

Investing in the Early Years



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Foreword

Liberal Democrats believe in freedom; a free society is one in which no person is “enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.” Key to this is an education system that provides all children with the skills needed to succeed in life: to think critically, to use their talents creatively, to develop a healthy lifestyle, good relationships and social responsibility, to equip them to make well-balanced decisions and resolve conflicts, as well as providing them with the tools needed to pursue their own goals in life.



We believe every child deserves a fair start in life, and we are determined to make sure that the education system finds and nurtures the best in everyone, so that every person can fulfil their potential.

Outside of the home environment, high quality early years education is of particular importance, with research demonstrating the potential long-term benefits of investment in early education and childcare for every child, but particularly for those who are disadvantaged.¹ Sadly in Wales one in three children experience poverty. One in four of our poorer children in Wales leave primary school unable to read well.² Pupils from poorer backgrounds lag behind those elsewhere in the UK, with only 26% of Welsh children eligible for free school meals achieving five good GCSEs compared to 38% in England.³

It is time for this to change. The Welsh Liberal Democrats believe in encouraging aspiration and providing opportunity for everyone, regardless of their background. We have the fresh ideas needed to develop a sustainable and affordable early years education and childcare system that secures the best outcomes for children and their families.

Aled Roberts AM

Welsh Liberal Democrat spokesperson
on Children, Education and Young People

¹ Heckman, J: Return on Investment: Costs vs. Benefits (2008) University of Chicago

² Save the Children: Read On. Get On. In Wales.

³ State of the Nation Report 2014

Introduction

“Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine....It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given that separates one person from another.”

(Nelson Mandela)

The Welsh Liberal Democrats are proud to have secured over £282million for a Welsh ‘Pupil Premium’ to help give schools the ability to tackle disadvantage and close the performance gap between children from poorer and wealthier backgrounds. This is essential in order to break down the unfair divisions in our society, and to ensure a productive, competitive economy. However, we must go further to address the huge gap in school readiness between the most and least advantaged children and give teachers the time to focus on a child’s individual needs.



Alongside investment in early years education, accessible and affordable childcare is an important means of enabling parents to return to work if they wish and can help improve a child’s social skills and reduce child poverty. The Welsh Liberal Democrats recognise the difficulties that many parents face, often struggling with the cost of childcare, which for many means it simply isn’t worth working, or working more hours.

We need a comprehensive system of early years support that is focused on the needs of children and their families and aims to prepare every child for a successful future. It is particularly important to support children who are living in poverty or who have special needs, to ensure that no one is left behind. This paper explores a range of policies that seek to achieve these aims, in line with our belief that investment in early years is vital to ensuring that each and every child has the freedom to achieve their potential.

Policy summary

This paper proposes a number of key policies to help every child get a fair start in life.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats would:

Support children from disadvantaged backgrounds by:

- increasing the Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant, which gives early years settings extra money to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to £1,000 per pupil per year; and
- guaranteeing this funding for five years to help schools plan their budget and give every child the best start in life.

Ensure teachers have time to give children the individual attention they need by:

- introducing a maximum class size of 25 for infants (Reception, Y1, Y2); and
- establishing an Infant Class Size Reduction Grant of £42m over the next Assembly term, with funding prioritised towards the largest classes.

Raise the quality of early years provision by:

- introducing a new qualification of Qualified Early Years Teacher;
- promoting Apprenticeships in Early Years and Childcare by raising awareness amongst employers and pupils;
- requiring that all Level 2 and Level 3 staff have an emergency paediatric first aid or full paediatric first aid certificate to count within the early years staff to child ratios; and
- ensuring that staff have specific training in supporting children with disabilities, with new childcare provision adapted to meet the needs of disabled children.

Develop a sustainable and affordable early years education and childcare system that secures the best outcomes for children and their families by:

Expanding provision:

- establishing a definition of sufficiency within statutory guidance, to help local authorities to more consistently and effectively fill gaps in provision;

- adopting a robust approach to assessing demand for Welsh medium and bilingual provision;
- enshrining entitlement to childcare including early years provision, bringing it in line with entitlement to a school place;
- encouraging the establishment of regionally based social enterprises run by charities, not-for-profit companies and employer or user owned mutual and cooperatives;
- promoting the use of community buildings, leisure centres and school premises to help increase the level of childcare provision in Wales;
- encouraging partnership working between nurseries and schools, to offer more wrap around care and greater flexibility for families;
- encouraging other solutions such as workplace nurseries in places that employ a large number of staff who work outside of normal office hours;
- examining a pilot of an 'at home' childcare service;
- reviewing the regulations on child-minders to ensure that parents have as many choices as possible;
- reforming the regulation and inspection regime by replacing current regulations with a single set of Early Childhood Education and Care Regulations and Standards, alongside an integrated regulatory framework via a new Single Quality Framework;



Addressing affordability:

- putting pressure on the UK Government for a firm timetable for the introduction of our tax-free childcare policy;
- **offering 10 hours a week of free childcare to all working parents from the end of paid parental leave (nine months) until the age of two, 38 weeks a year;**
- **offering 10 hours a week of free, quality childcare for all children age two to three, 38 weeks a year;**
- **increasing the statutory duty on local authorities to provide a funded early education place to fifteen hours a week, 38 weeks a year;**
- **supporting local providers to offer early years provision as flexibly as feasible;**

- encouraging nurseries to register as education providers for three year olds which can offer a more convenient arrangement for parents;
- in the longer term where funding allowed, seeking to expand all provision for funded childcare and early years education to a full 48 weeks a year; and
- supporting unemployed parents by continuing the 'Parents, Childcare and Employment' scheme.

Raising awareness:

- introducing a national single online source of information for families, to raise awareness of support and services in their area.

Early Years Pupil Premium

Policy: We will increase the Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant, which gives early years settings extra money to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to £1,000 per pupil per year. We will guarantee this funding for five years to help schools plan their budget and give every child the best start in life.

Background:

The early years are some of the most important in our lives but there are already wide variations in ability between children from different backgrounds when they start school. The Sutton Trust has suggested that there is a 19 month gap in school readiness between the most and least advantaged children.⁴ This gap widens through later years of school and beyond. If we want a more equal society, we must get help to all those who might fall behind, and their parents, right from the start.

Children who have attended a high quality pre-school do better in reading and maths aged six than those who have not.⁵ This positive impact lasts for the whole of a child's school career, with children who attend nursery or pre-school achieving significantly better GCSE results than those who are kept at home before school age. The boost from pre-school education is equivalent to gaining seven B grades at GCSE rather than seven C grades; children who go to pre-school also develop better literacy, behaviour and concentration as teenagers, and can earn an extra £27,000 over their working lives.⁶



⁴ Sutton Trust: [Social Mobility Report \(September 2012\)](#)

⁵ Findings from The Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project: <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/153.html>

⁶ Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16: Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project, Research Report (September 2014) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/influences-on-students-development-at-age-16>

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has highlighted that one of the key objectives of education policy, including the vital early years, should be to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their better-off peers.⁷ Over the last Assembly the Welsh Liberal Democrats secured over £282million for a Pupil Deprivation Grant, through successive budget deals with the Welsh Government. This grant gives additional funding to help disadvantaged children get a fair start in life, to help break the link between poverty and educational underachievement and close the gap between children from poorer and wealthier backgrounds.

