, housing, social care, mental health and skills and employability.

Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021 (2016-2021, Welsh Government)

This document outlines the Welsh government's key priorities for delivering those improvements. They are ambitious measures aimed at making a difference for everyone, at every stage in their lives.

The Childcare Offer for Wales (2022, Welsh Government)

A Welsh Government initiative that provides eligible working parents with 30 hours of childcare for three to four year olds only. The 30 hours childcare will be a combination of Curriculum for Wales Foundation Phase Nursery (FPN) (between 10 – 12.5 hours) and childcare (between 17.5 – 20 hours), for up to 48 weeks per year.

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2. The Kids' Clubs (2022) **Results of our National Club Survey 2022**

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4. WeCare Wales (2023) **Home**

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6. National Day Nurseries Association's (2018/2019) **NDNA 2018/19 Workforce Survey Wales**

7. Government social research (2022) **Independent review: Registration of the childcare play and early years workforce in Wales**

8. Welsh Government (2016) **National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years**

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10. Children in Wales (2021) **Early Years**

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12. The Kids' Clubs (2020) **What is Playwork?**

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17. Welsh Government (2010) **The Child Minding and Day Care Exceptions (Wales) Order 2010**

18. Care Inspector Wales (2023) **Home**

19. Estyn (2023) **Welcome to Estyn**

20. CWLWM (2023) **What we do**

21. Welsh government (No Date) **Childcare, Playwork and Early Years (CPEY) Sector Wales: contacts**

22. Social Care Wales (No Date) What do we mean when we refer to Early Years and childcare (EYCC)?

23. Welsh Government (2017) **Prosperity for All: the national strategy: Taking Wales Forward**

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27. Welsh Government (2021) **Programme for government 2021 to 2026: Well-being statement**

28. Welsh Government (2017) **Flying Start Health Programme Guidance**

29. Working Families (2023) **Wales – Free childcare for children aged 2, 3 & 4**

[30] To be eligible for Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance someone must work fewer than 16 hours of paid work per week. To be eligible for a Working Tax Credit, however, they must work at least 16 hours per week. Universal credit is not affected by working hours. **Working hours: benefits rules - How are benefits affected by hours worked?**

[31] See the accompanying report *'Understanding job-seeking behaviours: insights for social care Wales'* for more details.

[32] Mudiad Meithrin (2023) **Home**

[33] Early Years Wales (2023) **Home**

[34] The Kids' Clubs (2023) **About us**

[35] National Day Nurseries Association (2023) **About NDNA**

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