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Childcare in Further Education

Executive Summary

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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1. Executive summary

Introduction and methodology

- 1.1 Arad Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake a study into the extent to which childcare is a barrier to young parents in Wales wishing to enter, return to, or continue with further education (FE) in Wales.
- 1.2 The Welsh Government's budget includes a commitment of £0.4 million to *'implement a pilot childcare scheme promoted by the NUS for further education students'*. This research sought to examine the evidence base and the rationale for a new programme.
- 1.3 The research focused on a series of research questions, with priority placed on the following six:
 1. What are the specific issues facing young parents wishing to enter, or continue in FE? For example, is cost the only/main barrier?
 2. To what extent do childcare demands prevent young parents (up to 20 years of age, and a second group between 20 and 25 years of age) in Wales entering, or continuing in, FE?
 3. How many young parents are accessing support that is currently available?
 4. How many additional parents could be helped to access, or continue, in FE if further support was offered in Wales?
 5. Are there specific barriers for parents wishing to enter Welsh medium FE or wishing to make use of Welsh medium childcare?
 6. How does existing support available to young parents wishing to access FE in Wales compare to other regions of the United Kingdom? For example, the Care to Learn scheme.
- 1.4 The research included a series of stakeholder interviews, alongside reviews of literature and data relating to childcare in FE. The rationale for the method employed was to ensure that the research drew on the

expertise and knowledge of stakeholders, whilst making efficient use of existing data and published literature.

What are the specific issues facing young parents wishing to enter, or continue in FE?

- 1.5 There are many complex and inter-related barriers faced by learners in Wales wishing to access FE in Wales. The most common barriers outlined in the literature relate to the availability of provision, awareness of options, transport, financial constraints and attitudinal barriers to education. These barriers are not unique to parent learners, but overcoming them is often more challenging for parent learners than for most non-parent learners. One barrier, however, that is unique to young parents is the need to access childcare.

To what extent do childcare demands prevent young parents in Wales entering, or continuing, FE?

- 1.6 Cost and affordability of suitable options are often the main childcare barriers faced by FE parent learners. Even where cost barriers are removed by the financial support available through the Financial Contingency Fund (FCF), the availability of suitable childcare can remain a barrier. Logistical challenges such as the location of the provision, transport to and from the provider as well as coordinating childcare provision times with learning times, add further barriers for parent learners to access suitable childcare.
- 1.7 On-site crèche and childcare facilities (where available) provided by individual Further Education Institutions (FEIs) appear in most cases, to adequately meet the current demand for childcare amongst FE learners. Many of the affordability barriers of childcare have also been addressed through the financial support available through the FCF. The study findings indicate that increasing the availability of childcare provision alone is unlikely to increase the demand for childcare and the take up of FE courses unless other barriers such as accessibility to childcare are also addressed.

How many young parents are accessing support that is currently available?

- 1.8 A significant percentage of recent FCF expenditure is allocated to supporting the costs of childcare for FE learners in Wales. However, the demand for and the number of childcare funding awards offered to FE parent learners has remained fairly constant in recent years. The findings of this study also indicate that the majority of FEIs in Wales are easily able to fund applications for childcare support through the FCF.
- 1.9 The extent to which young parents are accessing support depends largely on their awareness of its availability. The findings of this research outline that communicating information about funding sources available to young parents is not as effective as it could be. As a result awareness of the support available amongst young parents may not be as high as it could be.

How many additional parents could be helped to access, or continue, in FE if support was offered in Wales?

- 1.10 The number and proportion of young people who are NEET in Wales have fallen since 2013. Similarly the birth numbers and rates for young mothers in Wales have also steadily declined since 2009. This suggests that the number of young parents who could access FE, but do not, may also be falling. However, it remains unclear how many young parents who do not access FE, would be encouraged to do so if further support was offered to them.

Are there specific barriers for parents wishing to enter Welsh-medium FE or wishing to make use of Welsh-medium or bilingual childcare?

- 1.11 There do not appear to be any additional barriers faced specifically by parent learners who wish to study FE courses through the medium of Welsh. There is evidence however to suggest some regional variation in the availability of Welsh-medium childcare.

How does existing support available for young parents wishing to access FE in Wales compare to other regions of the United Kingdom?

1.12 In other UK nations there are financial support programmes in place aimed specifically at young parent learners. This is not the case in Wales where young parents in FE are supported through discretionary funds such as FCF, which is available to eligible FE students.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

This study concludes that current discretionary funding arrangements appear to meet the needs of FE parent learners who require support with the costs of childcare. As such, and based on the evidence reviewed from various sources, we recommend that an additional pilot programme is not required at this moment in time.

Recommendation 2

FEIs rely largely on their FCF allocation to provide the childcare support that their parent learners require. The Welsh Government should therefore consider continuing to allocate these funds to FEIs.

Recommendation 3

Further efforts may be required to improve the way information about available support is shared with young parents in order to raise their awareness of the financial support opportunities that are currently available to them.