



# Early Years Wales

## 2026 Election Manifesto

*A Welsh Way Forward for Early Years:  
Policy Priorities for the Next Senedd*





David Dallimore  
Chair of Trustees



David Goodger  
CEO

# A message from our Chair & CEO



We are proud to launch a Manifesto for the Early Years for the 2026 Senedd elections.

Early Years Wales is the leading organisation representing providers and campaigning for better services for the youngest children and their families in Wales. Our Manifesto for the Early Years is aimed at political parties and aspiring Senedd Members to focus attention and efforts on enhancing opportunities for all babies and young children.

There is strong international evidence that the early years (age 0 to 7 years) establishes the foundations for children's development with strong links established to health, educational, social and economic outcomes into adulthood<sup>1</sup>. However, children in Wales do not always receive the best start in life.

Over the last two Senedd terms, there has been steady progress in Early Years policy in Wales. We have seen commitments to provide a universal offer for all 2-year-olds<sup>2</sup>, the implementation of the Childcare Offer for Wales<sup>3</sup>, a child-centered Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings<sup>4</sup>, and the launch of Early Childhood Play, Learning, and Care (ECLC)<sup>5</sup>.

Alongside this, Welsh Government has committed to a 10-Year Childcare Play and Early Years Workforce Plan (refreshed in July 2024),<sup>6</sup> Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers<sup>7</sup>, and an Anti-racist Wales Action Plan.<sup>8</sup>

We recognise that much has been achieved and we are proud of our record of working across the political spectrum and with the Welsh Government to support and influence change.

Our vision is for a vibrant ecosystem of services and professionals that allows all children in Wales to play, learn, and thrive, and be supported to fulfill their potential.

**For us to fulfil this vision, we need to build on the progress already made, but with an even stronger commitment to enhance the sector, the system, and the conditions for all babies and children.**

To do this will take commitment from the next Senedd and the next government of Wales to think ahead and support future generations.

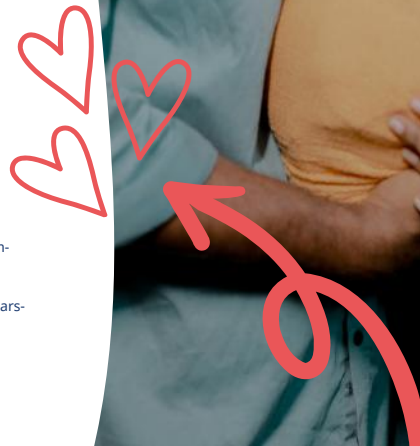
Our invitation to you is to work with us. Taken together, the following policy recommendations would make a huge difference and have long-term benefits for sector, for children and families, and for the future of Wales.

If you would like to discuss any of the recommendations or have a more general conversation about supporting children in the early years, we would be very happy to hear from you.

*Dr David Dalimore*  
Chair of Early Years Wales  
representing the Board  
and our members

*David Goodger*  
CEO of Early Years Wales

- 1 <https://heckmanequation.org/>
- 2 <https://www.gov.wales/flying-start-childcare-exceeds-expansion-targets-wales>
- 3 <https://www.gov.wales/childcare-offer-for-wales-campaign>
- 4 <https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/b1801d78-38c3-4320-9818-d9996c21aef8/220914-a-curriculum-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings.pdf>
- 5 <https://www.gov.wales/early-childhood-play-learning-and-care-ecplc>
- 6 <https://www.gov.wales/written-statement-review-and-refresh-10-year-childcare-play-and-early-years-workforce-plan>
- 7 <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-12/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy.pdf>
- 8 <https://www.gov.wales/anti-racist-wales-action-plan-2024-update-html>



## A Welsh Way Forward for Early Years: Policy Priorities for the Next Senedd



This document outlines a series of evidence-informed policy recommendations to improve early years care and education in Wales.

Drawing on research, sector engagement, and the lived experiences of families and practitioners, we propose a strategic framework to ensure that all children in Wales have the best start in life. Our recommendations focus on statutory reform, workforce development, parental support, and inclusive practice, with a particular emphasis on the first 1,000 days of life.

This document along with Bil Bob Plentyn – A law for every child<sup>9</sup>, and The Best Start in Life: An Early Years Framework for Action<sup>10</sup> offers a pathway to an even better early years' experience for children, their families and the workforce in Wales. Early Years Wales is proud to support both documents alongside the recommendations in our manifesto.