In 2014, the Welsh Liberal Democrats secured an additional £4.6million to introduce the Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant, to extend the Pupil Deprivation Grant to three and four-year-olds. This funding is worth £300 per eligible pupil and helps to ensure that every child gets the care and attention they deserve when they are very young, to give them the very best chance in life. This benefits nearly 15,500 nursery pupils across Wales.

Due to the importance we place on the early years **the Welsh Liberal Democrats would increase funding for the Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant, with the value gradually increasing over the lifetime of the next Assembly until it reaches £1000 per child.**

This will mean a huge amount of extra support for the children who need it most. **We would guarantee five year funding for the grant, to give schools the certainty they need to plan their budget** and put teachers in a stronger position to support the children who need it most, so that every child has a fair start and is ready to learn when they start school.

Cost: We will increase the Early Years Pupil Deprivation Grant each year to reach £1000 per child by the end of the next Assembly.

Year	Amount per pupil	Cost
2016-17	£450	£6.97m
2017-18	£600	£9.29m
2018-19	£750	£11.62m
2019-20	£900	£13.94m
2020-21	£1000	£15.59m

⁷ [State of the Nation 2014: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain](#)

Reducing infant class sizes to 25

Policy: We will ensure that teachers have the time to give children the individual attention they need by introducing a maximum class size of 25 for infants (Reception, Year 1, Year 2).

Background:

Evidence indicates that there are clear benefits to reducing class sizes for younger children, yet our class sizes are some of the highest in the developed world. Over 71,740 infant pupils in Wales are taught in classes of 25 or more, with 59% of infant classes having over 25 pupils. We believe that the younger pupils are, the more time and attention they need from teachers. **We would work to ensure that infant classes normally contain no more than 25 pupils, prioritising the largest classes first.** This would be done by investing in more teachers, to give them the time to focus on a child's individual needs which we believe is central to raising standards.

The School Admissions (Infant Class Sizes) (Wales) Regulations 2013⁸ provide the law on permissible class sizes in Wales for infant classes (Reception, Year 1 and Year 2).

Regulation 4(1) states: *'(1) No infant class may contain more than 30 pupils while an ordinary teaching session is conducted by a*

single school teacher.' However class sizes have been creeping up with an increasing number of classes of more than 30 pupils. In 2015 7,835 pupils were educated in classes of more than 30 pupils, up from 6,969 in 2013. 246 classes had more than the permitted number of 30 pupils in 2015, up from 218 in 2013⁹. This is a worrying trend that the Welsh Liberal Democrats believe needs to be addressed.

An OECD report (2014)¹⁰ has shown that the UK has an average public sector primary class size of 26; higher than most developed countries. Only China, Chile, Japan and Israel had bigger primary class sizes. In Wales the average class size in 2015 was 25.4 pupils, which is higher than the OECD average (21), the EU21 average (20) and the G20 average (24).



⁸ [School Admissions \(Infant Class Sizes\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2013](#)

⁹ [Schools Census Results January 2015](#) p.17-18

¹⁰ [OECD Education at a Glance 2014](#)

This comparison matters because pupils benefit from being taught in smaller groups where they receive more individual time and attention. The relationship between a pupil and teacher is often one of the most important and closest that a child has and smaller class sizes allows this relationship to flourish, improving the quality of education. A teacher will have more time to understand a child's special educational needs and learning style, which can help to improve grades and behaviour.

There are also benefits to teachers through more time to spend planning and marking work, as well as the potential to further develop their teaching skills and approaches in a smaller class. Teachers would be under less pressure as they would have more time to give children individual attention and improve the quality of lessons, in turn reducing teacher stress and burn-out and improving retention rates.

We cannot ignore the fact that over the past year there has been a 4.7% increase in independent education in Wales, which the Independent Schools Council attributes to its high record of achievement, pastoral care and smaller class sizes.¹¹ Private school classes tend to be much smaller than those in the state sector, with the number of pupils per teacher in Welsh independent schools at 8.2 compared to 18.4 in local authority maintained schools.¹²

A 2001 MORI survey for the Independent Schools Information Service showed class size to be the biggest factor behind parents' decisions to send their children to private schools (36%).¹³ There is therefore clearly a demand for smaller class sizes in the education market, as parents equate class size to quality of education. Until class size within the state sector is reduced there is the potential for greater drift towards privately funded education with a continued rise in the number of pupils attending independent schools.

School staff redundancies are also a key concern and could result in an ever increasing number of children being taught in large classes. The amount of funding schools receive per pupil in Wales has fallen for the first time in a decade, down by 1.1% (£64 per pupil).¹⁴ This



“Large class sizes are a real problem. Not only do they lead to increases in workload during a period that teachers are already dealing with unsustainable pressures, they reduce the individual teaching time with each child.”

Roberto De Benedictis
National Executive NUT

December 2014

¹¹ [Welsh independent schools see 4.7% rise in pupil numbers](#) (May 2015)

¹² [Schools Census Results January 2015](#) p.9

¹³ www.politics.co.uk/reference/class-sizes

¹⁴ [School spending pupil in Wales falls for first time in a decade](#) (July 2015)

is despite schools receiving an extra £73m via the Pupil Deprivation Grant to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds, which was money secured by the Welsh Liberal Democrats during the 2014 budget deal with the Welsh Government. Over 800 teachers and support staff are being made redundant across Wales, which will have a major impact on pupils and their learning.¹⁵ Our policy would ensure that schools have the funding to employ more teachers so that class sizes can be capped at 25, to protect the quality of education for Welsh pupils.



“Having smaller class sizes ensures increased attention for pupils across all of their subjects, the opportunity for teachers to identify any weaknesses as soon as they arise and provide the required support.”

**Stephen Morris, Headteacher
Cathedral School Cardiff**

September 2011

Where’s the evidence?

Class size is a well-documented, contentious area of educational research. One of the most robust studies undertaken was the Tennessee Project STAR (Students-Teacher Achievement Ratio) (1985–1989) in the United States. The project tracked over 11,600 in 79 schools and found that students in smaller classes substantially outperformed students in larger classes on both standardized and curriculum-based tests. There were also lasting benefits, as by fourth grade students from smaller classes still outperformed students from larger classes in all subjects and were better behaved.¹⁶

In England, the Class Size and Pupil Adult Ratio project was a longitudinal study of 10,000 pupils over their time in primary school. The study measured the effects of the natural variation in class size and controlled for factors such as prior attainment. The results showed a clear class size effect on pupil attainment in literacy and mathematics in the first year and in particular that ‘small classes, below 25 worked best in literacy for children who were most in need academically’, although effects in later years were less evident.¹⁷

More recently in 2014, a research summary by David Zyngier of 112 peer-reviewed studies on class size reduction and its effect on student achievement showed that the overwhelming majority of these studies found that smaller classes have a significant impact on student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap. Zyngier notes that “noticeably, of the

