Wales can build childcare that communities own and children help shape

By Co-operatives Wales, with a response from the Welsh Young Co-operators

The Bevan Foundation's briefing *Experiences of childcare and early years* brings together what parents and grandparents told four focus groups across Wales. Families described short sessions that do not fit shift work, gaps in provision, transport difficulties, extra costs and confusing routes to funded childcare. They also spoke about what good provision gives children: friendships, language, confidence and opportunities to play. The Welsh Government's planned expansion of funded childcare gives Wales a chance to act on both parts of that evidence. Where will new places be, who will own them, and will families be able to use them?

Co-operatives Wales believes public investment should help develop locally owned and run childcare, with parents, early years workers and communities sharing real decision-making power. A community co-operative could use that power to respond to what families described: opening hours that suit different working patterns, places closer to home, Welsh-medium provision and support for children with additional learning needs. To do this well, settings need viable funding, paid and qualified staff, and specialist help with premises, registration and co-operative governance. Ownership also determines where the money goes. Research in England has highlighted how debt and pressure for short-term returns in some large, investor-owned nursery groups can put provision at risk. That research concerns England. The question for Wales is what its own public investment should build. Community ownership gives local people a way to direct any surplus back into staff development, inclusive provision and the long-term stability of their setting. Publishing who owns providers and where surpluses go would help communities judge what public funding is achieving.

Our Co-operatives Wales Co-operative Education Manifesto links how services are governed with what children learn through everyday experience. In the early years, co-operation can mean deciding together how to use a play space, building something as a group or finding a fair way to share materials. A co-operative approach can be developed within the Curriculum for Wales, drawing on the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings. Sheffield's co-operative early years work offers experience to share as Wales develops its own approach. The case for that curriculum work is our proposal in response to the briefing.

The Welsh Young Co-operators welcome the attention the research gives to families' experiences. Our response is that children's own experiences should shape what happens next. Even very young children can show adults where they feel comfortable, what they enjoy and what keeps them from joining in. Adults can listen through play, observation, pictures, gestures and conversation, including in Welsh. They can then show children what changed because of what they expressed. That is what "Nothing About Us Without Us" looks like in the early years.

As Wales expands funded childcare, we want the Welsh Government and councils to help communities establish and sustain co-operative settings. Success should be measured in places families can actually use, stable jobs for skilled staff, and decisions children and families can influence. Local ownership gives the people who depend on a setting a say in what it becomes.