<sup>9</sup> [https://issuu.com/childreninwales/docs/bil\\_pob\\_plentyn\\_-\\_a\\_law\\_for\\_every\\_child?fr=sMjFkZDg0Mjg0OTI](https://issuu.com/childreninwales/docs/bil_pob_plentyn_-_a_law_for_every_child?fr=sMjFkZDg0Mjg0OTI)

<sup>10</sup> <https://phw.nhs.wales/news/parents-voices-at-the-heart-of-new-early-years-framework-for-action/>



1

## Statutory Recognition of Early Childhood, Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC)

### Recommendation

Make ECPLC a statutory responsibility across all early years settings.

### Rationale

ECPLC provides a holistic framework for the care, play, and learning of children aged 0–5. It aligns with the UNCRC and promotes equity across diverse settings. Statutory adoption would ensure consistency, quality, and child-centred practice across Wales.

2

## Reform of Parental Leave and Support

### Recommendation

Increase the duration and financial support for maternity and paternity leave to dovetail with the start of funded childcare provision at age two.

### Rationale

Increasing the duration and financial support for maternity and paternity leave has strong social, economic, and health-related rationales. Longer leave allows parents to form stronger emotional bonds with their newborns, which is crucial for early development; extended maternity leave supports exclusive breastfeeding, which has proven health benefits for both mother and child; and studies show that paid parental leave is associated with lower infant mortality rates.



3

### Sustainable Childcare Funding

#### Recommendation

Increase the Childcare Offer funding rate beyond the current £6.40 per hour.

#### Rationale

Current funding for early years providers to deliver Welsh Government's Childcare Offer is insufficient to meet rising operational costs. A higher rate would support staff retention, quality provision, and long-term sustainability of early years settings.

4

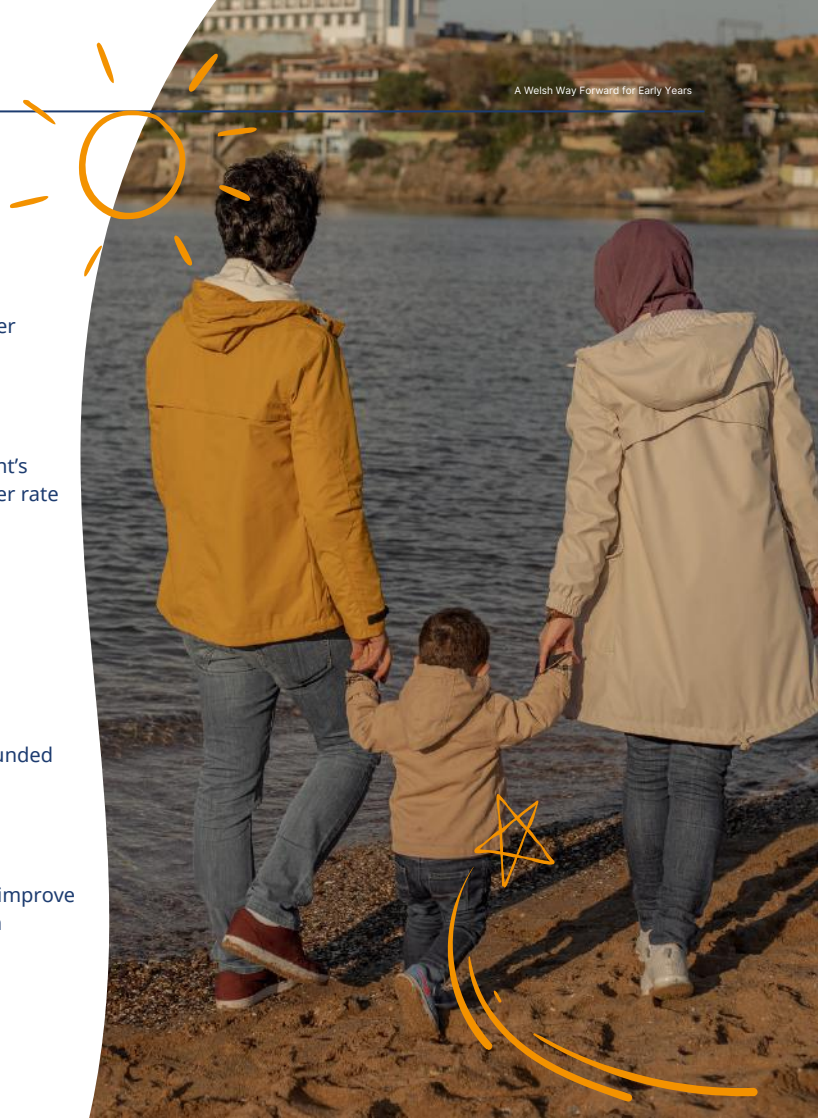
### Accessible and Simplified Childcare Offer

#### Recommendation

Streamline the application process for parents and carers accessing funded childcare.