¹⁵ [Exclusive: 800 school staff redundancies after funding cuts](#) (July 2015)

¹⁶ [The Tennessee Study of Class Size in the Early School Grades](#)

¹⁷ Blatchford, P: *The Class Size Debate: Is Small Better?* (Open University Press, 2003)

papers included in this review, only three authors supported the notion that smaller class sizes did not produce better outcomes to justify the expenditure.”¹⁸

An examination of academic literature on the impact of class size by D.W. Schanzenbach (2014) found that “smaller classes are particularly effective at raising achievement levels of low-income and minority children”. The research concluded that “the evidence suggests that increasing class size will harm not only children’s test scores in the short run, but also their long-run human capital formation. Money saved today by increasing class sizes will result in more substantial social and educational costs in the future.”¹⁹



Research in the UK by Maria Iacovou (2001) on class size in the early years concluded that “In terms of policy, this paper makes one clear prediction: if money is spent to reduce infant class sizes, then children’s attainment in reading will improve. The Government has already gone some way towards its stated aim of reducing class sizes to a maximum of 30; however, the beneficial effect of reducing class sizes is not confined to cutting very large classes down to 30, but would continue if classes were cut to below 30.”²⁰

There is a widespread perception among teachers, governors and parents that pupils will achieve better in classes where there are small numbers of pupils. This view was highlighted by N.Bennett (1994) who stated that “there is a clear consensus among head teachers, teachers, chairs of governors and parents that increasing class size adversely affects teaching and learning. With regard to children there is concern with the effect of increasing class sizes on the amount of individual attention, the assessment, and standards of their work, their behaviour and safety.”²¹

¹⁸ Class size and academic results, with a focus on children from culturally, linguistically and economically disenfranchised communities (Evidence Base, 2014)

¹⁹ Does Class Size Matter? (National Education Policy Center Policy Brief, 2014)

²⁰ Class size in the early years: is smaller really better? (Institute for Social and Economic Research Essex University, 2001)

²¹ Class Size in Primary Schools: N. Bennett (University of Exeter, 1994)

The Sutton Trust-EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit,²² which provides guidance for teachers and schools on how to use their resources to improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, highlights that reducing class sizes would put pupils on average three months ahead. When surveyed by the Sutton Trust as to how they intend to spend the Pupil Premium in England, nearly three-quarters (73%) of teachers identified reducing class sizes as one of their top three priorities.²³

In Wales a 2003 Estyn report on visits to schools by inspectors stated that “the discussions with headteachers and other staff during the visits also suggest that they see the reduction of class size to below 30 across the primary phase is essential.”²⁴ A survey by the Welsh Liberal Democrats of primary and secondary schools in Wales on the impact of the Pupil Deprivation Grant in Wales found that 39% of schools list staffing within their top three items of expenditure.²⁵

Most recently, the Year 2 Evaluation of the Pupil Deprivation Grant (December 2015)²⁶ found that “the PDG has led to an increase in the size of the school staff in virtually all case study schools.” In particular, the biggest impact has been on the number of Teaching Assistants, who deliver specific literacy or numeracy interventions by withdrawing small groups from ordinary lessons. This reiterates evidence outlined above that attainment is improved where pupils are taught in smaller classes where teachers have more time to spend with pupils.

Why Early Years?

The 2001 report by Estyn on ‘The Impact of Class Size in Primary Schools’ found that “there is much evidence to suggest that teaching and learning are much better in classes of under 30 where the pupils are in early years education and in the early stages of key stage 1”. This conclusion was based on a number of reports, including a report by Ofsted which stated that “small class sizes are of benefit in the early years of primary education.”²⁷

“Reducing class size is one of the most important investments we can make in our children's future. Recent research confirms what parents have always known: Children learn better in small classes with good teachers, and kids who start out in smaller classes do better right through their high school graduation.”

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton
Presidential Radio Address
June 1999

²² [The Sutton Trust Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#)

²³ [Sutton Trust](#) (May 2011)

²⁴ [The Impact of Class Size in primary Schools](#) (Estyn 2003)

²⁵ [Learning lessons from the Pupil Deprivation Grant](#) (September 2013)

²⁶ [Year 2 Evaluation of the Pupil Deprivation Grant](#) (December 2015)

²⁷ [Class size and the quality of education](#) (Ofsted 1995)

A further report found that “younger pupils (3-8 years) tend to do better in smaller classes, mainly because teachers are able in such classes to give them more individual attention at a critical stage in their development, which helps in promoting good standards in early literacy and numeracy.”²⁸ Our policy therefore focuses on reducing class sizes within the early years of primary education (Reception, Year 1 and Year 2) where evidence shows that the benefits for pupils are greater.

Cost: According to the Sutton Trust Toolkit, reducing class size is a more expensive policy when compared to other interventions. However, Blatchford cautions against comparing class size reduction policies with other initiatives as ‘it is not a fair test in the sense that initiatives such as one-to-one tutoring, peer tutoring and computer-assisted learning represent a distinctive method of teaching while CSR merely set limits on the numbers of participants involved. We would then need to consider what teaching and instruction would be appropriate in classes of different sizes.’²⁹ Financial benefits of the policy can include a reduction in stress and ‘burn out’ for teachers with a correlating increase in morale and retention rates and a reduction in substitute teacher costs.

The Labour/Liberal Democrat Partnership Government in Wales (2000-2003) made £31m available over three years through the Infant Class Size Reduction Grant, of which £5.4m was capital funding. This funded an extra 550 teachers and 70 additional classrooms to support the partnership agreement aim to cut class sizes to 25 pupils.³⁰ Applying a real terms increase (at 2015-16 prices using the December 2015 GDP deflators) **the Welsh Liberal Democrats would establish an Infant Class Size Reduction Grant of £42m over the next Assembly term, with funding prioritised towards the largest classes.**

“Infant class sizes have been slowly, but steadily, increasing over a number of years. This has a major impact on teachers’ workload and their ability to spend valuable quality time with their pupils. It has a direct impact on attainment levels.

Creating a cap of 25 pupils is undoubtedly a proposal that will be well received by the teaching profession across Wales.”

Owen Hathway

NUT Wales Policy Officer

December 2015

²⁸ OHMCI: Annual Report (1995-96)

²⁹ Submission from Professor Blatchford to Scottish Parliament enquiry on class sizes 2010

³⁰ National Assembly Record of Proceedings 22/03/2001

Early Years Teacher Training

Policy: We will raise the quality of early years provision by introducing a new qualification of Qualified Early Years Teacher and raising awareness of Apprenticeships in Early Years and Childcare. We will introduce legislation requiring all nursery staff to complete an officially recognised paediatric first aid course.

Qualified Early Years Teacher Qualification

Providing children with high quality education and care in their earliest years can help them succeed at school and later in life. This helps to create a fairer society where opportunities are equal regardless of background. The 'Effective Pre-School, Primary & Secondary Education' (EPPSE) study, is the first major study in the UK to focus specifically on the effectiveness of early years education. It found that the quality of pre-school experience is directly related to better intellectual, social and behavioural development in children and in particular children from disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit from good quality pre-school experiences where they mix with children from different social backgrounds.³¹



The Nutbrown review (2012) in England set out that a key factor in driving up the quality of early years education is improving the skills of the early years workforce and professional qualifications are a key part of this.³² According to Professor Cathy Nutbrown (March 2012): “Getting qualifications right will help to ensure that women and men enter the profession with the skills and experiences they need to do the best work with young children and their families...This can only benefit young children, both in terms of their day-to-day experiences in the Early Years Foundation Stage and future learning outcomes.”

³¹ UCL Effective Pre-School, Primary & Secondary Education, Findings: Pre-School Period <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/66744.html>

³² Nutbrown Review: Foundations for Quality (June 2012)

In Wales, the only recognised route at present to becoming a higher-level practitioner is the Qualified Teacher Status, but often this does not necessarily prepare teachers effectively to work with children in the Foundation Phase. The Graham Review (2014) recommended that given the pedagogical rather than educational approach inherent within the Foundation Phase, they advocate a separately registered Early Childhood QTS specialising in the years from birth to seven.³³

The Welsh Liberal Democrats support this recommendation which would help enhance the specialist skills of the workforce. **We would introduce a new qualification of Qualified Early Years Teacher**, which would be offered at the same level as current teaching qualifications (either a four year undergraduate degree or a single postgraduate year, or through employment based routes). This would focus on the three strands of early years provision - health, education and social services - with the specialism in early education and a basic understanding of the other two strands and how to work with professionals from different backgrounds. It would include expertise in early language development and specific training in supporting children with disabilities. **We would promote Apprenticeships in Early Years and Childcare by increasing awareness amongst employers and pupils.**

Paediatric First Aid Training

Nursery staff do an incredible job, but a young child can choke without warning and often without any visible signs. Nationally recognised courses for first aid in the workplace, First Aid at Work and Emergency First Aid at Work, focus on treating adults. When a first aider is dealing with a child or an infant there are particular differences when managing the incident, performing CPR and dealing with choking, as well as recognition of children's illnesses and injuries, which are covered in a Paediatric First Aid course. It is essential that nursery staff have these specialist skills and the confidence to respond quickly in emergency situations.

Current regulations for non-maintained settings in Wales under the Child Minding and Day Care Regulations (Wales) 2010 require that 'at all times, at least one person caring for relevant children has a suitable first aid qualification.' In registered settings, the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Child Care (2012) require that 'at all times, at least one person caring for the children must have a current first aid qualification in first aid for infants and young children.' However, in the event that the trained staff member may be absent or

³³ [Independent review of childcare and early education registration, regulation and inspection](#) (August 2014)

feel unable to handle an incident when it arises, we believe that all staff should be fully trained in first aid for infants so that any staff member can assist in an emergency situation.

The Paediatric First Aid course gives those working with children the confidence and skills to be able to deal with an incident should it arise. It also gives parents greater confidence to leave their children in the safe hands of the nursery, trusting that their staff will know



what to do should an incident occur. **The Welsh Liberal Democrats will require that all Level 2 and Level 3 staff have an emergency paediatric first aid or full paediatric first aid certificate to count within the early years staff to child ratios**, so that all staff can respond to emergencies quickly and confidently.

Disabled Children

Disabled children can often be excluded from childcare settings because staff are not properly trained. In order to ensure disabled children can access our enhanced early years entitlement **we would ensure that staff have specific training in supporting children with disabilities**, including:

- **Disability equality** - to overcome attitudinal barriers, and create a welcoming ethos and 'can do' attitude, which parents and children describe as vital;
- **Specific skills** – as needed to support some children. These include alternative methods of communication, moving and handling;
- **Individual techniques** for use with particular children. For example, the administration of a particular medicine or a particular feeding technique.

Such training should be included in the Qualified Early Years Teacher qualification for early years workers with additional courses available for staff who are already qualified as either initial or refresher training as appropriate. More closely integrated working between education, specialist health and social services would be supported through continuing professional development.

As new childcare provision comes on stream, we would ensure that this additional care is adapted to meet the needs of disabled children and monitor to ensure this is the case. What was developed would vary from area to area, according to the needs of the local children but would be considered to be a high priority for available funding.

Cost: Ensuring more early years professionals have an 'Early Years Teacher' qualification may mean higher salaries for staff, which will have a cost implication for the Welsh Government in meeting its commitments on funded early years provision. It may also have a cost implications for private early years providers, who could pass on the cost to customers.

The Sutton Trust has emphasised that while early years provision has significant potential to narrow the attainment gap and improve outcomes for children, evidence is clear that developmental benefits will only be achieved if children are able to attend good quality provision.³⁴ The involvement of people who have studied the all-round development of children at a high level, who are skilled at designing activities which will stretch children by allowing them to discover things for themselves, and who can identify the stimulus that will open a door in the child's mind, is vital.

³⁴ The Sutton Trust: Sound Foundations (January 2014)

Childcare

Policy: We will seek to form a sustainable and affordable early years education and childcare system that secures the best outcomes for children and their families.

Introduction

Early years are the most important period in a child's development. High quality early years education is vital in determining a child's life chances and all the evidence suggests that early intervention is the best way to promote social mobility and give children the best start in life.

Liberal Democrats fully support parents who choose to give up paid work to care for their child full-time. We are proud that in government in Westminster we led the introduction of shared parental leave, giving working parents greater flexibility with their childcare arrangements, helping to develop parental bonds and recognising the importance for parents of time at home with their child. We also extended the right to request flexible working to 20 million people; every employee now has the right to request flexible working hours. This is a crucial milestone in how we can help people balance their family life with work and caring responsibilities, supporting the many people who rely on informal childcare provided by friends or relatives.

In terms of formal childcare, government has an important role to play in ensuring that future generations receive a good start in life. It benefits the whole of society if our children grow up to be confident, rounded individuals with a sense of social responsibility. The building blocks for these characteristics are all laid well before a child reaches school, and that is why it is so important that we develop a high quality, universally available early years system which supports parents and focuses on the child.



In Coalition Government we prioritised investment in early years education and childcare by increasing the free entitlement from 12.5 to 15 hours a week of free early years education

and childcare for all three and four year olds in England. The Liberal Democrats pushed to extend free childcare provision to the most deprived two year olds, to help those from the most hard-pressed homes. We also fought for the introduction of tax-free childcare, which will save working parents in Wales up to £2000 on childcare costs per year for each child under 12. In our 2015 manifesto, we committed to an increase in free childcare per week and to an extension of the free child care provision to all working parents, from the end of paid parental leave (nine months) to two years.