#### Rationale

Complexity in the current system deters uptake. Simplification would improve access, particularly for disadvantaged families, and support the Welsh Government's universal childcare ambitions.





5

Strengthening Parental Support Services



**Recommendation**

Expand access to parenting advice and developmental support from conception onwards.

**Rationale**

Early intervention is critical. Providing accessible, community-based support improves child health, development, and parental confidence.

6

Ministerial and Leadership Accountability

**Recommendation**

Appoint a dedicated Minister for Babies and Children.

**Rationale**

A ministerial role would ensure that early years issues are prioritised in policymaking and that children's voices are represented at the highest level.



## 7 Terminology Reform



### Recommendation

Rename the Children's Commissioner to the Babies and Children's Commissioner.

### Rationale

This change reflects the importance of the first 1,000 days and strengthens the visibility of infant rights in policy discourse.

## 8 Movement and Physical Development

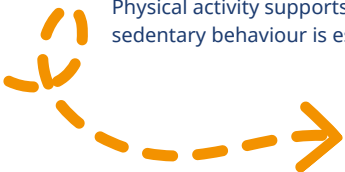


### Recommendation

Embed movement and physical activity in early years legislation.

### Rationale

Physical activity supports motor, cognitive, and social development. Addressing sedentary behaviour is essential for long-term health outcomes.



9

### Inclusive and Anti-Racist Practice

#### **Recommendation**

Mandate anti-racist approaches in early years settings.

#### **Rationale**

Inclusive practice supports equality of opportunity and cultural responsiveness. It contributes to the Welsh Government's goal of an anti-racist Wales by 2030.

10

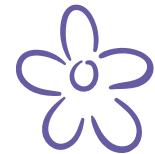
### Focus on the First 1,000 Days

#### **Recommendation**

Enhance support for families during pregnancy and the first two years of life.

#### **Rationale**

This period is foundational for lifelong development. Investment in early support yields significant social and economic returns.



11

## Workforce Development



### Recommendation

Improve pay, conditions, and career pathways for early years practitioners.

### Rationale

The sector faces high turnover and low pay. Investment in the workforce is essential to ensure quality and continuity of care.

12

## Welsh Language promotion



### Recommendation

Increase funding for organisations promoting Welsh in early years settings.

### Rationale

Early exposure to Welsh supports language acquisition and cultural identity. Targeted funding can bridge gaps for non-Welsh-speaking families.



13

### Childcare Ratios



#### Recommendation

Legislate for low staff-to-child ratios.

#### Rationale

Lower ratios in early years settings enable personalised care and better developmental outcomes. Cost-saving measures that increase ratios risk undermining quality.

14

### Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Support

#### Recommendation

- Expedite referral processes for young children with ALN.
- Fund staff training and reduce ratios in ALN settings.
- Increase health visitor capacity and local authority support.

#### Rationale

Early identification and intervention are critical. Current delays and resource constraints hinder effective support for children with ALN.



## Working together with the wider sector:

Early Years Wales is pleased to endorse **Bill Bob Plentyn**<sup>11</sup>, created by Jane Dodds and the Cross Party Group on Children and Families, as well as **The Best Start in Life: An Early Years Framework for Action**<sup>12</sup> produced by Public Health Wales. We would also like to encourage the use of the Welsh Government's **ECPLC**<sup>13</sup> framework which helps inform early years practice.

<sup>11</sup> Bil Pob Plentyn | A Law for Every Child (July 2025) has been developed by the Senedd Cross Party Group on Children and Families and the Senedd Cross party Group on Children in Our Care. [https://issuu.com/childreninwales/docs/bil\\_pob\\_plentyn\\_-\\_a\\_law\\_for\\_every\\_child?fr=sMjFKZDg0Mjg00T](https://issuu.com/childreninwales/docs/bil_pob_plentyn_-_a_law_for_every_child?fr=sMjFKZDg0Mjg00T)

<sup>12</sup> Best Start in Life: An Early Years Framework for Action, published by Public Health Wales on 1 July 2025 alongside a Parental Insights report, outlines a new approach to improving support for families with babies and young children. It brings together the expertise of early years professionals and the lived experiences of parents and carers to define what it means to give every child in Wales the best start in life and offers a clear, shared vision for how the early years system can bring it to life. <https://phw.nhs.wales/news/parents-voices-at-the-heart-of-new-early-years-framework-for-action/>

<sup>13</sup> Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) is an integrated approach to education and childcare for children aged 0-5, focusing on holistic development to support well-being and lifelong learning, aligning with the Curriculum for Wales and National Minimum Standards. <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/early-childhood-play-learning-and-care-in-wales/>



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