In Wales, the situation for younger children is far less generous and less effective, with a high degree of inconsistency across the country. All three to four year olds are entitled to free part-time nursery education provision funded by the Welsh Government for 10 hours per week (as opposed to the current level of 15 hours and proposed level of 30 hours in England). The major downside is the lack of flexibility, with current provision for three year olds and through Flying Start being difficult to adapt to the work circumstances of parents. A 'Save the Children' report points out: 'This situation is undermining one of the key pillars of the Welsh Government's Child Poverty Strategy for Wales which aims to reduce the number of families living in workless households by supporting parents into good quality employment and making work pay.'³⁵

Childcare and early years education in Wales is also hugely complex, with a mix of services provided by the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Yet huge gaps in provision, particularly in rural and deprived areas, and high costs often prevent parents from entering or returning to work.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats recognise the difficulties that many parents face in accessing affordable and quality childcare, which is an important means of enabling parents to return to work, reducing child poverty and giving children the best start in life. Families with young children often struggle with the cost of childcare, which for many parents means it simply isn't worth working, or increasing their working hours. In its 2015 review of the key inequalities in Wales, based on evidence it had gathered over the past 5 years, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said that 'improving access to childcare' was one of the key challenges for Wales.³⁶ Early education and childcare are key to enabling parents to move into work or extend their hours and for disadvantaged families to move out of poverty.

³⁵ http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/Making_Work_Pay_Wales_Briefing_English_1.pdf

³⁶ <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/publication/wales-fairer>

Recent research by the Institute for Public Policy Research has highlighted concerns over the UK Government's plans to increase free childcare for three and four year olds in working families from 15 to 30 hours a week; in particular that there will not be adequate funding to support the policy. This may result in a poorly-delivered policy with negative outcomes for families and doubts over the sustainability of the sector. The report states that there are arguably more strategic ways to invest in childcare, which would also increase maternal employment and equalise readiness for school across socio-economic groups. Examples include extending the 15 hours of free childcare offered to disadvantaged two year olds in England to all children of this age, and increasing the free childcare on offer from 38 to 48 weeks of the year to cover holiday care.³⁷



The childcare and early education policies outlined in this paper recognise these concerns and seek to form a sustainable and affordable early years education and childcare system that secures the best outcomes for children and their families. This is not about formal education of the kind that school age children receive; it is about affordable childcare and specialist early years education with children engaging and learning through play. It is about giving every child the opportunity to mix with other children, to learn new things, boost their confidence and develop the practical and social skills that will help them to become school-ready.

Evidence shows that children benefit from a quality nursery or early years education with these benefits lasting into later life. It is an investment in the future of children, as high quality early education improves outcomes for children and helps to narrow the gap between the most disadvantaged children and their peers.

Expanding provision

For families to benefit from early education and childcare, it must be affordable and within easy reach. Over the last fifteen years there has been a substantial expansion of early education and childcare provision in Wales following the 1998 'Meeting the Childcare

³⁷ [IPPR Extending the early years entitlement: Costings, concerns and alternatives \(October 2015\)](#)

Challenge', with a 10.6% expansion in the number of places offering full day-care between September 2011 and September 2014. The Childcare Act (2006) now places a duty on local authorities in England and Wales to ensure sufficient childcare for working parents and those undertaking training with the intention of returning to work, with particular regard for childcare suitable for disabled children, involving the Welsh language and in respect of which the child care element of working tax credit is payable.

Despite this there still remain major gaps in provision. After-school and holiday childcare are two of the largest gaps in provision in Wales according to CSSIW data, with the number of out-of-school childcare places falling by 6.3% between September 2011 and September 2014. The Family and Childcare Trust's 2015 survey³⁸ indicates that only 22% of local authorities reported sufficient childcare for children aged two or under, 6% for disabled children and parents working atypical work patterns and not a single local authority had enough provision for children who live in rural areas.

	England	Scotland	Wales	Britain average of regions and nations
Children aged two or under	54%	32%	22%	49%
Three and four year olds	69%	55%	17%	63%
5-11s	35%	32%	11%	33%
12-14s	17%	23%	6%	17%
Disabled children	28%	18%	6%	25%
Children who live in rural areas	20%	14%	0%	17%
Children of parents who work full-time	54%	23%	28%	49%
Children of parents with atypical work patterns, for example, shift workers	14%	9%	6%	13%

Percentage of local authorities reporting sufficient childcare for particular groups of children

Source: Family and Childcare Trust Annual Childcare Costs Survey 2014

Local authorities are legally required to carry out an audit of childcare supply and demand via a 'Childcare Sufficiency Assessment'. Statutory guidance requires that CSAs are carried out every three years, with an annual refresh. A key criticism is that there is no agreed definition of sufficiency in law or statutory guidance³⁹, which means there is no consistent reference point that local authorities can use to determine whether they have enough childcare or not. An evaluation of CSAs commissioned by the Welsh Government found that the approach to assessments varies across Wales in terms of research methods, definitions of sufficiency and action plans to fill gaps in provision.

³⁸ Family and Childcare Trust Annual Childcare Costs Survey 2014

³⁹ Office for Public Management 2008

The Welsh Liberal Democrats would establish a definition of sufficiency within statutory guidance, to help local authorities to more consistently and effectively fill gaps in provision. The variance in approach to assessing demand also means that there are challenges in understanding the extent to which demand for Welsh-medium and bilingual childcare is being met. **We would adopt a robust approach to assessing demand for Welsh medium and bilingual provision** including whether there are sufficient Welsh speaking nursery staff. This information would be used to ensure sufficient Welsh language provision to meet demand.

There is also a lack of any sanction for local authorities who fail to fulfil their legal obligations under the Childcare Act 2006. **The Welsh Liberal Democrats would enshrine entitlement to childcare including early years provision, bringing it in line with entitlement to a school place.** This would enable parents to hold local



authorities to account if they are unable to find a childcare place and would provide a greater stimulus for local authorities to comply with their duty under the Childcare Act.⁴⁰

An entitlement to childcare would inevitably require a significant expansion of childcare places. **The Welsh Liberal Democrats would encourage the establishment of regionally based social enterprises run by charities, not-for-profit companies and employer or user owned mutual and cooperatives.** Such models provide high quality provision and can offer income contingent fees for parents so that the cost of childcare can be more affordable for those on lower incomes.

We would also promote the use of community buildings, leisure centres and school premises to help increase the level of childcare provision in Wales, particularly in rural areas where providing sustainable daytime and wrap around childcare is more challenging. We would ensure that local authorities make best use of facilities in their area to increase nursery provision by **encouraging partnership working between nurseries and schools, to offer more wrap around care and greater flexibility for families.**

⁴⁰ [Family and Childcare Trust Annual Childcare Costs Survey 2015](#)

Childcare for parents with atypical work patterns represents another large gap in provision. This includes shift workers and those who are required to work outside of normal office hours, although patterns of work can often be predictable so childcare can be planned in advance. However atypical work patterns also encompass those whose hours of work vary from week to week, for example agency workers or those on a zero hours' contract. The irregular and often unpredictable nature of the work can make it difficult to organise childcare and many of these jobs can be poorly paid, which can compound the childcare challenges faced by families. Parents may 'shift-parent', sharing childcare between them, use informal childcare or employ a nanny. Where these options are not available, **we would encourage other solutions such as workplace nurseries in places that employ a large number of staff who work outside of normal office hours.**

In some parts of the UK private childcare providers and some public sector organisations run registered 'at home' childcare services. This involves registered child-minders offering childcare in the child's own home. The difference between this system and nannies is that carers are registered with the CSSIW, so low income parents are able to apply for the childcare element of Working Tax Credit or Universal Credit to pay for them. The organisation that runs the services, namely the private company, hospital or local authority, brokers the relationship between parent and carer or sometimes employs the carer themselves. **The Welsh Liberal Democrats would examine a pilot of an 'at home' childcare service**, perhaps using a local authority Family Information Service as a base.

We must also look at ways of supporting the child-minding profession, which is an important part of our economy and can provide a more affordable option for parents seeking childcare. According to a survey by the National Childminding Association Cymru, the sector supports around 9,500 jobs and is worth an estimated £122m per year to the Welsh economy.⁴¹ Research by the New Economic Foundation suggested that for every £1 child-minders are paid, childcare workers generate between £7 and £9.50 worth of benefits to society.⁴²



⁴¹ [WalesOnline: Research shows childminding is worth 122m a year to Welsh economy \(1 Nov 2011\)](#)

⁴² [New Economics Foundation: A Bit Rich \(2009\)](#)

Yet according to the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, child-minders are facing the same issues as other childcare and early years settings in relation to registration, regulation and inspection, as well as challenges of business sustainability and support for training and development. The Welsh Government 'Independent review of childcare and early education registration, regulation and inspection' found that the current split system of inspection is overly complex and unlikely to support outcomes that give children the best start in life, with considerable duplication between the regulator and inspector (CSSIW and Estyn) and across local and national government.⁴³ There is also still an issue in some areas of Wales with inconsistencies in relation to planning permission required if registering as a child-minder.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats would review the regulations on child-minders to ensure that parents have as many choices as possible in making decisions over childcare and early years provision. **We would reform the regulation and inspection regime by replacing current regulations with a single set of Early Childhood Education and Care Regulations and Standards, alongside an integrated regulatory framework via a new Single Quality Framework**, to remove duplication and create a more unified system that ensures better outcomes for children.

Addressing affordability

The cost of childcare is widely recognised as a barrier to take up. Families in Wales pay more for childcare than in any other country in Europe except for Switzerland and many parents on low and middle incomes are forced to choose between paying high childcare costs, reducing their hours or giving up work completely.⁴⁴ Research published for the Good Care Guide (2014) revealed that almost one in three parents with young children spend 30% or more of all available earnings on childcare. With the weekly cost of full time nursery care for a child under two at £199.42 in Wales and £178.96 for a child-minder,⁴⁵ it can often be scarcely affordable to return to work.

According to research by Save the Children⁴⁶, parents in severe poverty have cut back on key essentials, like food and household bills, simply to pay for childcare, while 58% said they were no better off working and paying for childcare. A quarter of the parents in severe

⁴³ [Independent review of childcare and early education registration, regulation and inspection](#) (August 2014)

⁴⁴ Family and Childcare Trust General Election Factsheet: Childcare in Wales

⁴⁵ Family and Childcare Trust Annual Childcare Costs Survey 2015 p.9

⁴⁶ [Save the Children: The Childcare Trap: Making Work Pay – Wales Briefing](#) (2011)

poverty who responded had given up work, a third had turned down a job, and a quarter had not been able to take up education or training because of difficulties in accessing childcare. The survey results suggest that ‘in order to maximise family incomes, make work pay and in turn tackle child poverty, childcare must be both more affordable and more easily available to parents on the lowest incomes.’

In government in Westminster the Liberal Democrats fought for the introduction of tax-free childcare, which would benefit around 83,600 families in Wales. Worth up to £2,000 per child per year up to the age of 12, it would help ease the cost of childcare for all working families including the self-employed and those working part-time. Tax-free childcare was due to be introduced in Autumn 2015, but has now been delayed until 2017. **Welsh Liberal Democrats would put pressure on the UK Government for a firm timetable for the introduction of our tax-free childcare policy**, to ensure that it is not delayed further.

Under the Coalition Government, free childcare in England was expanded to 15 hours a week, 38 weeks a year for three and four year olds as well as 40% of the most disadvantaged two year olds. In contrast, Wales lags behind with a minimum of ten hours a week of statutory free early education for three and four year olds.



The Welsh Government’s Flying Start scheme is also available for children below the age of four in some of the most deprived areas of Wales. This scheme offers enhanced health visiting, parenting support programmes, early language development and play skills and free ‘quality’ childcare for all eligible two to three year olds for 2.5 hours a day, five days a week for 39 weeks.⁴⁷ However, this prescribed format of delivering free early education in two or three hour slots has been criticised as creating a barrier to work due to its inflexibility and many parents have to seek other formal childcare to cover a whole working day.

At the moment, there is also a black hole in government support for young families. The gap from the end of parental leave to a subsidised place in childcare or early years education is

⁴⁷ [Welsh Government: Flying Start](#)

between 2 and 3.5 years, depending on the age at which a child starts the free pre-school year and whether or not they live in a Flying Start area. This is an arbitrary age for the free entitlement to start: the Millennium Cohort Study reported that by age three, children from disadvantaged families are already a year behind their more advantaged peers in both social and educational development.⁴⁸ The Sutton Trust has found that the poorest children are 19 months behind on school readiness at the age of five.⁴⁹

Liberal Democrats propose starting the early years entitlement much earlier to bridge this gap. The importance of pre-school and early home learning is highlighted in the Effective Provision of Pre-school Primary and Secondary Education study⁵⁰, which tracked a large sample of children through different phases of education and identified the effects of background characteristics on children's cognitive and social behavioural development. This found that attending any pre-school, compared to none, predicted higher total GCSE scores, higher grades in GCSE English and maths and the likelihood of achieving 5 or more GCSEs at grade A*-C. The more months students had spent in pre-school, the greater the impact on total GCSE scores and grades in English and maths. However, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project⁵¹ found that full-time early years education does not confer a greater benefit than part-time provision.

We believe that a younger start is particularly beneficial as neurological research is beginning to show that even by eighteen months the brain can be permanently affected by experience, making it imperative that all children benefit from positive stimulation and connections from a young age. Early education can boost cognitive and social development and also help identify and support children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) before they start school, with the consequence that many need no additional support later in their school careers. The Early Years Transition and Special Educational Needs Project found that children who did not go to pre-school were more likely to be at risk of having SEN when they started school⁵², while children identified at risk of SEN on entering pre-school were less likely to be still at risk as they moved on to primary school⁵³.

⁴⁸ Hansen & Joshi (eds) (2007) Millennium Cohort Study second survey – a user's guide to initial findings. Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, University of London

⁴⁹ [Sutton Trust: Subject to Background: What promotes better achievement for bright but disadvantaged students? \(March 2015\)](#)

⁵⁰ [Effective Provision of Pre-school Primary and Secondary Education study](#)

⁵¹ [The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project](#)

⁵² Sammons, Taggart, Smees, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, & Elliot (2003) The Early Years Transition & Special Educational Needs (EYTSEN) Project. DfES.

⁵³ Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart & Elliot (2003) Technical Paper 8a: Measuring the impact of preschool on children's cognitive progress over the pre-school period. London: Institute of Education.

It is evident that there needs to be a more comprehensive package of free childcare and early years education in Wales, that better fits the needs of families and has a more positive impact on child development, maternal employment and gender equity. According to the Family and Childcare Trust, ‘despite the importance of childcare, the Welsh childcare system is not working.’⁵⁴ Save the Children has called on the Welsh Government to ‘examine existing pre-school childcare support in Wales to address flexibility, accessibility and availability barriers’ and to ‘reassess the current levels of pre-school childcare entitlement in Wales in light of new enhanced provision in England.’ Childcare is a sound investment for the future and it is time to stop tinkering at the edges and to fully review early years system in Wales to deliver high-quality, sustainable and flexible provision that better meets the needs of children and their families.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats propose to offer 10 hours a week of free childcare to all working parents from the end of paid parental leave (nine months) until the age of two, 38 weeks a year. This will apply to any family where all the adults or the single adult in the household are in work. In the longer term we would examine the benefits of extending this to 15 hours of funded provision where resources allow. In the past year employment figures for the majority of female age groups in Wales has dropped, particularly for younger females age 18–24.⁵⁵ This measure would make it more affordable for those seeking to re-enter the job market or take on a part-time role, where currently the cost of childcare is prohibitive. It would also help to reduce in-work poverty, where currently 23% of children in Wales living in working families are in poverty, as well as the number of children likely to live in persistent poverty which is currently higher than anywhere else in the UK.⁵⁶ As well as reducing poverty and helping parents afford to work, this measure will help all children start school confident, happy and ready to learn.

For children aged 2, pre-school care through Flying Start is provided for 2.5 hours a day; insufficient even for most part-time employment – and only in limited areas. Flying Start is an area based scheme, defined using the most deprived



⁵⁴ Family and Childcare Trust General Election Factsheet: Childcare in Wales

⁵⁵ State of the Nation 2015 p.187

⁵⁶ State of the Nation 2015 p.186

Lower Super Output Areas, which as highlighted by the Social Mobility Commission means that there are many children and families living on low incomes who do not receive services.⁵⁷ The cost of providing a childcare place through Flying Start is three times that of a standard nursery, at £11.32 per hour⁵⁸ compared to an average hourly nursery cost for a child age 2 and over of £4.14⁵⁹. This is partly due to the heavy administration requirements of Flying Start which requires significant staff time. Furthermore, the scheme has been criticised for significant shortcomings in ensuring equal opportunities for disadvantaged families to access Welsh-medium Flying Start childcare provision.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats strongly support the aim of Flying Start to improve the lives of deprived children, through measures including an enhanced health visiting service, access to parenting programmes and support for speech, language and communication. In particular, the outreach work is of key importance in reaching the many disadvantaged families in Wales who may not be aware of the support available to them. However, we believe that the childcare element of Flying Start is inflexible, unsustainable and not fit for purpose.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats would fundamentally reform childcare provision for two year olds, by removing childcare from Flying Start and reinvesting this funding in universal provision for all two year olds. **We would offer 10 hours a week of free, quality childcare for all children age two to three, 38 weeks a year.** In the longer term and where resources allow, we would seek to extend this to 15 hours a week.

This approach is advocated by the Institute for Public Policy Research⁶⁰, which concluded that childcare policies that focus purely on the expansion of the offer for 3 and 4 year olds are not the best way to support families. The report highlights that parents of children under the age of 3 are more likely to be locked out of work because of unaffordable childcare and face higher hourly costs for childcare than parents of older children, yet receive less support. It states that previous IPPR research has demonstrated that greater provision for the under-3s could 'help close the gender gap in both employment rates and wages, and increase household living standards.' The IPPR recommends that the government 'prioritise universalising the offer to 2-year-olds over extending the offer to 3 and 4 year olds.'

⁵⁷ [State of the Nation 2015](#) p.191

⁵⁸ [Welsh Government: National Evaluation of Flying Start \(2013\)](#) p.18 (£28.30 per 2.5 hour session)

⁵⁹ Calculations using [Family and Childcare Trust, Childcare Costs Survey 2015, February 2015](#)

⁶⁰ [IPPR Extending the early years entitlement: Costings, concerns and alternatives \(October 2015\)](#)

For three to four year olds, local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a free part-time good quality education place from the term following a child's third birthday, should the parent or carer want this. Part-time is for a minimum of 10 hours a week, 38 weeks a year. These places must be in an approved setting, which can be in a school or in a non-maintained setting such as playgroup, child-minder or private nursery where that setting is registered with the local authority to deliver early years education. Currently at least four local authorities in Wales offer fifteen hours a week of early education and delegated school budgets for standalone nurseries are currently calculated on a full time equivalent basis; the equivalent of two nursery places at 15 hours a week. The funding and practice of many local authorities for the provision of early education in Wales is therefore geared towards an offer of fifteen hours a week for three and four year olds. We would enshrine this in law by **increasing the statutory duty on local authorities to provide a funded early education place to fifteen hours a week, 38 weeks a year.**

Families today come in all shapes and sizes, and we would not prescribe how the early years entitlement had to be taken; **we would support local providers to offer childcare provision and early years education as flexibly as feasible.** It could, for example, be taken in shorter sessions over five days or longer sessions over only a few days. Parents would also be free to split the hours across different providers if this met their needs better, whether in the maintained, private, voluntary or independent sector. Some day nurseries are registered with their local authority as education providers for three year olds which offers parents greater flexibility in using their statutory early education place, with parents paying for the additional care over these hours. **We would encourage nurseries to register as education providers for three year olds which can offer a more convenient arrangement for parents,** supported by the new integrated inspection framework to enable them to achieve this.

In the longer term, where funding allowed we would seek to expand all provision for funded childcare and early years education to a full 48 weeks a year, based on recommendations of the Institute for Public Policy Research⁶¹ and the Family



⁶¹ [IPPR Extending the early years entitlement: Costings, concerns and alternatives \(October 2015\)](#)

and Childcare Trust.⁶² The IPPR in its report highlights that present offers for 38 weeks a year leave parents struggling to secure holiday care, which can be expensive and hard to find. This has implications on continuity of care for children as well as on parents' employment with many parents forced to cut their working hours during school holidays. Extending the offer to 10 additional weeks a year would improve affordability and stimulate supply by creating an increased demand for childcare provision.⁶³

The childcare and early years provision offered here would be enough for some mothers and fathers to return to work part-time around their caring responsibilities, while reducing the overall cost of childcare for families in full-time work. For those parents who prefer the informal care of grandparents and other relatives, it would provide the informal carer with the opportunity to share the care-giving by enabling the child to socialise and learn with other children. The offers would be in no way compulsory, and we would expect that some families, particularly those with younger children, might use only a portion of the entitlement, perhaps increasing the hours as their child grows. For those mothers and fathers who choose to be full-time parents, the universal entitlement from two onwards would provide the opportunity for them to work or study or spend quality time with any younger children.

Beyond the obvious educational benefits to children and employment assistance to parents, society is likely to benefit far more widely from such an increase in quality early years education. US studies into the effective provision of pre-school education suggest that each \$1 spent could later return almost \$13 in savings (with less need for remedial education and reduced healthcare and criminal justice costs)⁶⁴ and while it is unlikely that savings would be as high as this in the UK context, it shows how effective well spent money in the early years can be.⁶⁵ Further to this, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has argued that early years education can be seen as a 'public good' contributing to the nation's social cohesion with health, educational and labour market benefits.⁶⁶

By facilitating parental employment, one of the most tangible additional benefits of the early years entitlement is likely to be a contribution to a reduction in child poverty and the gender pay gap. Previous research has suggested that maternal employment patterns reflect

⁶² Family and Childcare Trust: *Childcare Costs Survey 2015* p.4

⁶³ IPPR *Extending the early years entitlement: Costings, concerns and alternatives (October 2015)*

⁶⁴ http://www.highscope.org/file/Research/PerryProject/PerryApril_20052.pps#277,2,Experimentaldesign

⁶⁵ PricewaterhouseCoopers, *Universal early education and care in 2020: costs, benefits and funding options* (Daycare Trust, 2004), p4

⁶⁶ Sarah Butt, Kate Goddard and Ivana La Valle with Maxine Hill, *Childcare nation? Progress on the childcare strategy and priorities for the future*, (Daycare Trust/ National Centre for Social Research, 2007) p10

patterns of childcare provision.⁶⁷ The Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents 2012-2013 confirms this, reporting that over half (54%) of non-working mothers would prefer to go out to work if they could arrange good quality childcare which was convenient, reliable and affordable.⁶⁸ To this end **we would support unemployed parents by continuing the ‘Parents, Childcare and Employment’ scheme**, which helps cover the cost of childcare while they undertake training to gain the skills they need to get a job.⁶⁹

Raising awareness

A lack of information can be a real barrier to some parents seeking to access childcare, given the complex array of services and entitlements. Local authorities have a duty to provide information on local services, but this varies and is often confusing or incomplete. The Welsh Government ‘Childcare gap analysis for Wales’ (July 2014) highlights that the affordability gap for childcare users and other stakeholders is exacerbated by lack of awareness and uptake of financial support for childcare by parents and carers. Sixteen of twenty-two local authority childcare sufficiency assessments highlight that a significant percentage of parents/carers are not accessing financial assistance and/or do not know where to access information about this.⁷⁰

The Welsh Liberal Democrats would introduce a national single online source of information for families, to raise awareness of support and services in their area. This would include information on childcare services, schools, leisure facilities and health services, links to online parent groups, help to



identify which forms of childcare support parents are entitled to and a guide to understanding new changes such as shared parental leave which will benefit families in Wales. We would also encourage information services such as ‘O Gam I Gam’ which aims to promote and encourage the development of the accessibility and affordability of a range of quality childcare and play provision, with a specific referral element for children with specific needs or families in receipt of certain benefits.

⁶⁷ Ibid p.56

⁶⁸ Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents 2012-2013 (January 2014)

⁶⁹ Welsh Government: New £10.9m childcare scheme to help get parents into work (October 2015)

⁷⁰ Welsh Government: Childcare gap analysis for Wales (July 2014)

Costings

Working families 9 months–2 years

10 hours of free childcare for all working parents from the end of paid parental leave (9 months) to 2 years, for 38 weeks a year, would cost **£32.4m per year**. This is based on an estimated cohort of 35,900 children living in working and mixed households⁷¹, an hourly rate to providers of £4.17 for children under 2⁷² and a take-up rate of 57%⁷³.

All 2-3 year olds

10 hours of free childcare for all two year olds, 38 weeks a year, would cost £44.9m per year. This is based on an estimated cohort of 33,990 children age 2-3⁷⁴, an hourly rate to providers of £4.14 for children over 2⁷⁵ and a take-up rate of 84%⁷⁶. Currently £29.5m is spent on childcare through Flying Start⁷⁷, which we would re-invest into this policy. An additional **£15.4m per year** would therefore be required on top of current funding.

All 3-4 year olds

We would increase the statutory duty on local authorities to provide a funded early education place to fifteen hours a week, 38 weeks a year, from the term following a child's third birthday. This would cost an additional **£15.9m** on top of existing expenditure, based on an average of 4 terms of provision, the 2015-16 average delegated school budget figure for primary schools⁷⁸ and a 100% take-up rate.

Capital funding

We will commit capital funding to allow nurseries and other early years settings to expand and for maintenance costs. We would set aside **£20m** per annum to support the increase in demand for provision and to make childcare more flexible, but would consult with providers and local authorities about which areas need to build capacity.

Longer term

In the longer term we would seek to extend the offer to working families of children from 9 months-2 years and all 2-3 year olds to 15 hours a week and extend the offer for all ages to 48 weeks a year. This would be implemented as and when resources allowed and following review of the benefits of extending each policy in this way.

⁷¹ Calculations using StatsWales, [Children living in workless households by area, variable and household status](#)

⁷² Calculations using Family and Childcare Trust, [Childcare Costs Survey 2015, February 2015](#)

⁷³ [Welsh Childcare and Early Years Survey \(2010\)](#) p.26 0-2 year-olds in any childcare (formal and informal)

⁷⁴ Calculations using StatsWales, [Population projections by year and gender](#)

⁷⁵ Calculations using Family and Childcare Trust, [Childcare Costs Survey 2015, February 2015](#)

⁷⁶ [Wales average percentage of children taking up full or reduced offer of childcare: Flying Start 2014-15](#)

⁷⁷ [Written Assembly Question WAQ69676](#)

⁷⁸ [Local authority budgeted expenditure on schools](#)

Conclusion

The Welsh Liberal Democrats recognise that the most influential people for every young child are its parents. Whether one parent, or both, is at home all the time to care for their child themselves, or whether some of the caring is undertaken by other people, parents have an irreplaceable role in bringing up their children.

However, government has an important part to play in supporting parents in this role, to ensure that future generations receive the best possible start in life. The building blocks for a child's characteristics are laid well before a child starts school, which is why it is essential that we have a high quality early years system that delivers the best possible outcomes for pupils and parents.

Welsh Liberal Democrats have prioritised support for the poorest pupils in our budget negotiations with the Welsh Government. We will continue to support children who need it most by increasing funding for the Early Years Pupil Premium, to help reduce the attainment gap between pupils from advantaged and more disadvantaged backgrounds and support those who may fall behind right from the very start.

Class sizes in Wales are some of the highest in the developed world, yet evidence indicates that there are clear benefits to smaller classes for younger children. We would work to ensure that infant classes normally contain no more than 25 pupils, to give teachers the time to focus on a child's individual needs which we believe is central to raising standards.

If we are to offer our children high quality early years provision, then a professional workforce is essential. This means more and better training throughout the sector and a more comprehensive system of inspection and registration.

Finally, the current system of childcare in Wales is haphazard, confusing and simply does not work for many working families. Investment in childcare will reap benefits in the future and we believe it is time to stop tinkering at the edges and instead to develop a responsive, affordable and sustainable system of childcare and early years education that works for all.

With thanks to policy consultant Jill Rutter for her recommendations on improving childcare provision in Wales in 'Early Education and Childcare in Wales – a report for the Welsh Liberal Democrats' (commissioned by the Welsh Liberal Democrats, National Assembly for Wales in 2015)